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THE ST. PETERSBURG-TAMPA AIRBOAT LINE

by EUGENE F. PROVENZO, JR. *

THE ST. PETERSBURG-TAMPA Airboat Line operated between St. Petersburg and Tampa, Florida, for three months between January 1, 1914, and March 31, 1914. The Line is commonly recognized as the world's first regularly-scheduled passenger and commercial freight airline. The idea for the airline originated with the Florida engineer and businessman, P. E. Fansler. It was while experimenting with speed boat racing that he became interested in flying as a way of achieving even greater speed. When he heard about the record-breaking long distance flight made by Antony Jannus in a Benoist flying boat between Omaha and New Orleans in the fall of 1912, he became even more interested in flying.¹

Jannus was an instructor and pilot for the Benoist Air Craft Company of St. Louis. Begun in 1908 by Thomas W. Benoist, the company was an important early designer and manufacturer of aircraft and was responsible for a number of important firsts in aviation history. A Benoist biplane piloted by Jannus was used to make the first successful parachute jump from an airplane.²

Fansler contacted Benoist late in 1913 about the possibilities of buying an airplane. Then, after exchanging several letters with Benoist, he conceived of the idea of starting a commercial airline: "I wrote to Tom about the scheme, and he immediately became enthusiastic. He agreed to build and furnish two boats if I would work out the operating details, select a route and handle the

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1. For biographical background on Jannus see: "Antony (Tony) H. Jannus: Early Benoist Instructor and Test Pilot," manuscript included under the title *The Flying Pioneers Biographies of Harold E. Morehouse*. Archival Collection of the National Air and Space Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
2. For information on Thomas Benoist, see Christy C. Magrath, "Tom Benoist-One of Flying's All Time Greats," *Aeronautics*, VI (April-September 1954), 4-10, and Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., "Thomas W. Benoist-Early Pioneer Aviator (1874-1917)," *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin*, XXXI (January 1975), 91-104.

business end. My experience all over Florida led me to conclude that a line could be operated between St. Petersburg and Tampa under favorable conditions."³

Having convinced twelve businessmen from St. Petersburg to put up \$100 each to back the airline scheme, he then got the St. Petersburg Board of Trade to match the amount. Fansler's backers agreed to pay the airline company \$50.00 a day during January, and \$25.00 a day thereafter, minus passenger revenue, for every day on which four trips were made.⁴

St. Petersburg was an ideal location for running a passenger and freight service. The city at that time had a population of about 8,000. The nearest outlet for wholesale goods was Tampa. Although it was only about twenty-three miles across the bay, Tampa was a twelve-hour train ride, or three-hour boat ride away.⁵

On December 4, 1913, the airline was officially organized by Fansler as the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line. A few weeks later, on December 17, 1913—exactly ten years after the Wright Brothers made their flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina—Benoist arrived in St. Petersburg and signed a contract with the city for the operation of the airline. The actual operation of the service was to begin at ten o'clock on the morning of January 1, 1914.⁶

Benoist had arranged for one of his planes to be shipped by train to St. Petersburg. Expecting it to arrive about Christmas, the shipment of the aircraft was delayed, however, and it did not arrive until December 31—the day before the airline was officially to begin operation. Antony Jannus and a mechanic, J. D. Smith, had come into St. Petersburg earlier, and they took over the assembly and testing of the plane. As Fansler recalled the event: "The boat had been flown before shipment, so, when it had been re-assembled, and just before the sun plunged into the Gulf of Mexico, Tony gave her the final inspection and told Smitty to 'crank 'er up.' Willing hands laid hold of the wings and guided No. 43, as she was known, into the water. A short taxi to warm

3. P. E. Fansler, "The First Commercial Airline," *Aero Digest*, XV (December 1929), 58.

4. *Ibid.*, 58-59.

