

Rocket Mail

It seemed like a good idea at the time **BY JOHN LOCKWOOD**

Even in these days of the Internet, sending paper mail by airplane remains a major part of everyday life. The early efforts to build upon airmail and experiment with rocket mail, however, never quite caught on.

There had been earlier efforts at home and abroad, usually over short distances and using handcrafted rockets. It all came to a head in 1959, however, when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) decided to try it out.

The rocket chosen for this job was Thor, a 55-ton intermediate-range ballistic missile developed by the U.S. Air Force. Thor was a single-stage rocket, with a range of 1,500 miles. On November 27, 1957, the government gave the go-ahead for production.

The launch duly took place on May 21, 1959, from Cape Canaveral. It was the 44th flight of a Thor. NASA increased its range to 6,000 miles by adding the second stage of a Vanguard rocket. The resulting combination was called a “Thor-Able” rocket.

Two letters were added to the instrument-laden nose cone. Lt. Col. Thomas W. Morgan wrote the letters, addressed to Maj. Gen. Donald M. Yates and Col. Henry E. Warden.

The Thor-Able, as planned, flew down the South Atlantic Ocean, at a height of 300 miles. The nose cone reentered the atmosphere at 15,000mph, the air friction reaching 9,000°F. The cone was covered with ablative material, which carried away the heat as it burned off. The parachute then opened, and the cone came down near Ascension Island, halfway between Africa and South America.

An Air Force C-54 spotted the cone upon reentry and directed a recovery ship to the area. The cone was found 30 feet underwater, suspended from the parachute floating on the surface. The entire flight had lasted just 23 minutes. Some 3 1/2 hours after that, the cone was recovered. So far, so good.

The cone was taken by ship back to the United States and then by train to General Electric in Philadelphia. When the cone was opened, the letters were nowhere to be seen. Had the heat during reentry somehow burned up the letters? A more thorough search two weeks later found the letters jammed among the instruments in the cone’s tip.

For some unexplained reason, the letters were flown back to Morgan’s office. He was, unfortunately, away at another duty site and did not return until almost two months later.

When Morgan returned, he personally delivered the letters to Yates and Warden. They had both been 15 miles away when the Thor-Able was launched, which makes one wonder why the letters weren’t addressed, instead, to somebody on Ascension Island. †

In a 1959 experiment at high-speed mail delivery, a Thor-Able rocket was used to transport letters thousands of miles away in only minutes. Unfortunately, the recovery, transport, and subsequent delivery delay of two months negated any speed advantages. E-mail is definitely better.

