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April's feature article —

**Rocket Mail Stamps Flown
After 75 Years**

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Figure 1

Rocket Mail Stamps Flown After 75 Years

Chris Hargreaves

From time to time one comes across stamps and covers for rocket flights between the U.S.A. and Canada in May 1936. The covers (Figure 1) are usually addressed to Intern. Philatelic Exhibition, Grand Central Palace Booth 77, Lexington Avenue, 46th-47th Streets, New York. Both the stamps and the covers were produced by Gerhard Zucker.

Gerhard Zucker

Gerhard Zucker (1908 – 1985) was a German businessman and rocket engineer who was particularly interested in the potential of transporting mail by rocket. He performed experiments in Germany in 1933; in England, Scotland, and Italy in 1934, and in the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland in 1935. He sometimes produced special stamps for mail to be carried on these flights. Some of the flights were successful; some were not.

Zucker claimed that his experiments included two attempts to fire a rocket across the English Channel, from Ostend to Dover, on April 8, 1935. The first rocket, *K1*, was supposed to have traveled 24 miles (38 kilometers) before landing in the sea. It was recovered by a passing ship, the S.S. *Kirin Maru*, which returned it to Zucker that afternoon.

Zucker made various claims over the next few months that the second rocket, *K2*:

- flew further than *K1* before landing in the sea;
- was recovered the same day, but the ship's master refused to return the rocket to Zucker, who therefore said the rocket was lost at sea;
- was handed over to Zucker five months later, after Zucker agreed not to disclose the name of the ship.

Zucker then sent covers from *K2* to collectors together with a statement that they had been recovered by a Danish sailing ship three months after the launch. He also claimed that the captain of the Danish

ship had signed some of the covers. Unfortunately, somebody tried to contact the captain in Denmark and it turned out that neither the captain nor the ship existed!

In 1936 Zucker was invited to the United States. There were proposals for the dispatch of rocket mail between the United States and Canada

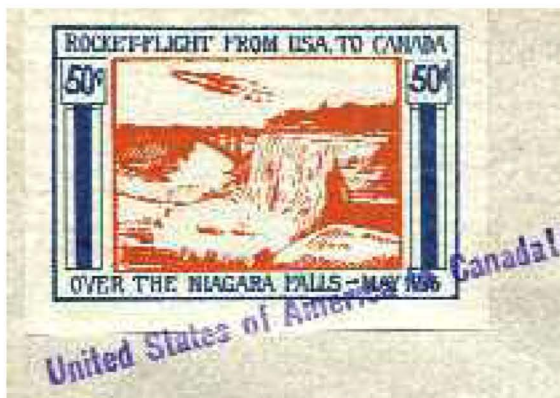


Figure 2

across Niagara Falls, during the Third International Philatelic Exhibition (TIPEX 1936) at the Grand Central Palace in New York. However, before he left Germany, the Gestapo, suspicious about his contacts with the English government, arrested Zucker. To keep the commitments to TIPEX, Karl H. Hennig Sr., a Hamburg, Germany, dealer and booth holder at TIPEX, agreed to take everything to New York. A series of 10 rocket stamps (Figure 2) were sold at TIPEX, as were covers with 50¢ and 75¢ rocket stamps affixed.

There are various accounts as to what then happened in New York. These reports disagree as to whether or not a rocket was shown in New York, whether Hennig tried to avoid publicity in New York, what happened to the rocket and even the spelling of Hennig's name.

There are also different theories as to why the rocket flights across Niagara Falls never took place. One account is an undated letter from Robert Schoendorf in Don Amos's papers in the Canadian Aerophilatelic Society library, which states:

Dear Mr. Amos:

Re your query of March 29: Karl Hennig, Hamburg, Germany, brought over a launching rack and a rocket which was displayed at his booth at the Intl. Phil. Exhibition 1936. I remember this very well as I assisted him at his stand as an interpreter. He tried to get a permit to fire the rocket, but the time was too short for this.

There are also various accounts as to what happened to Zucker after 1936. There is supposed to have been a report in the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* that Zucker had been executed for treason, but this had not happened. Other newspaper reports said he served 16 months in prison for fraud and embezzlement, accused of selling stamps from the two rocket launches in Ostend that had not actually taken place.

During World War II Gerhard Zucker served in the Luftwaffe, but does not appear to have been involved with the program that developed the V1 and V2 rockets. After the war he lived in West Germany where he became a furniture dealer. He continued his rocket experiments until three people were killed in an accident at a rocket demonstration on May 7, 1964, on the Hasselkopf Mountain near Braunlage. This accident led to a ban on civilian rocket research in West Germany.

Zucker's covers are rarely seen these days, though covers for his



Figure 3

1936 "Rocket Flights over Niagara Falls" have started appearing in Canadian bourses from time to time in the last five years.

75 Years Later

However, 75 years after they were printed, some of Zucker's stamps flew on a rocket built and launched by Wilfred Ashley McIsaac in Eastern Ontario.