5. H. M. DuBois, "Practical Developments in American Aeronautics," *Flying*, III (February 1914), 20.

6. *Ibid.*, 59.

up and Tony took off. Ten minutes later he landed on the opposite side of the lagoon where a rough hanger had been erected and announced we were ready for the start on schedule next morning.“⁷

“Number 43” was a Type 14 Benoist Flying Boat. The plane was powered by a seventy-five horsepower Roberts engine located in the hull and connected to the propeller by a roller chain. A bi-plane design measuring thirty-two feet in length, the craft had a wing span of thirty-five feet. Constructed with a spruce frame covered by canvas, the plane was designed to carry two passengers. Fully loaded, the plane was capable of flying sixty-four miles per hour.⁸

A crowd of nearly 3,000 had assembled by 9:30 on the morning of January 1 to see the inauguration of the airline. After introducing Benoist and Jannus, Fansler formally declared the airline opened. The first ticket for the airline was auctioned off for \$400 to Mayor A. C. Phiel, who “explained that he had to buy some machinery in Tampa and had to hurry. . . . Mr. Phiel in a raincoat stepped gingerly into the boat, which had been pulled down until it was just awash. Smitty pulled down on the starting bar, and the little Roberts motor that was to prove so reliable began to roar. Tony settled down into his seat and tested his controls. The crowd looked on with interest. Many had never seen an airplane of any kind, and had little conception of what the plane could do. Tony yelled to me for the time, and I told him that he had a minute before ten o’clock. He speeded up the engine . . . with a wave of his hand, Tony gave her the gun, and the boat taxied out over the lagoon to the inshore side. Turning, Tony drove her straight for the harbor entrance, and before reaching it, pulled her off the water.“⁹ The first commercial airline flight in history had begun.

Jannus was sighted less than one half-hour later by a crowd waiting for his arrival in Tampa. Landing safely, Jannus returned almost immediately to St. Petersburg. Another round-trip was made that same afternoon. After this, regular operations were begun. Passengers for the airline were charged \$5.00 per flight,

7. Ibid.

8. For descriptions of the plane see: “The Benoist Flying Boat,” *Flight*, VI (February 28, 1914), 213; and “The Benoist Flying Boat,” *Aeronautics*, V (January 1913), 15-18.

9. Fansler, “First Commercial Airline,” 59.

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and \$10.00 for the round trip between the two cities. Each passenger was allowed a total weight of 200 pounds, which included their own weight plus luggage. Four round trips were scheduled each day. Delivery and receipt of the materials being sent were the responsibility of the shipper.¹⁰ From the beginning, Benoist felt that the airboat line could be a practical operation: "We feel confident that we can show that passengers and freight can be carried at this rate at considerable profit. The price charged is just twice that asked of similar trips by automobile. That should be just about right. Certainly we would defeat the purpose of the first airboat line if we established what transportation men consider an extraordinary tariff."¹¹ Between January 1 and January 10, 1914, a total of twenty-six trips were made covering a distance of 682 miles.¹²

Within the first few weeks of the airline's operation a publicity stunt was undertaken that is credited to be the first commercial flight of goods in history. On the morning of January 13, 1914, a butcher in Tampa called Fansler asking him if he could send a fifty-pound shipment via the airboat. Fansler agreed.

Shortly afterward the following exchange of telegrams was published in an advertisement in *Aero* magazine:

| | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Swift & Co. Tampa, Fla. | St. Petersburg, Fla. Jan. 13, 1914 |
| Ship via first Benoist airboat express one case each premium hams and bacon. five cases ham to follow on evening boat. | |
| 8:52 A.M. | Hefner Grocery Co. |

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Hefner Grocery Co. St. Petersburg, Fla. | Tampa, Fla. Jan. 13, 1914 |
| Your wire for case each Premium hams, bacon, airship delivery, rec'd 9 A.M. Shipment left via Benoist airboat eleven-four and will reach you in twenty minutes. Answer when shipment rec'd and when this telegram rec'd. | |
| Paid day. Swift & Co. | Swift & Co. St. Petersburg, Fla. |

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10. "Air Liner Travels 682 Miles First Ten Days," *Aero and Hydro*, VII (January 24, 1914), 213.
 11. *Aero and Hydro*, VII (January 10, 1914), 178.
 12. Fansler, "First Commercial Airline," 264.

