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THE MOUNTAIN AND THE MOTH.

Round the Matterhorn in a "Tiger"

By A. B. GOLAY.

(The following article has appeared in the December, 1950, number of the "FLIGHT" and is herewith reproduced by the courtesy of the Editor.)

Though I had been flying quite extensively over other parts of the globe, the Swiss Alps with their granite masses covered by their eternal white cape had always been at the zenith of my winged ambition — especially, very especially, that proud needle named Matterhorn. Many had climbed it, some had already flown near it with powerful engines in front of them; but I made up my mind to fly over it in that toy, that foolproof kite, backbone of the English flying clubs — a Tiger Moth.

For months in advance I was thrilled at the anticipation of the trip, which no doubt would give me one of the greatest kicks in my life. I knew there was a certain amount of risk. A B.E.A. Dakota captain had told me they had definite instructions to keep away from these high peaks and that, if briefed to cross such areas, they had to carry all the necessary paraphernalia of oxygen-breathing apparatus.

I also knew how draughty a Tiger Moth's cockpit always is, and that there was no possibility of adding to the weight by oxygen bottles; nor could my warm flying clothing be reduced.

You can now picture me arriving at Northolt on the night of July 8th, 1950, and dumping my car in the line of the parked vehicles awaiting their respective owners' return from some Continental trip. Loaded with my R.A.F. flying boots, lined flying coat and gloves, and with my telephone-fitted helmet hanging at the end of the communication tubes, I felt a rather goat-like creature in the bluish electric lights of the airport.

Though it has nothing to do with the main story of my trip, I must say that a night airline crossing to the Continent at an average of 9,000ft. in a fairly clear atmosphere is a very wonderful experience, especially for passengers used to daylight travelling.

Thanks to a little tactful string-pulling a member of the Viking's crew reserved me a seat by dumping my heavy boots near the first window forward, port side, so that I could amuse myself by identifying the scenery passing under my eyes between the roaring engine and the fuselage.

Customs and embarkation formalities were soon over and, as happy as an owl fluttering round a familiar hunting ground, I made my way — not too quickly with my heavy equipment — to what was going to be an enjoyable two and a half hours' trip under a blue-black sky with stars and later, a modest half-moon looking over it all. Punctually at 24.00 hours the pilot opened up, and in a few minutes, flying over the metropolis at 2,000ft., I was able to get my pocket compass to work and my air map open on the table; I called for the necessary information from the navigator so that I could follow and check our progress along the night track of the aircraft. Without difficulty I identified all the main roads and districts we flew over: Hammersmith, Marble Arch, the Mall, Piccadilly, the Thames, and many well-known bridges; then the London Docks and Southend, at which point

we banked sharply to starboard and headed south (140 deg.), leaving Margate right on our tail.

Travelling at 208 m.p.h. over the Channel, we soon found the lighthouse near Le Touquet greeting us from the Continent. I will not relate here all the fun I had in identifying from a fairly high altitude the many French towns as their hundreds of lights came into view before disappearing under the wing. I found identification much easier when cities saddled rivers, with the bridges to help; Dijon was the most striking example. I was so thrilled by this comfortable night travelling that my advice to readers is to travel likewise — and I believe that B.E.A. are now serving better suppers than the one they gave me.

In a matter of minutes from Dijon we were over the Jura hills, dominating the Swiss plain, with the lake of Geneva down below, the Savoy Alps in the background and the majestic Mont Blanc, with its Napoleonic triangular hat, greeting us faintly in the first light creeping in from the east.

Coming in to land at Geneva Airport is always a spectacular performance when one realizes that it has to take place immediately after the aircraft almost brushes the Jura tops; our pilot nosed down at 30 deg. and in two wide circles, the last one right over the French Department of Savoy and the "little lake", making the final approach from the east end of the "two-way only" landing strip; it seemed to draw us to earth as we made the final approach at roof-top height across the proud city of Calvin.

There was nothing particularly pleasant about disembarking into the Customs inquisition at 03.20 hours, or waiting for the coach — having broken down, we were politely informed, it was now on its way to us.

On July 13th I rose fairly early, though hardly early enough for the programme of the day . . . the Swiss beds are so comfortable that even with a musical alarm clock it is a painful performance to kick the eiderdown away. The sun was up before me, in a pale blue sky with little wind to disturb it for quite a while. The mountains across the lake had the desired grey steel colour, promising good visual contact with the giants high up there. Everything so far, so good!

A few quick words by telephone with the airfield chief pilot at 09.30 hours confirmed all last-minute preparations — filling up with fuel and oil, etc. — were well under way. The expectation of what was to come made me appreciate the Continental breakfast plus a few extras for physical ballast to ensure that my own system functioned as well as I expected that of the aircraft to do.

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I had a great reception at the Lausanne Flying Club — at which, incidentally, every flying member has first to make a deposit of some £42 for as long as his licence is valid. The system of insurance, too, may be rather a liability for pilots, for in case of a total write-off of a light aircraft they have to pay £180. At the current rate of exchange I was charged £5 per hour flying time — and as I was likely to be flying all the time it would be the basic rate!

