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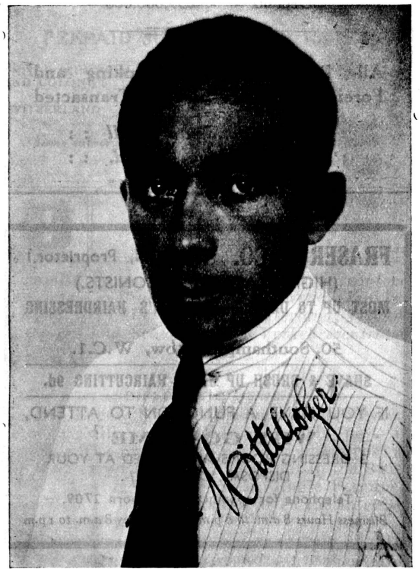
Walter Mittelholzer †

By ST.



" When fate has allowed to any man more than one great gift, accident or necessity seems usually to contrive that one shall encumber and impede the other." *Swinburne.*

Like a thunderbolt from a blue sky came the stunning news of the death of Walter Mittelholzer, our famous compatriot.

He who had looked death in the eye on innumerable occasions when flying over the four continents of the earth, has become the victim of an accident in the Styrian Alps (Austria) when on a mountaineering expedition. To the mountains he wended his way whenever he was in need of a rest from his daily toils; there in the Alpine splendours he found solace, and in the stillness and vastness of the mountain world he received new inspirations and new vigour for his great exploits. The plans for many a new venture were thought out on these expeditions, and it is therefore all the more tragic that he should have found his death amongst the mountains which he loved so much. It seemed almost as if they had taken their revenge on him, for having conquered them on so many occasions by flying over their glittering peaks. They have embraced him on his last wanderings and claimed him, and perhaps he would not have wished for a better end, but alas it came all too soon, there was so much more for him to do. —

I met Walter Mittelholzer for the first time some four years ago, when I had the privilege to lunch with him at Croydon, in company with a good friend of mine. This first meeting left a great and lasting impression on me; although small in stature and unassuming in his bearings, one was at once struck by the dynamic force which seemed to possess him, his eyes were the eyes of a conqueror; since then I have met him several times at lectures in the Swiss Colony and at a Journalist's conference in Fleet Street. It is with a heavy heart that I take up my pen to write these obituary notes. —

When, two years ago, I reviewed his book, " Flying Adventures," in this paper, I reproduced the preface which was written by Lord Beaverbrook, and I can do no better than to repeat it, it is a testimonial of one famous man to another:

Walter Mittelholzer is one of the most intrepid and skilful air pilots in the world. His intrepidity is not based on rashness, however, but on cool calculation and a profound knowledge of the science of flying.

Many and many a mile have I travelled with him, and many more I hope to travel in days to come. For when you journey on high with Mittelholzer you grow confident, that in spirit and character he is the embodiment of the great English seamen of the sixteenth century.

One day a historian of the air will arise who will make his own name and fame by describing the grand career of Mittelholzer. In the meantime, we are fortunate to have, in his own words, some chapters from the life of this remarkable man. —

Walter Mittelholzer was born on the 2nd of April, 1894, in St. Gall, where he received his schooling at the "Volks" and " Kantonsschule," later on he made his apprenticeship as a photographer. From his earliest years he was an enthusiastic mountain climber, and his military career started with a mountain regiment.

In 1915 he was transferred to the Swiss Flying Corps, first as a photographer, and later on as an observer, after a while he received a commission, and from that moment he became one of the most daring and efficient military pilots of the Swiss Army.

Shortly after the war he founded, together with Alfred Comte, the first commercial Air Transit concern in Switzerland, the " Aero," this company, which undertook passenger flights, specialised at the same time in Air Photography, and it was there, where Mittelholzer began his career as an Air photographer; which in later years made him not only famous as a pilot but equally so as the producer of wonderful views taken from the Air in all parts of the world. (Many of his Alpine views appeared in the Swiss Observer in the last three Anniversary numbers.)

Two years later the " Aero " concern was amalgamated with the " Ad Astra " Company from which the " Swissair " emerged of which he was technical Manager and Chief Pilot. —

In 1923 he was asked by the Junkers Works if he would take part in the Junkers Spitzbergen Expedition, which was to be an auxiliary expedition to Roald Amundsen's first Polar flight, he accepted the proposition with enthusiasm and on this occasion the mountains, glaciers and fjords of Spitzbergen were flown over for the first time.

Soon after his return from the successful Spitzbergen expedition, he was invited by the Persian Government to carry out a survey, with a view to introducing regular aerial transport to Persia. On this flight he flew across the premier mountain in Persia, the ice-crowned Demavend, which towers to a height of 18,600 feet, this was the culminating achievement of the Persian flight, as he was the first to fly over it.

During the years 1926/27 Mittelholzer undertook his first Seaplane flight over the length of Africa landing at Cape Town where he received an official reception by the Lord Mayor.

