Special Report on Shipping Animals By Air
Animals are too often treated like just another piece of baggage, no more valuable than a suitcase or a mail sack.

Freddie’s tail thumped against the side of his carrying case as an airline attendant placed him on a loading cart in preparation for his trip to Chicago. As the best dog of a New Hampshire dachshund kennel, Freddie represented the kennel owner’s hopes for recognition at a Great Lakes dachshund show.

At Chicago’s Midway Airport, following a stop in Detroit, Freddie’s owner waited impatiently for him to be brought to the baggage claim area. Long after the luggage and other animals had been claimed, Freddie’s case appeared.

As a porter lifted the case off the conveyor belt, he exclaimed, “This dog’s dead, lady! He stinks!”

Freddie’s face and body and the sides of the case were streaked with dried blood. The grill on the door had been torn out by the frantic dog.

“To describe what went through my head at that moment is impossible,” Freddie’s owner said later. “I love all my dogs, but this one was special to me. There was a rapport between us that I had never before had with an animal.”

Her sorrow was temporarily allayed as she realized that Freddie was still breathing, although slightly. But by the time she had located an airline employee and been sent by taxi to a veterinarian’s office, the hint of life was gone.

Examination of the
The shifting of freight and negligence of airline employees that resulted in Freddie’s death are only two of the numerous threats to the health and safety of animals. Other major ones are:

- Inadequate air supply in baggage compartments
- Lack of temperature control in baggage compartments
- Delays and cancellations of flights and dumping of animals for other cargo, during which animals are usually ignored in a warehouse
- Improper caging and crating by shippers
- Acceptance by carriers of animals in poor health
- Failure of owners or consignees to claim animals quickly upon arrival

The efforts of The Humane Society and other animal welfare groups to obtain better circumstances for flying animals have been badly hindered by the absence of federal regulations requiring airlines to handle animals humanely. Without such regulations, HSUS sees little hope for protecting animals during air shipments.

“Airlines have no obligation to give food, water, exercise, or periodic inspections to animals, regardless of the length of flight,” pointed out HSUS Chief Investigator Frank J. McMahon.

He said the problem is complicated by the fact that many air express employees are paid by commission and are, therefore, willing to accept anything, regardless of the condition of either the animal or the shipping crate.

Most airline reservations personnel are as ignorant about methods and conditions for transporting animals as the general public. A recent check of major airlines in Washington, D.C., revealed that most personnel had no idea how animals are shipped. One airline and an REA office assured an HSUS inquirer that animals are always shipped in compartments separate from other cargo, which is seldom the case.

Many animal owners have been misled when told that baggage compartments are “pressurized,” which is almost always true. What airline representatives fail to say is that on most planes the air supply to baggage compartments is turned off during flight and there is little or no temperature control.

The reason for shutting off air to baggage compartments in flight is valid—the shortage of oxygen is bound to extinguish any fire that might break out. But the air in the compartment at take-off is not adequate for an animal during a long flight and sometimes results in death by suffocation.

Perhaps the highest rate of mortality occurs in mid-summer, when animals often die from excessive heat in sealed baggage compartments or in un-air-conditioned warehouses. But lack of temperature control is a threat throughout the year. A purser for an international airline told HSUS that a minimum-maximum thermometer he placed in a baggage compartment of a plane on which he was working recorded temperatures ranging from 104 on the ground to 0° in flight. During winter flights, it is not uncommon to find water in animals’ bowls frozen solid.

If airlines are going to accept animal shipments as a source of income, they must provide conditions that will ensure their good health and safety. Airlines complain about the high rate of claims they receive for loss or injury to animals, yet they fail to understand that an improvement in flying conditions would reduce their claim rate. (According to Consumer Reports, American Airlines receives 461% more claims for animals than regular cargo.) Recognizing the high risks involved, Braniff, Northwest, Air Canada, and many smaller airlines refuse to accept liability for the loss, injury, or death of passengers’ pets in the baggage compartments.

The most obvious change that needs to be made is the provision of a separate compartment for animals only, in which there is an adequate air supply and temperature control. In many planes, this would necessitate the partitioning of existing space. In others, it would mean reserving one of the existing cargo spaces for the exclusive use of animals.

Missed or cancelled flights are seldom more than inconveniences to human passengers, but to animals they can mean death.

A naval officer’s boxer died following shipment from Germany to Kansas, after the dog was unreasonably routed from Chicago to Houston before going to Kansas. The shipment took four days instead of the promised 40 hours. Death three days later was attributed to complications from extreme constipation.
A pet shop owner in Hagerstown, Md., became alarmed when a shipment of tropical fish from Florida did not arrive on a Friday afternoon plane. Upon investigation, he learned that the flight had been cancelled because of a snowstorm and that the fish would remain at Baltimore’s Friendship Airport until Monday. After driving to Baltimore, he discovered the boxes, clearly marked “Keep Warm,” in a cold warehouse, where many of the fish were already dead or dying.

Like hundreds of others, these people learned the hard way that the only means of ensuring the safety of animals in flight is to check on them every step of the way. And it isn’t enough to take an information clerk’s word that the animal has left or arrived on schedule. It is necessary to insist that someone check in person and report back.