Received Premium hams and bacon via Benoist airboat
eleven twenty-five; you were rec'd twelve five.

Hefner Grocery Co. ¹³

Some weeks later, a similar advertisement was run in *Collier's* magazine. ¹⁴ Besides chronicling what was undoubtedly the first commercial flight of a ham in history, these advertisements provide an important record of the beginnings of commercial aviation.

Antony Jannus's brother Roger joined the airline as a pilot shortly after it had begun regular operation, and a second plane was shortly added to the airline. This was consistent with Fansler's desire to expand the operation and scope of the company as quickly as possible. A plan was put together by Fansler to fly railroad passengers on the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad from Tampa to St. Petersburg, rather than have them take the steamer across Tampa Bay. ¹⁵ He also tried to convince the postal authorities to establish an air post between St. Petersburg and Tampa. Both of these ideas, however, were finally rejected as being impractical. ¹⁶

A flying school was started by Benoist and Jannus in conjunction with the airline, as well as series of regular flights to Manatee, Bradenton, and Sarasota. By March 31, 1914, the end of the original three-month contract, a total of 1,204 passengers had been carried aloft. ¹⁷

With the end of the tourist season in March, the airboat line was discontinued, and it never resumed operation. Antony Jannus left the Benoist Company to start a passenger service in Sandusky, Ohio. The following year, he was sent to Russia by the Curtiss Aircraft Company to train Russian pilots. On October 12, 1916, he was killed in a flying accident near Sevastopol in the Crimea. ¹⁸

Benoist met a similar unfortunate fate. Shortly after returning from England, where he was negotiating with the British for the sale of his planes, he was killed in a streetcar accident. ¹⁹ Fansler lived until 1937, but failed to continue work in the field of com-

13. *Aero*, VII (March 21, 1914), inside cover advertisement.

14. *Collier's*, LI (March 12, 1913), inside cover advertisement.

15. Fansler, "First Commercial Airline," 265.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Magrath, "Tom Benoist," 9.

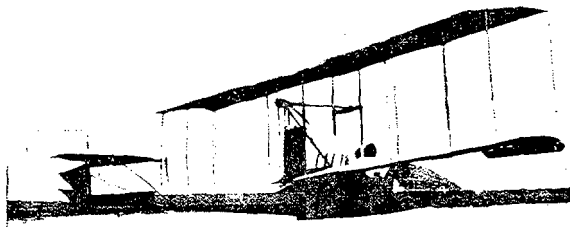
18. Morehouse, "Antony (Tony) H. Jannus," 11.

19. Provenzo, "Thomas W. Benoist," 104.

Announcement

¶ Beginning first day of January, 1914, the Benoist School of Aviation will be in operation on the north break-water of the yacht basin at St. Petersburg, Fla.

¶ The School will be under the personal supervision of Tom W. Benoist and Tony Jannus. There will be plenty of machines for each student to receive exhaustive and personal instruction in the operation of the airboat and as the weather in this part of Florida will permit 14 hours of flying a day and every day in the week during the months of January, February and March, students will experience no trouble in getting plenty of practice and will naturally come out of the school in the Spring expert flyers.