Two years later he was invited by Baron Louis de Rothschild, the well-known Austrian sportsman, to fly him in as short a time as possible from Cairo to the Serengeti Plains, in the Kilimanjaro region, where he intended to do some big-game hunting. On this expedition he covered 12,213 miles in a total flying time of 126 hours, and for the first time Mount Kibo (the highest peak of Kilimanjaro, 19,320 feet) and Mount Kenja (17,000 feet) were flown over, some of the most wonderful pictures were taken on this occasion.

In December 1930 Mittelholzer flew across the Sahara to Lake Chad (15,000 miles).

History was made by his one-day flight from Zurich to Africa and back on May 20th 1933, covering 2,800 miles in exactly fifteen flying hours, which corresponds to a straight-line distance from London to Bagdad or to Nigeria, his average flying speed was 187 m.p.h.

A year later, he flew to Abyssinia landing at Addis Ababa covering a distance of 4,500 miles, where he was personally congratulated by the late Emperor of Abyssinia, Hailé Selassié.

These are only the more important flights which he undertook, space prevents me from mentioning the many thousand miles which he flew otherwise and especially on the routes of the Swissair as a pilot. To fly with Mittelholzer was both a pleasure and an education.

Perhaps mention should also be made of his flight, carrying mail from Zurich to Naples-Athens, Istambul and Belgrad, and the many flights over the Swiss Alps; on one of the latter he nearly lost his life when his machine crashed into the mountain side on a return journey from Milan to Zurich; for three months he was helpless in bed until his frozen fingers and doubly fractured thigh bone were sufficiently healed to permit him to undertake further flights.

During the last few years he gave many lectures both at home and abroad, relating his experiences during his sensational flights. Up to the end of 1936 Mittelholzer had covered nearly a million miles during which he had taken over a thousand photographs.

A number of countries showered honours on him; he received the gold medals of the " Aero Club de France," the " Ligue Internationale des Aviateurs ", the " Schweizerischen Aero-Clubs," the " Oesterreichischen Aero-Clubs," etc., he was also a honorary member of the Swiss Aero-Club.

In reading through the obituary notices in the English Press, I found that his merits as the founder and pioneer of new navigation methods were not sufficiently appreciated, undoubtedly owing to the fact, that most of the scientific instruments so necessary for efficient navigation purposes have been until recently almost unknown here. Yet, it was Mittelholzer who was in this branch of aviation, in the real sense of the word, a pioneer, and this side of his work will undoubtedly receive general appreciation in the future. As far back as 1936 " The Aeroplane " wrote, that Mittelholzer " has trained his pilots to use only the precise radio-navigation methods which are becoming recognised as the only precise safe technique for European air transport in the future." The up-to-date equipment for navigation purposes installed in all " Swissair " machines were largely due to his initiative based on years of experience and experiments; thanks to him the flight-captain has to-day such a diversity of auxiliary appliances at his disposal, that according to his capability and his experience, each flight accomplished may be said to involve the solution of a problem. The days of the irresponsible hardihood of the " joystick crusaders " are definitely a thing of the past for commercial aviation. Mittelholzer's work in this direction will secure him for ever an honoured name in the world of aviation.—

Mittelholzer was equally efficient with his pen as with the joy-stick, he wrote at least half a dozen books, some of which were translated into foreign languages; in addition he was the author of a great number of articles on technical matters in connection with aviation.

And now that is all ended, those hands which gripped the joy-stick through hundreds of flights have grown cold, those keen and yet friendly eyes will remain closed for ever, that faithful heart has ceased to beat; far away from his country, which he loved with all his might, they carried him in a simple wooden coffin from the mountain side down to the little church of St. Jlgen, where he waited for his last journey home.

Around his bier not only his family and his many friends in all parts of the world mourn, but also his country of which he was such a distinguished son.

The memory of this really great man will remain deeply engraved in the hearts of all those who have known him.

SWISS EXCHANGE TRAINS.

As everyone knows a considerable number of our English friends go to Switzerland each year for their holidays. This Summer, owing to the more favourable exchange value of the £ and the better economic conditions in Great Britain, the number of English visitors to our country will probably reach record figures. Our Transport Undertakings, both Federal and private, and the " Fremdenindustrie " as a whole are looking forward to better times. They need and deserve them.

It lies in the nature of things that holiday traffic is rather onesided. Whilst there is a steady flow, and at times even a rush, of English visitors to Switzerland, the number of Swiss folk coming to this country on pleasure bent is comparatively small. For some years past, the Commercial Service of the Swiss Federal Railways in Berne have made a commendable effort to improve the balance. In order to " repay the compliment " to our visitors from abroad, and realizing full well that " Travel should be both ways," they are periodically organising so-called " Exchange Trains " (Austauschextrazüge) from Switzerland to other European countries, including England. Their purpose is twofold: first, it is a practical way of showing our English cousins that we take an interest in their land and appreciate them, not only as good clients, but also as our hosts in their own country. Then, these trains give the Swiss people themselves an excellent chance of seeing and " doing " this truly great Metropolis