“You simply can’t count on airline employees to check animals on their own initiative,” McMahon said. “The airline isn’t required to do it, and the employees aren’t paid to do it.”

At John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, animals are checked and cared for by the staff of a New York humane society. Similar operations are conducted in Philadelphia, Boston, and at Washington, D.C.’s National Airport. At these airports, animals are at least being cared for while they are on the ground. But hundreds of other airports have no provisions whatsoever.

While HSUS applauds these projects, it believes the only solution to the problem is federal legislation that will require the carriers to do the job.

“This is one area where commercial interests have a clear-cut responsibility,” McMahon said. “Humane societies have far too many other demands on their time and money to do a job that profit-making companies should be doing.”

Even the simplest need for an animal, an adequate carrying case or shipping crate, is frequently ignored. Spend a few hours at an air express animal receiving station and you’ll see dozens of crates that are too small, with inadequate ventilation, or too flimsy to withstand weight of other freight stacked on top of it.

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Animalport at National Airport, an HSUS investigator found that a weimaraner had chewed his way out of a clothes trunk that had been inadequately converted to a shipping case. A mixed beagle was found in a plywood case so small that he had to double up during transit. The top of a cardboard box filled with quail had been broken open, giving them an opportunity to escape.

"The cruelest situations I've observed have involved puppies coming from the puppy mills of Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska and hunting dogs from the Ozarks," said Washington Animalport Director Fay Brisk.

Puppy mills, so labeled because of their mass production of puppies for the nation's pet shops, commonly ship puppies in crates similar to those used for lettuce, two animals per crate. The crates are so flimsy that they can be easily smashed. Many of these puppies appear to be ill, and hunting dogs are often emaciated, infested with parasites, or suffering from distemper, Miss Brisk said.

Miss Brisk was so angry about the poor condition of a hunting dog that passed through the animalport recently that she called the veterinarian who had signed the health certificate attached to the crate. The veterinarian said he was required by state law to certify only that the dog had no diseases that could be transmitted to humans. He had not been paid to certify the health of the animal beyond that, he said.

Volunteers at the animalport have seen enough sick animals pass through the facility to convince them that many shippers send animals with full knowledge of sickness.

"When you look on an animal as merely a commercial commodity, you're concerned only about getting your money, not about the welfare of the animal," Miss Brisk said.

One of the most inexcusable sources of cruelty is failure of consignees or addressess to claim animals quickly upon arrival. This is especially true of C.O.D. shipments. Many recipients seem oblivious to the fact that it is living creatures they are receiving. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for commercial consignees to refuse shipments if the animals are in poor condition or overdue.

A West Virginia pet shop owner refused to accept a C.O.D. shipment of 14 puppies from a Nebraska puppy mill after it arrived too late for Christmas sales. Before the puppies were returned to the shipper, three of them—two poodles and a doberman pinscher—had died.

Unfortunately, animals are often treated like just another piece of baggage, no more valuable than a suitcase or a mail sack. Several airlines and air express companies have taken steps to change this sad situation. But the progress is much too slow. The Humane Society has concluded that shippers and handlers will provide humane conditions and treatment only when forced to do so. It appears that the enactment of federal regulations is the only answer.

Additional copies of this report are available at 35 each from The Humane Society of the United States, 1604 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. NOTE: After Nov. 1, 1974, write to 2001 L St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007

They Need Your Help!

1. If you have ever had an animal killed or injured during air shipment, send the details to HSUS.

2. Visit the air express terminal at your closest airport to observe how animals are handled. You'll need to make advance arrangements with REA or whatever company operates the terminal.

3. If conditions are bad, arrange for a reporter and photographer to visit the terminal with you. Give the reporter a copy of this report.

4. Write to HSUS for information on current legislation aimed at improving air shipment conditions for animals. (Until Nov. 1, 1974, the address is 1504 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. After Nov. 1: 2100 L St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.)

5. Send a contribution to HSUS to help in its drive to stop this cruelty. Your financial support, in any amount, is needed to solve this problem.

If You Must Send Your Pet by Air

1. Have the airline give you specific information on the conditions under which the animal will be transported. Is there an adequate air supply? In summer or winter, especially, make sure there is adequate temperature control. If a stop or change of planes is necessary, who will be responsible for making sure the animal is cared for? If you can't obtain specific information and assurances, find another airline.

2. Avoid shipping animals in midsummer, especially during mid-day hours. Make sure your pet is in good health. Have him checked by a veterinarian, and have the vet sign a health certificate. Consult him on the advisability of tranquilizing the animal.

3. Obtain an adequate carrier, either from a pet shop or the airlines. Make sure it is large enough for the animal to stand in and sturdy enough to withstand the weight of baggage that might be stacked on top of it. It should have ample openings for air at two (opposite) ends. Let your pet get used to it before the day of the flight.

4. Cover the bottom with some kind of absorbent material. Shredded newspapers will do, if nothing else is available.

5. If the animal will be in transit for more than a few hours, put a small bowl of water (preferably anchored to the side) in the carrier.

6. Don't give him food or water for a few hours before traveling, to avoid indigestion.

7. Ask the airline to provide "escort service" to the plane during loading, in order to observe your pet being loaded.

8. Check on the animal every step of the way.