The sky-blue Tiger Moth I had chosen was waiting for me on the edge of the tarmac, already facing the 130 deg. of my true track. A few telephone calls were put through by the chief instructor for weather reports on my route; a 35 m.p.h. wind was blowing at 13,000ft. from the S.E. and practically a headwind all the way up. The general situation was fairly satisfactory and if there was no unexpected delay I could be in the air by 10.45. I gave my flight plan to the chief pilot, who suggested that I should follow the safe Rhône Valley to within a couple of miles of Sion, making altitude all the time to 12,000ft. a.s.l., and then aim for the Matterhorn. I pointed to my map and said, "Look at this true track starting from this airfield on direct course to the Matterhorn, 72 miles away. Unless you put down your 'veto,' this remains my route." He smiled and said "O.K."; and to keep in his good books I assured him that I would turn back should I see the red light.

All I had to do now was to make an inspection, for my own satisfaction, of the blue aircraft: fuel and oil tanks were full; the gas vents properly open; the petrol gauge was right; the ignition system seemed sound in every respect. A glance over the cooling system showed it to be O.K.; every cowl fastener was in place; all engine controls were functioning properly; the exhaust manifold must have been well looked after, for there was no trace of tiredness; the airscrew seemed above reproach; the fuselage was in a fair way of preservation; and there were no rags, tools or any obstructions near the cables. Finally, I jumped into the cockpit for a test of rudder elevators and ailerons; last, but not least, I checked the seat straps. Everything was in order.

Within a few minutes I had strapped myself securely in the cockpit and was running-up the engine for magneto and oil-pressure checks. Lausanne Airfield is still listed as "amateur" and is of rather primitive layout — running, like so many airfields in Switzerland, to two directions only, on account of the whole country's topographical arrangement. At 10.50 hours I taxied up a steep slope, gave a last look round in all directions, turned into wind and opened up. The little Tiger Moth zoomed into the blue, climbing happily in a gentle left turn. I waved to my friends down below as I passed again over the airfield, with one eye on the instruments, my attention alternating to port and starboard as I put the nose on 140 deg. m. at a pre-arranged climbing speed of 75 m.p.h. Under my port wing was the Swiss plain, with three lakes glittering in the distance under the warm sun of a really beautiful summer's day. To starboard lay the blue lake Léman, its mirror-like surface only slightly ruffled here and there. The Dent d'Oche, on the south side of the lake, reflected her beauty into the peaceful water.

Vevey now went by, of Cornish Riviera appearance — an island surrounded by vineyards, made bluish-green in patches by the pest-control treatment given

to them. The uniformity of these treasured fields of grape cultivation is broken by very narrow, tortuous paths up and down the steep slopes, used only by peasants.

In front of me, through the blur of the prop, was a veritable spectacle, though I knew that much more striking sights were in store for my hungry eyes. Here were what are called pre-Alps — the lower mountains north of the white masses with eternal snow, and they were gradually drawing nearer to me. The Tiger was set at the attack angle of 15 deg., which should bring me after some 90 minutes' flying to an approximate altitude of 14,000ft.

Passing over the famous Castle of Chillon I wondered what the ghost of that ancestor of the Italian royal family, Peter the First Duke of Savoy (presuming that he was buried in the damp vault below), might be mumbling as I flew over his thousand-year-old fortress. Soon I was over the first mountain, leaving the Rocher de Naye — with its funicular — and the chain of the Oberland on port side.

At 11.27 I passed to starboard of the Grand Muveran, only a bare 100ft. above its level. This was my first striking impression of these great masses of granite, showing all round the way in which prehistoric dead material had been thrown to the surface of Mother Earth in distinct layers of that kind of stone peculiar to the Alps. Here I performed my first acrobatic feat by squeezing the joystick between my knees, setting my camera for action and, with a slight kick of port rudder, taking a picture of the Grand Muveran's summit.

Troubled Air.

Though I was just above the altitude of the peak, near the 10,000ft. mark, which I reached after a very gentle ascent through perfectly smooth air, I was suddenly met by violent up-currents, a most unpleasant sensation, the reason for which suddenly struck me. Under me was a sheer 7,000ft. drop into the Rhône Valley! Never before had the realization of emptiness beneath affected me in any way; but this sudden voidness of space sent a weight, like one of those granite blocks into my stomach. Fortunately the new panorama quickly unrolling before my eyes soon brought a sense of relief: The Matterhorn had suddenly appeared before me, though still quite a distance away.

I had by now to give more attention to the increased wind which was slowing my progress, with a harder call on fuel. The ever-falling temperature was biting fiercely at my barely protected face, but I was

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all eyes, as directly to starboard, 30 miles away, Mont Blanc glittered under the cloudless sky.

The great mountain cut its profile right into the blue, with the Dents du Midi — the east slopes — and the seven sharp needles pointing the beauty of the scene to the beholder. Now the Grand Combin was dominating my track, and I paid my tribute to her magnificence by another port kick to the rudder to put her picture in my camera. This time a gust of wind very nearly sent the apparatus flying into space.

