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# Launch of the M.V. "General Guisan"

An event of great significance in the history of the Swiss Mercantile Fleet took place on Thursday, June 19th, 1947, at West Hartlepool, when the first vessel specially built to sail under the Swiss Flag, was launched by Madame Guisan, in the presence of her husband, General Henri Guisan, Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Army during the last war, and a number of distinguished guests.

For centuries the joke about the "Swiss Navy" has gone round the world, and although Switzerland has had in fact a Mercantile Marine as far back as 1914, this joke, at our expense, has been kept up with remarkable persistency, and even now, in spite of the launching at the Durham sea-port last month, we are still teased about it. When I discussed this point with one of my colleagues of the English Press, saying that the "Swiss Navy" joke has become a thing of the past, he replied, "Yes, that may be so, you have a navy, but no sea," to which I retorted that some countries have a "Ministry of Food, but no . . . .," my colleague good humouredly agreed that this was not a bad argument. I must leave it to my countrymen to judge whether it is wise to adopt this slogan under present circumstances.—

It might be an opportune moment to refer to the history of the Swiss Mercantile Fleet.

The Swiss Fleet came into being during the war. Up to that time, Switzerland, without a seaboard, was chartering foreign vessels for its imports — an average of a million tons per annum from overseas. This was the case during the war 1914/18. It was hoped that it might still be possible to act likewise during the last war, especially in view of the time charter contract which was concluded sometime before the beginning of hostilities for 15 Greek tramps with an aggregate tonnage of about 120,000 tons which the belligerents agreed to allot to Switzerland with a guarantee of non-requisition.

As war operations developed, however, it was found necessary to create a small merchant fleet under the Swiss Flag which would secure more easily from the belligerents immunity at sea and access to the ports of discharge as such a fleet was entirely in Swiss hands and used exclusively for transport to and from Switzerland. A little later, other ships were added to this fleet for the transportation of food for the Red Cross which brought highly appreciated relief to all those — prisoners-of-war and others — who benefited from this humanitarian work.

Under the Convention of Barcelona of 1921, such countries without seaboard were allowed to carry out shipping business under their own flag. This enabled the Swiss Government to issue a decree on the 9th April, 1941, creating the Swiss Flag. Its essential provisions are in agreement with the usual maritime law. The Swiss Federal Council decreed that the various international conventions settling and unifying customs at sea, the work of minors, the repatriation of sailors, the contracts for the crews, etc., should be made compulsory for all vessels flying the Swiss Flag.

The port of registry for all Swiss ships is Basle.

They are entered in the Register of Swiss Ships kept by the Office for Maritime Navigation in Basle, which superintends the whole of Swiss shipping.

The Swiss Fleet is now entirely owned by private firms. It is composed of six ships representing a total tonnage of 44,160 tons. All the vessels are rather old except the s.s. "St. CERGUE" built in 1937 at the yards of William Gray & Co., Ltd., in West Hartlepool, and belonging to the Suisse-Atlantique S.A., Lausanne, which is linked up with André & Cie., S.A., of Lausanne, a grain firm known throughout the world, founded in 1877.

Complying with the request of the Swiss authorities to keep up a small, efficient and modern fleet under the Swiss Flag, the Suisse-Atlantique S.A. ordered the M.V. "GENERAL GUISAN" from Messrs. William Gray & Co., Ltd.

The vessel is of shelter deck type with dimensions:

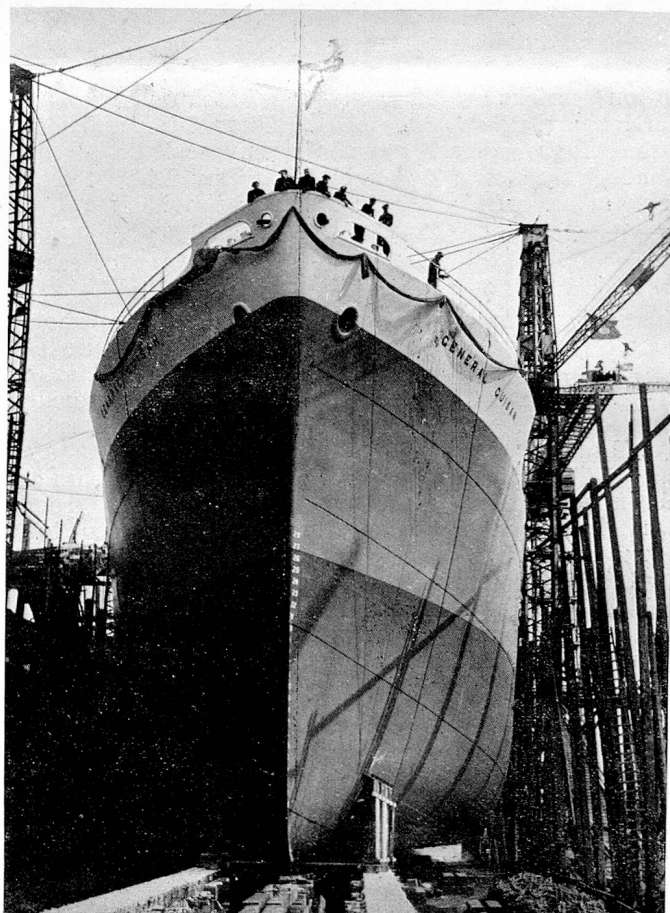
Length B.P.: 420' 0"

Breadth Moulded: 57' 3½"

Depth Moulded to Shelter Deck: 37' 0"

and will carry 9,100 tons on a mean draft of about 25' 1".

The vessel has four holds and five hatches. Two



M.V. "GENERAL GUISAN."



General and Madame Guisan outside Durham Cathedral.

10-ton derricks are fitted at No. 2 hatch and two 5-ton derricks at all other hatches. Three 5-ton and eight 3-ton electric winches will be supplied by Messrs. Sunderland Forge & Engineering Co., Ltd. Special cargo space with separate hatch is provided.

Deep tanks are fitted forward of the machinery space and are constructed for the carriage of cargo, edible oil or water ballast.

Electric hydraulic steering gear with telemotor control and auxiliary hand gear will be supplied by Messrs. Donkin & Co., Ltd., electric windlass by Messrs. Clarke Chapman & Co., Ltd., and automatic domestic refrigerating plant by Messrs. L. Sterne & Co., Ltd.

The captain, passengers, officers and engineers are accommodated in the bridge house. Chart room, wheelhouse, radio room, pilot and radio operators' room are arranged on the navigating bridge, with captain's and officers' accommodation on the captain's bridge. Engineers' rooms are arranged on the shelter deck. Passenger accommodation for six passengers, complete with dining saloon and smoke room, is arranged on the lower bridge.

Petty officers, caterers and crew are accommodated on the shelter deck on either side of the machinery casing.

Mechanical ventilation and heating, fitted throughout accommodation, will be supplied by Messrs. Norris Warming Co., Ltd.

Messrs. Sulzer Bros., Ltd., Winterthur, will supply the main engine together with attendant auxiliaries. The engine will be of Sulzer Marine Diesel

Type 7 S-D. 60, having 7 cylinders, 600 m.m. diameter by 1040 m.m. stroke and developing 3,150 B.H.P. at 135 r.p.m. continuously.

Two 100 K.W. and one 25 K.W. generators will also be supplied from Switzerland.

The main engine and generators will be fitted by the Central Marine Engine Works of the Builders, who will supply the remainder of the installation.

Steam for heating purposes will be provided by a Cochrane composite exhaust gas and/or oil fired boiler.

Speed in service will be 12 knots.

With regard to the naming of the ship the firm of Messrs. André & Cie, Lausanne, the owners, initiated a prize-competition amongst their staff, the winner to be present at the launching of the ship. The suggestion of Monsieur Ruchat, Manager of their Paris Office, to give the vessel the name of "General Guisan," after the first soldier of our Army, was adopted, and consequently Monsieur Ruchat, was present at West Hartlepool, where he was complimented by the General himself.