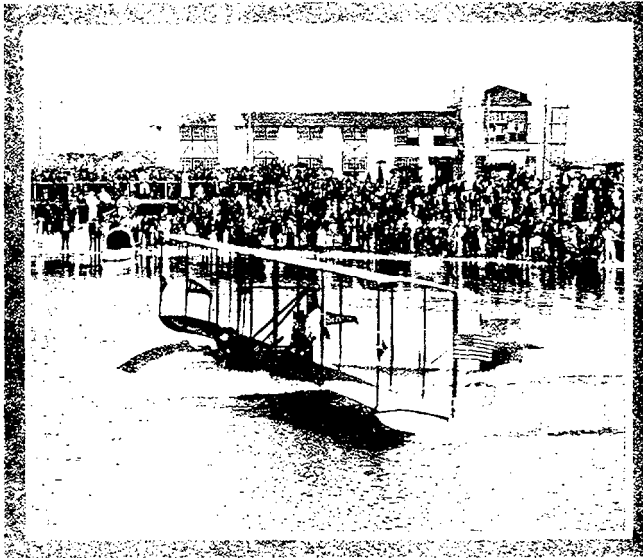
¶ Besides, St. Petersburg will be the very center of things aeronautical during the winter, as a regular passenger line will be maintained between St. Petersburg and Tampa, using as many as one-half dozen passenger-carrying machines, maintaining a regular schedule the same as railroads and steam boats. This will enable the student to obtain first hand information as to the practical operation of the new airboat in commercial business. It will also put the student in line for any positions and promotions that may come up at that time and will of course give him opportunities to meet many customers for airboats and prospective customers who will be there looking for personal information about the practicability of these machines.

¶ Motor boat and automobile dealers and others who are planning to take on a line of airboats to supplement their other business the coming year, will do well to spend a week's vacation in St. Petersburg to see just what the possibilities are in connection with these boats and to make arrangements for obtaining the agency in their territory before it has been taken by some one else.

Address **Benoist Aircraft Company**
6628 Delmar Boul., St. Louis, Mo.

The Benoist Aircraft Company advertised its school of aviation at St. Petersburg in the January 13, 1914 issue of *Aero and Hydro*. Advertisement reproduced through the courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

What the Benoist Flying Boats Have Done



and what other flying boats have done last year is of some interest, but what flying boats are doing now-right now -today --is of actual interest to the prospective purchaser for 1914.

Compare the work that the Benoist Airboat is doing at St. Petersburg, Florida, this winter, with the work being done by other airboats and you will get an idea of the comparative efficiency of the Benoist and others.

For instance, the Benoist airboat is carrying on a regular up-to-the-minute, man's-job, passenger-carrying business. Hacking it across Old Tampa Bay twenty-two miles, four times a day, on regular schedule, as regular as clockwork and never missing a trip. Also this work is not being done by an immense organization, a great number of

