



The first airline was the German airship company DELAG, founded on 16 November 1909. The four oldest non-airship airlines that still exist are the Netherlands' KLM (1919), Colombia's Avianca (1919), Australia's Qantas (1921) and the Czech Republic's Czech Airlines (1923).

As of 2019, the largest airline by passengers carried and fleet size was the American Airlines Group, while Delta Air Lines was the largest by revenue. Lufthansa Group was the largest by number of employees, FedEx Express by freight tonne-kilometres, Turkish Airlines by number of countries served and UPS Airlines by number of destinations served (though United Airlines was the largest passenger airline by number of destinations served).

The earliest fixed wing airline in Europe was Aircraft Transport and Travel, formed by George Holt Thomas in 1916; via a series of takeovers and mergers, this company is an ancestor of modern-day British Airways. Using a fleet of former military Airco DH.4A biplanes that had been modified to carry two passengers in the fuselage, it operated relief flights between Folkestone and Ghent. On 15 July 1919, the company flew a proving flight across the English Channel, despite a lack of support from the British government. The flight took 2 hours and 30 minutes at £21 per passenger.

By the early 1920s, small airlines were struggling to compete, and there was a movement towards increased consolidation. In 1924, Imperial Airways was formed from the merger of Instone Air Line Com-

pany, British Marine Air Navigation, Daimler Airway and Handley Page Transport Co Ltd., to allow British airlines to compete with stiff competition from French and German airlines that were enjoying heavy government subsidies. The airline was a pioneer in surveying and opening up air routes across the world to serve far-flung parts of the British Empire and to enhance trade and integration.

Two French airlines also merged to form Air Union on 1 January 1923. This later merged with four other French airlines to become Air France, the country's flagship carrier to this day, on 7 October 1933.

Germany's Deutsche Luft Hansa was created in 1926 by merger of two airlines, one of them Junkers Luftverkehr. Luft Hansa, due to the Junkers heritage and unlike most other airlines at the time, became a major investor in airlines outside of Europe, providing capital to Varig and Avianca. German airliners built by Junkers, Dornier, and Fokker were among the most advanced in the world at the time

Tony Jannus conducted the United States' first scheduled commercial airline flight on 1 January 1914 for the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line. The 23-minute flight traveled between St. Petersburg and Tampa, passing some 50 feet above Tampa Bay in Jannus' Benoist XIV wood and muslin biplane flying boat. His passenger was a former mayor of St. Petersburg, who paid \$400 for the privilege of sitting on a wooden bench in the open cockpit. The Airboat line operated for about four months, carrying more than 1,200 passengers who paid \$5 each.

In 1918, the US Postal Service won the financial backing of Congress to begin experimenting with air mail service, initially using Curtiss Jenny aircraft that had been procured by the Army Air Service. Private operators were the first to fly the mail, but due to numerous accidents the Army was tasked with mail delivery, but they proved to be too unreliable and lost their air mail duties. By the mid-1920s, the Postal Service had developed its own air mail network, based on a transcontinental backbone between New York City and San Francisco. To supplement this service, they offered twelve contracts for spur routes to independent bidders. Some of the carriers that won these routes would, through time and mergers, evolve into Pan Am, Delta Air Lines, Braniff Airways, American Airlines, United Airlines (originally a division of Boeing), Trans World Airlines, Northwest Airlines, and Eastern Air Lines.

Service during the early 1920s was sporadic: most airlines at the time were focused on carrying bags of mail. In 1925, however, Ford Motor Company bought out the Stout Aircraft Company and began construction of the all-metal Ford Trimotor, which became the first successful American airliner. With a 12-passenger capacity, the Trimotor made passenger service potentially profitable. Air service was seen as a supplement to rail service in the American transportation network.

At the same time, Juan Trippe began a crusade to create an air network that would link America to the world, and he achieved this goal through his airline, Pan American World Airways, with a fleet of flying boats that linked Los Angeles to Shanghai and Boston to London. Pan Am and Northwest Airways (which began flights to Canada in the 1920s) were the only U.S. airlines to go international before the 1940s.

With the introduction of the Boeing 247 and Douglas DC-3 in the 1930s, the U.S. airline industry was generally profitable, even during the Great Depression. This trend continued until the beginning of World War II.

World War II, like World War I, brought new life to the airline industry. Many airlines in the Allied countries were flush from lease contracts to the military, and foresaw a future explosive demand for civil air transport, for both passengers and cargo. They invested in the newly emerging flagships of air travel such as

the Boeing Stratocruiser, Lockheed Constellation, and Douglas DC-6. Most of these new aircraft were based on American bombers such as the B-29.

In the 1950s, the De Havilland Comet, Boeing 707, Douglas DC-8, and Sud Aviation Caravelle became the first flagships of the Jet Age in the West, while the Eastern bloc had Tupolev Tu-104 and Tupolev Tu-124 in the fleets of state-owned carriers such as Czechoslovak ČSA, Soviet Aeroflot and East-German Interflug. The Vickers Viscount and Lockheed L-188 Electra inaugurated turboprop transport. On 4 October 1958, BOAC started transatlantic flights between London Heathrow and New York Idlewild with a Comet 4, and Pan Am followed on 26 October with a B707 service between New York and Paris.

The next big boost for the airlines would come in the 1970s, when the Boeing 747, McDonnell Douglas DC-10, and Lockheed L-1011 inaugurated widebody ("jumbo jet") service, which is still the standard in international travel. The Tupolev Tu-144 and its Western counterpart, Concorde, made supersonic travel a reality. Concorde first flew in 1969 and operated through 2003. In 1972, Airbus began producing Europe's most commercially successful line of airliners to date. The added efficiencies for these aircraft were often not in speed, but in passenger capacity, payload, and range.

The 1978 U.S. airline industry deregulation lowered federally controlled barriers for new airlines just as a downturn in the nation's economy occurred. By the 1980s, almost half of the total flying in the world took place in the U.S., and today the domestic industry operates over 10,000 daily departures nationwide

The last 50 years of the airline industry have varied from reasonably profitable, to devastatingly depressed. As the first major market to deregulate the industry in 1978, U.S. airlines have experienced more turbulence than almost any other country or region. In fact, no U.S. legacy carrier survived bankruptcy-free. More problems materialized recently with the pandemic crisis.



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