\* \* \*

With great expectations I left the train at Darlington in the afternoon of Thursday, June 19th, 1947, to be taken, by courtesy of Messrs. William Gray & Co., Ltd., in a car to their Dock Yard at West Hartlepool.

I left London in brilliant sunshine, and my hopes ran high that the weather would keep fine throughout the day, but on the thirty miles journey from Darlington to West Hartlepool, dull weather set in and my companion predicted rain, which as he said, was quite a common occurrence in this part of the country.

According to the time-table handed to me a tea was to be served for the guests at the Headquarters of the builders in the Dock Yard. Shortly after my arrival the party turned up coming by cars from an informal luncheon party at the Grand Hotel, West Hartlepool.

Amongst the Swiss guests were:

General Guisan and Madame Guisan, the Swiss Minister and Madame Paul Ruegger, Monsieur Escher, Counsellor of Legation, Monsieur de Graffenried, Counsellor of Legation, Lieut-Colonel Rieser, Military Attaché, Monsieur Aubaret, 1st Secretary of Legation, Dr. A. Lindt, Press Attaché, Mr. J. Huber, Swiss Consul at Manchester, Monsieur and Madame André, Chairman, Suisse-Atlantique, S.A., Lausanne, Mr. W. Laesser, Directeur de l'Administration Fédérale des Blés, Berne, Mr. E. Liechti, Directeur de la Société Coopérative Suisses des Céréales et Matières Fourragères, Berne, Mr. Ryniker, Directeur de l'Office de la Navigation Maritime de la Confédération Suisse, Bâle, Mr. G. Sulzer, Directeur Sulzer Bros., Winterthur, Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Grau, Manager, European Grain Agency Ltd., Mr. Chas. Gysin, Dr. H. W. Egli, London Correspondent of the "*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*," Mr. A. Stauffer, "*Swiss Observer*," Mr. Th. Haller, London Correspondent "*Agence Télégr. Suisse*," Mr. P. Fent, London Correspondent "*Die Tat*," and "*Gazette de Lausanne*."

The main Hall of the building was suitably decorated with Swiss and English flags and on the numerous tables fresh flowers were placed. A sumptuous tea was served and Monsieur Ruegger, the Swiss Minister, introduced some of the late comers to General Guisan, I took this opportunity to mention to the General how pleased the Colony in London would



have been to see him in our midst, to which he replied that it was of much regret to him that circumstances did not allow him to do so, but that he hoped in the near future to be amongst his countrymen.

Then somewhere a hooter sounded, it was the signal that the tug was ready to take the party to the Central Yard where the christening and the launching of the ship was to take place.

A strong wind set in, and made the short journey rather irksome, especially for the Ladies who found it difficult to keep their hats on. In the distance, appeared the many stocks filled with ships of many nations under construction, and above one of them the Swiss Flag proudly flew. It was an elevating moment for we Swiss to see our country's emblem flying for the first time in an English Dock Yard. With a face, depicting deep emotion, the General stood on the bridge watching the spectacle.

Arriving at the Central Yard the company disembarked, and suddenly the clouds, as if by command, disappeared, and brilliant sunshine set in, a befitting happening for the coming ceremony.

Mr. F. C. Pyman, Managing-Director of Wm. Gray & Co., Ltd., then conducted the party on a tour through a part of the ship yard (Joiners' shop and Iron work sheds) where the various stages of building a ship could be followed. Especially interesting it was to watch the making of the furniture for the ship.

In the meantime the gates of the Dock Yard were opened to the public, thousands of town people, workmen and children, — the latter having an afternoon off from school, — assembled to watch, what I was told

would be one of the most notable launching ceremonies ever witnessed at West Hartlepool.

Arriving at the foot of the launching platform, a little girl, daughter of one of the foremen at the Docks presented Madame Guisan with a beautiful bouquet of flowers, in accepting this gift, Madame Guisan enquired the address of the little girl, so that she could send her a parcel of chocolate on her return to Switzerland.

