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NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR AERONAUTICS.

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INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF AIR TRAVEL.

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INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF AIR TRAVEL.*

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By Edward P. Warner.

Although of less vital concern in the United States than in some other parts of the world, the relation of non-military flying to international law is a subject of grave importance even there, since airplanes are already operating between the United States and various West Indian islands not under the American flag, and since transport by air is sure sooner or later to extend across the Canadian and Mexican boundaries. In Europe the international questions arising out of air travel have been serious stumbling blocks from the very first, as any really extended undertaking must somewhere cross national boundaries. European experience with those questions is then of interest both to the American tourist expecting to travel on the European air-lines and to those persons who are actually attempting to operate aircraft in America and who are likely to meet with similar problems themselves.

The problems of international air travel are of two sorts, those which arise out of precautions taken to insure national safety and those which are concerned rather with economic questions. The precautions taken to insure national safety always have been and seem likely always to remain a source of considerable trouble to all who travel by aircraft or by any other means, but they are particularly irritating at present as a result of the elaborate precautions for control of international intercourse that have arisen out of the war and the suspicions and distrusts that it engendered. The most obvious illustration of this recent violent increase of control is of course the requirement of passports, a

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requirement which is now fortunately lapsing in a few countries.

Passports and Customs.

In order to insure that no person shall enter a state without a proper passport, as well as to prevent smuggling, it is provided by all countries in Europe that aircraft shall cross the international boundaries only between certain fixed points and that they shall in all instances terminate an international flight at an officially prescribed customs airport. While this rule is, on the whole, as mild as could be expected, its excessively literal interpretation occasionally makes trouble, especially as it often has to be interpreted and enforced by officials entirely ignorant of the necessities which attend the operation of aircraft.

A striking instance came to the writer's attention two years ago, when an airplane which was travelling with a load of passengers between the capitals of two European powers developed minor engine trouble after crossing the international boundary line. The pilot selected a field and landed with the intention of putting matters to rights and promptly proceeding on his way but he had hardly brought his airplane to rest when a policeman appeared and declared that neither the pilot nor any one else should set foot on the ground to repair the engine or for any other purpose until the passport control officer arrived. The functionary put in an appearance after some four hours, during most of which time the rain descended on the defenseless heads of the passengers, the airplane being an early type not fitted with a closed cabin. It does not seem probable that that particular lot of passengers spent much

of their time thereafter in enthusiastically pleading the cause of civil aviation, although the government represented by the over-zealous officer of the law is one which has consistently supported air transport by every possible means. A single unfortunate occurrence of the sort just described does more harm than months of official support and scores of successful journeys can counterbalance.

Fortunately, one great danger to commercial flying has been averted by the general ratification of the International Air Navigation Convention. That document provides that aircraft registered with any ratifying state may pass over the territory of any other ratifying state without alighting at all. This saves both time and trouble, and gives to air travel a distinct advantage over travel by rail, since it is impossible to go from France to Tzechoslovakia, for example, by rail without securing a visé from and undergoing the passport examination of at least one intermediate country, whereas the trip from Strasburg to Prague by air is regularly made without intermediate landing. No governmental formalities need be gone through with by the individual in order to make the non-stop flight across German territory.

Another class of regulation designed to promote national safety is that relating to flights over military areas. Such regulations, of course, apply to all flights, not only to those of international scope, and to all aircraft, although they are, as a rule, enforced with special stringency against aliens. Each European country has listed a number of forts, dockyards, harbors of strat-

egic importance, and other areas over which no aircraft may pass except at a very great altitude. There are 11 such areas listed in the British Isles, for example, and any aircraft flying over them, and failing promptly to alter its course when signaled to do so, is likely to be fired on from the ground. Fortunately, most of the areas are not so located as to interfere with aerial traffic, being at remote locations on the sea coast. It is to be expected that such areas will always exist, but it may be hoped that their number will decrease as international relations improve and mutual confidence between neighboring states increases.

The Problem of Smuggling.

When the economic provisions are considered there seems to be less expectation of improvement than in other connections. It is reasonable to hope that the passport nuisance will be done away with within a few years at most, but every nation will certainly continue to exercise some measure of control over the merchandise imported, and the continuance of the customs airport system will be necessary for that reason. The problem of the use of aircraft for smuggling is likely to become very grave, particularly as night flying becomes easier and more common, and it may be necessary to establish an air patrol analogous to the revenue cutter service in order to prevent illicit use of the airplane. That, however, is a question for the future.

For the present it is sufficient to say that customs examination, like passport formalities, lose part of their terrors, when

travelling by air in Europe, both because part of the examinations are avoided entirely by passing over some states without stopping and because the traffic, being handled by smaller units and being distributed more uniformly throughout the day than is possible with rail or marine traffic, congests the examination facilities less than they are congested on the comparatively infrequent arrival of a train or ship. There is no doubt that the simplicity and quickness with which all formalities are taken care of at the air stations has been a governing factor in deciding many tourists to travel by air wherever possible on their European trips.

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