Ashley McIsaac (Figure 3) is a rocket enthusiast who launched a series of rockets in the 1990s. He has recently resumed building and launching rockets to commemorate Canadian military and aerospace achievements. In 2010, Ashley launched a modified Arreaux high-powered rocket in Prince Edward County as a commemoration of the military and for the Avro Arrow.

In 2011 Ashley planned to launch an ARCAS rocket. This was a popular sounding rocket in the late 1950s and 1960s from the Atlantic Research Corporation, responsible for improving atmospheric research in several countries including Canada. The rocket was duplicated by Aerotech in the 1990s as a scaled down half-size version of the original for high-powered rocket enthusiasts.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Ashley McIsaac constructed the rocket in the spring of 2011 and planned to launch some time in June or July. A suitable launch site was, however, difficult to find. He finally spoke with the owners of the Camden Aerodrome in Camden East, Ontario, and the Gananoque Airport near the Thousand Islands. Ashley was given permission to launch his rocket at either location. He chose the airfield in Gananoque, located just inside the Township of Leeds and the Thousands Islands. This is a sprawling countryside community of vast farm land and very few trees, which was not the case at Camden. The Gananoque airfield is a former World War II airfield, now mainly used for weekend skydiving. Since all airfields are a restricted airspace, launching from an airfield greatly simplified the issue of a warning (or no-tam) to other air users.

During his research for the Canadian rocket mail project, Ashley came across Gerhard Zucker's Niagara Falls Rocket Mail stamps on eBay. He commented that he was "thrilled to learn of the stamps' unique history, and the fact they were never launched because no rocket was available. Now, after all this time, what the German Gerhard Zucker had started, the Canadian Wilfred Ashley could finally finish."

The rocket carrying mail with Canadian postage lifted off from the Gananoque aerodrome at 10:15 a.m. on October 31, 2011 (Figure 4). The launch vehicle was a 4 foot, 7½ inch tall high-powered ARCAS rocket from Aerotech in the United States. ARCAS weighed approximately five pounds and used a solid fuel motor delivering 18 pounds (80 newtons) of thrust.



Figure 6

When the rocket reached an estimated 2,500 feet altitude, a 36" nylon parachute deployed, returning the entire unit back to the aerodrome unharmed. The lift-off and landing was captured on film by an on-board "gopro" camera strapped to the exterior of the rocket's body. There was a 10-15 kilometers/hour southwestern breeze blowing on the launch day, but by aiming the rocket correctly, the wind blew it back to the airfield, and it came in for a perfect landing (Figure 5).

When the rocket was safely recovered, Ashley McIsaac retrieved the contents. Seven commemorative letters with 1936 "First Canadian Rocket Flight" stamps were collected from inside the protective payload bay and immediately forwarded to the nearest post office in the city of Gananoque, Ontario (Figure 6). From this point they were delivered by conventional means of transportation, mainly to local media outlets and museums.

As well as one of Zucker's stamps, the covers carried a label "You have received the First Official Canadian Rocket Mail," since when Ashley researched Rocket Mail in Canada before the flight on October 31, he did not find any reports about such flights. There are, in fact, other Canadian covers carried by rockets listed in *The Air Mails of Canada and Newfoundland*. Ashley's flight is, however, one of the longest and highest rocket flights to carry mail in Canada and probably the only mail-carrying rocket flight in Canada during the last 25 years.

Ashley McIsaac continued his "Private Rocket Program" in 2012:

- May 11th 2012: an Astrobee D rocket carrying 5 letters reached an altitude of 600-700 feet.
- June 29th 2012: an Astrobee D III rocket carried 7 letters to an altitude of 1200-1600 feet.
- November 6th, 2012: an Astrobee D IV rocket with 12 letters reached an altitude of approximately 800 feet.

A total of 31 letters have been flown on Ashley McIsaac's rockets. They were all franked with current Canadian postage stamps as well as a Gerhard Zucker 'First Canadian Rocket-Flight' stamp from 1936, and cancelled in Gananoque after the flight. Some of the covers have been sold on eBay and a donation made from the proceeds to the Arthritis Research Foundation of Canada.

References

1. About Gerhard Zucker's TIPEX covers: *The Air Mails of Canada and Newfoundland*, Section 20 - Astrophilately in Canada - edited by Reuben Ramkissoon, AAMS Publications.
2. About all Zucker's rocket covers: *Rocket Mail Flights of the World to 1986* by Dr. Max Kronstein, AAMS Publications.
3. Additional information about Gerhard Zucker's life and activities was obtained from many sources via the internet. Highly recommended is: www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/23/turner2.php
4. Ashley McIsaac's October 3, 2011 rocket launch was described by Ashley in several discussions with the author and in the article "Rocket Stamps Flown After 75 Years" by Ashley McIsaac in the December 2011 *Canadian Aerophilatelist*.
5. A film of the rocket's launch and flight can be seen at:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnsBBBrCicro
6. More information about Ashley's rocket flights in 2012 is at:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1w_2RUq9VMW9yVjqlWbf29HXjGHgOE1F5ATmkxGnn_7Y/edit?pli=1
7. For more information about the hobby of building rockets, check out: www.sigmarockets.com

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