Then the company ascended the launching platform, first the General and Madame Guisan, accompanied by the Swiss Minister and Madame Ruegger, Major-General and Mrs. C. M. Smith, who was specially delegated from the War Office to accompany our General, and Mr. and Mrs. F. C. Pyman and the other official guests. The General on mounting to the platform was loudly cheered by a dense crowd of spectators.

It was a most impressive gathering consisting of diplomats, representatives of the owners, engineers and a large party of journalists both English and Swiss.

And now the great moment arrived, a great hush suddenly descended over the multitude broken only by the noise of some machines still running in the distance, Madame Guisan stepped forward accompanied by Mr. F. C. Pyman, Managing-Director of Messrs. Wm. Gray & Co., Ltd., and in a hardly audible voice, owing to deep emotion, christened the ship and crashed the traditional bottle, which was covered with ribbons in our national colours, against the bows, pressed the release button and the ship, amongst the shrieking of



**AFTER THE LAUNCHING OF THE M.V. "GENERAL GUISAN."**

Front row, left to right: General Guisan, Mr. F. C. Pyman, Madame Guisan.

sirens, and the cheers and clapping of thousands of spectators, gracefully glided down the slipway taking the water in a style fine enough to allay every traditional superstition.

An unforgettable moment and a proud one too; amongst general rejoicing three cheers were given to General Guisan who was overwhelmed with congratulations and handshakes.

The M.V. "GENERAL GUISAN" floating on the sea in majestic grandeur is now awaiting the fitting out with her engines.

Slowly the spectators dispersed and the official guests returned to the Grand Hotel, where the second part of the programme was to take place. An interval of about an hour and a half was used by some to pay a short visit to the town, whilst others took the opportunity of having a swim, amongst them our energetic Military and Press Attaché's.

\* \* \*

The Banquet which started soon after 7 p.m. was preceded by a Sherry Party. About seventy people sat down to a very enjoyable meal, in the large Hall of the Grand Hotel, which was decorated with Swiss and English flags, and as a special compliment to the principal guests, General and Madame Guisan, the flag of the canton of Vaud was placed directly behind their seats.

Towards the end of the dinner the toasts to "The King" and "La Suisse" were proposed by Mr. F. C. Pyman, who was in the Chair. These were followed by the Chairman's toast "Success to M.V. "GENERAL GUISAN."

In proposing this toast, Mr. Pyman, referred to the international aspect of the Ship Yard, saying that on both sides of the M.V. "GENERAL GUISAN" were ships under construction for Eire, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, France, Chile and Brazil, and that it was a special pleasure for his firm to have our country now on their order books.

The speaker said that he had very many happy memories of previous visits to Switzerland, and little did he think then that one day his firm would have the honour to build the first ship for that country.

Mr. Pyman also mentioned the happy association which exist between his concern, and the firm of Sulzer Bros., in Winterthur.

In conclusion, he expressed his great pleasure to

see amongst the many distinguished guests the Swiss Minister and Madame Ruegger.

The toast was enthusiastically responded to by the entire company and in replying, the Swiss Minister said that he was deeply moved to witness the launching ceremony, and that he felt sure that this emotion was shared by all his compatriots who were present at this event, especially as this ship was so closely associated to a living being, and the first ship in the short history of Switzerland's Mercantile Marine, which was born and not adopted.

Monsieur Ruegger continued by saying that the Swiss people were proud that this new vessel was coupled with the name of Switzerland's great military leader, who by his undaunted spirit, courage and determination saved our country from invasion.

"The idea of building this ship," he said, "was born on Vaudois territory, which is our General's native canton, and I wish to express my appreciation to Monsieur André and the "Suisse Atlantique" company for this memorable enterprise."

The Minister also said that Switzerland had always admired the cultural activities of England and its Northern counties, through whose co-operation the new ship had been launched into British waters, and that it was an achievement which would warm the hearts of all Swiss throughout the world and strengthen the link between the country whose colours the ship would fly.