The Matterhorn was approaching nearer and nearer: there it was, seen through the mist of the air-screw — a dark needle-like rock 20 miles away. I was now so happy and thrilled that I found myself singing in a hoarse, high-pitched voice; or was it only the laughter of the Gremlins dancing on my lower starboard wing?

At 11.35 hours I was over and crossing the Val d'Hérens with a lake-like hydraulic power reservoir deep in its upper part; to the east, the Valley of the Rhône was stretching as far as I could see, with some mist rising.

Suddenly the Tiger Moth was fighting a losing battle. She would not, or could not, climb any more. The up-currents were throwing us from port to starboard as the warm air from the sunny west side of the valley roughly pushed one wing up and the cold air from the east slope hammering the other down. I really was not very happy; and a lot of "white stuff" was blowing in from the South and Italy. I quickly put my nose down to a nearly level position, then started circling, gradually climbing again. Now I was keeping my eyes on the petrol gauge up there above the tank: that "wobbling" gauge-knob was going down fast ... half my fuel had already gone. But the oil situation was O.K.

By the time I reached 13,800 ft. the aircraft was only two miles away from the Matterhorn, with the Dent Blanche just passing to port, so near that I grabbed my camera once more, the stick tight between my knees; and I pocketed her too. With the increasing roughness of the air I could, I thought, only reach the 14,000ft. with difficulty; so I quickly made up my mind that I would have to be satisfied with looking at the old warrior from no higher altitude. Keeping about 1,000ft. away from the summit, I went round him in a bank of about 30 deg. to port. I was more or less level with the top, and now passing over a glacier which reflected arctic icy light up to me, while flimsy little

cumulus-like clouds rushed S.S.E. below me. This glacier, I presume, was the one closing the highest end of an Italian valley; but again and again I was directing an anxious eye on the instruments. I saw the ridge on the Italian side of the Matterhorn, dark and so steep that no snow could adhere there at this time of the year, and very little even during the winter season. The crest of the ridge was like the rough stump of a broken saw swinging past my port wing-tip, and only about 50ft. away.

To starboard, the mass of Monte Rosa was most imposing, and ahead, far away, the distant Bernese Alps were piercing the light white clouds.

Still with the port wing down, a last back pressure on the stick brought me closely round the precipices seen from Zermatt. At this striking moment the whole fantastic scene was like a Dante's Inferno cooled down and petrified by some magic touch. I had to breathe deeply, again and again, to take it all in. I felt so desperately awed and lonely that only hours later, in the silence and darkness of the night, could I bring back to my mind anything like the realization of where I had been and what I had seen. This giant of dead, hard, icy-cold substance stunned the senses. Yet it was beautiful, so sublimely fantastic; and the sun itself was trying with all its might to warm it up — and forever failing. The summit was now "flying" out of the sun and blinding me, so there was no question of taking a "snap" from this position. The famous mountain was already behind me, the adventure was coming to a close — and the petrol gauge was three-quarters down. During all the hard climbing, of course, the willing little engine had been working at full capacity.

I, on the other hand, had had less exercise, and now began to realize that my clothing was not nearly warm enough. I put the trusted Tiger's nose down, the wings level, the compass on 310 deg., and shook myself as much as my harness would allow. A wave of warmth, pleasure and satisfaction came over me; as pleased as Punch I was!

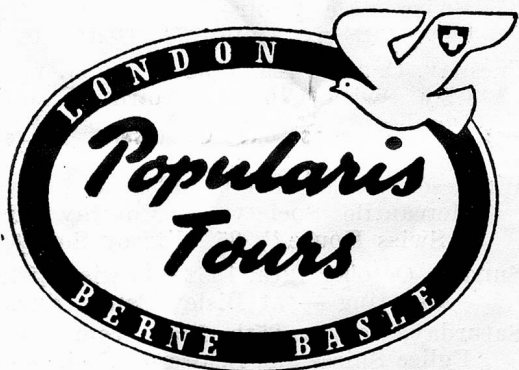
By 12.10 hours, with higher air density and the temperature increasing, the engine was purring with gladness, and the frost marks on windscreen, leading edges and struts gradually disappeared under the warming sun. I myself felt as though warm oil had been poured into my frozen joints and put them in working order again.

After what the gods had allowed me to contemplate I feared that the rest of the journey might be monotonous. But the beautiful Lake Léman was even looking more beautiful; nothing had changed in the peaceful scenery below during my short absence in the realms of solitude, and as I flew on towards civilization I fell to wondering why such peace as I was leaving could not be injected into humanity.

Miles away, where the dark line of the Jura Mountains closed the horizon I could already see my home airfield, where, at 12.35 hours, I touched-down a few minutes later, feeling pleased with myself, but nevertheless glad to find a strong hand behind me taking my harness away. I was soon enjoying a very hot cup of black coffee offered by the chief pilot to celebrate the safe return of the rash amateur.

Before closing I feel I must pay a tribute to the firm who made the experience possible by the good design and manufacture of the aircraft I used.

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