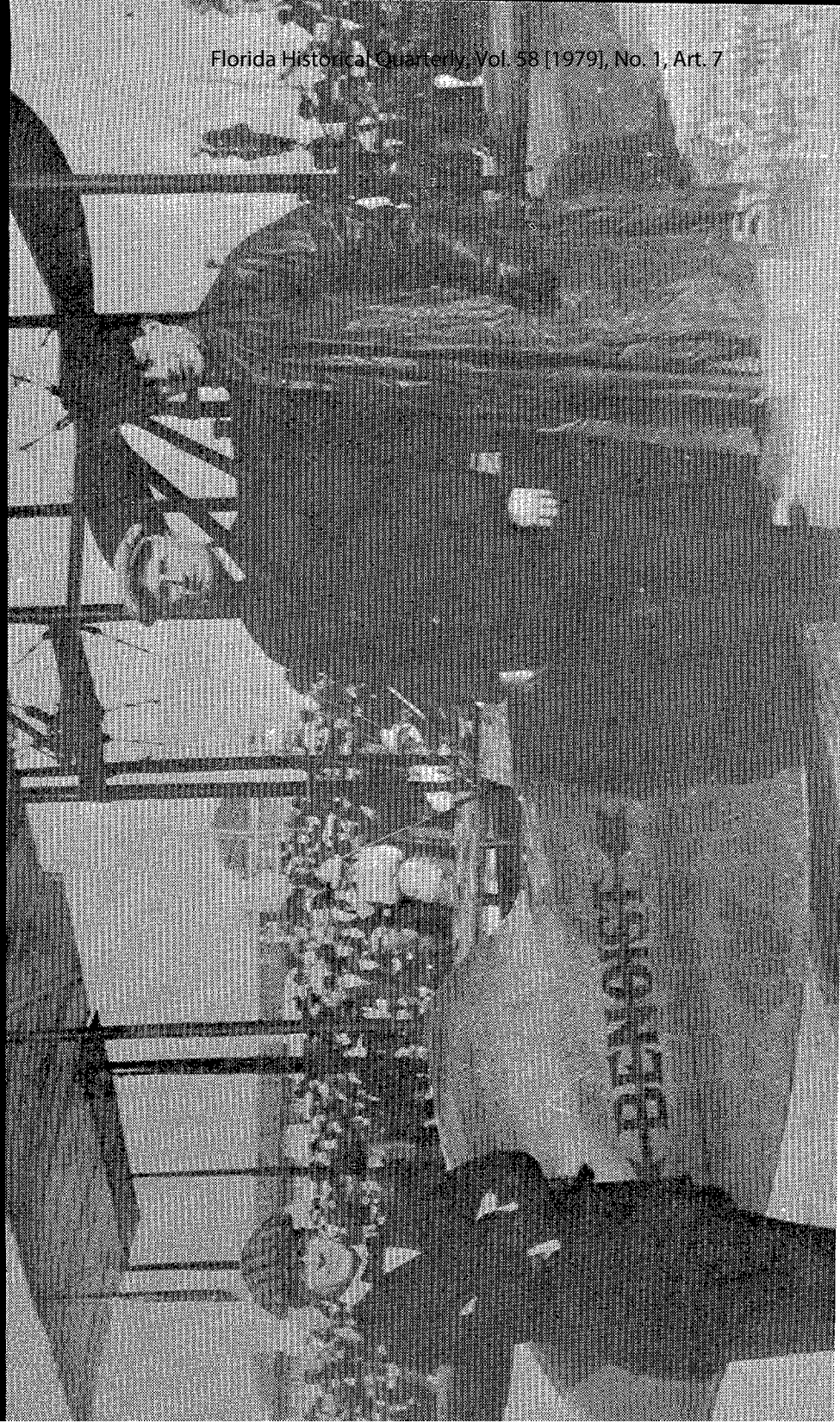
machines and fliers with equipment in reserve, representing an investment of thousands of dollars; but is simply being accomplished with one airboat, working every day like a taxicab or a businessman's automobile.

This consistent efficiency, compared with that of the performance of other air boats, stands not as the result of luck, but rather as the result of an endless search for perfection in material, workmanship and design. Any man who purchases a Benoist airboat is simply making himself profit sharer in this general plan. If further interested address

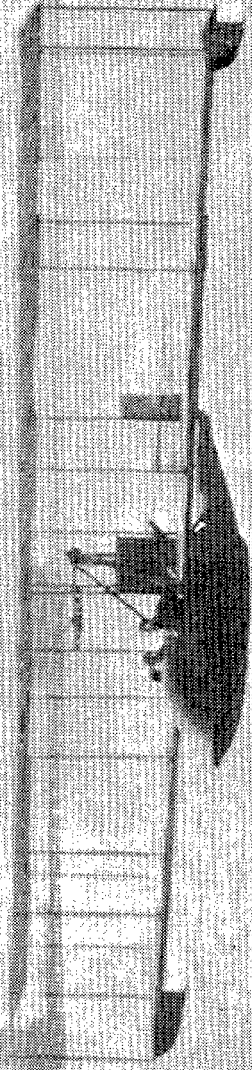
Winter Flying School, St. Petersburg, Fla.

Benoist Aircraft Company 6628 Delmar Blvd., **St. Louis, Mo.**

Advertisement for the Benoist Aircraft Company, published in *Aero and Hydro*, February 7, 1914. Reproduced through the courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.



The crowd awaits the initial flight of the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line. Posing by the airboat, left to right, are P. E. Fansler, A. C. Phici, and Antony Jannus, courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.



Opening
St. Petersburg-Tampa
Airboat Line

The Benoist Air Boat in flight over Tampa Bay, 1914. Photograph courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

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mercial aviation.²⁰ His dream of the possibilities of commercial flight, while not sustained, were successfully realized in the three short months in 1914, during which the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line was in operation.

70. Paul Fleming, "Wife of a Pioneer," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 29, 1953.