Terminating his oration, Monsieur Ruegger, on behalf of his countrymen present and absent, extended to General Guisan his sincere thanks for the unforgettable speech which he made in 1940 on the historical grounds of the Rütli, exhorting his military commanders assembled there, to steadfastness in a time full of dangers to our country's independence. (*Loud applause*).

Before resuming his seat he complimented Madame Guisan for the charming way in which she had performed the christening ceremony.

Loud applause greeted the words of our Minister. A touching ceremony then took place, when Mr. Pyman, Managing-Director of Wm. Gray & Co., Ltd., presented Madame Guisan with a beautiful powder compact as a memento of the occasion, thanking her for having undertaken the long journey to christen the ship which bears the name of her distinguished husband.

Then came the great moment of the evening; it was announced that the General would address the gathering. Never-ending cheers from all sides of the Hall greeted him on rising, and he seemed visibly moved by the spontaneous reception he received.

General Guisan, who spoke in French, said that the launching ceremony witnessed this afternoon, had made a deep impression on both his wife and himself, and that it was a unique experience in the life of a Swiss General, as never before in the history of our country had such an event taken place.

He spoke of the warm feelings engendered in our country during the war by British respect for the neutrality of Swiss ships sailing on the high seas, and of the many tokens of friendship towards our country expressed by the late Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill and Field-Marshal Montgomery, and members of the Government.

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He expressed thanks for the words spoken by our Minister, and to Dr. Egli, who conveyed to him the greetings of the Swiss Colony in London.

Turning to Major-General C. M. Smith, of the Northern Command, he expressed his thanks for having been thus honoured, and his pleasure at having had the opportunity to meet, during his short stay, a distinguished fellow-officer.

General Guisan also tendered thanks to Monsieur André and the "Suisse Atlantique" for having named the ship after him, and thus having given him an opportunity to be present on this auspicious occasion and to the Directors of Wm. Gray & Co., Ltd., of West Hartlepool for their generous hospitality.

Concluding his address, he expressed the hope that the ship launched under such promising conditions may have a long, distinguished and lucky life in sailing the high seas.

The General received a long and hearty ovation from the entire company.

Monsieur André then was called upon to give the toast "The Builders"; and who then answered the question how Switzerland, a land of mountains, cows and perhaps a few watchmakers could possibly become interested in building ships. "It was," he said, partly because the British — far from being competitors — had freely offered help to the Swiss to become initiated into the trade of the sea, which was a remarkable example of the spirit and friendliness of the British people for which Switzerland was grateful."

The speaker also gave thanks to the firm of Gebr. Sulzer, in Winterthur, for their collaboration, to the

builders of the ship, and last but not least to General Guisan, who, as he said "has after God Almighty, saved our country."

Mr. G. Sulzer, a Director of the Sulzer concern, also spoke shortly.

The last speaker was Capt. J. H. Farmer, of C.M.E.W., who said that Gray's liked to be judged on results and that he was convinced, that the ship would live up to its expectations, and that the owners would, no doubt, come back for more.

Before the proceedings closed, Miss Avril Pyman, the charming daughter of the Managing-Director expressed thanks in French to the guests and presented silver powder compacts to Madame André and Madame Demaurex, and Mr. E. A. Grau, Manager of the European Grain Agency Ltd., read out a number of congratulatory telegrams which were received by various branch offices of the "Suisse Atlantique."

\* \* \*

And so ended a memorable day, which I am sure, will live for many a day in the memory of all those who were privileged to be present.

A word of thanks should be given to the Directors and the Managing-Director of William Gray & Co., Ltd., for the splendid way in which they organised this event, not forgetting Mr. R. W. Whales, Private Secretary to Sir Wm. Gray, Bt., who so efficiently looked after all the visitors.

And now "Good Luck and Happy Sailing" to the  
M. V. "GENERAL GUISAN."

ST.

