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ROUNDAABOUT SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

JULY entries in my diary include an exhibition in Geneva that promises to be of outstanding interest. Its title: "Fifty Years of Aviation".

What a half-century it has been. For it is less than 50 years since Bider became the first man to fly over the Alps, Durafour the first to land on Mont Blanc, the Dufaux brothers the first to fly the length of the banana-shaped lake of Geneva — and the township of Avenches had to tell another Swiss pioneer, René Grandjean, that flying was a danger to the community and would be forthwith banned.

But fascinating as those pioneering days undoubtedly were, I like to think of the aviation history that is being made right now, especially in this month of July as more passenger records are being broken than ever more.

Look at the picture as they all flock to landlocked Switzerland along the skyways of Europe — the climbers and the company directors, the sportsmen and the salesmen, and the simple everyday tourists.

This little country, sheltering behind its protective barrier of mountains and far from the sea, is this year playing host to an unprecedented number of visitors.

In they flood to attend the trade fairs and the traditional festivals. To scale the peaks the hard way or the modern way — on wheels. To fish for salmon and pike and trout in the quiet blue lakes or sparkling mountain torrents. Or just to rest and relax amid the most grandiose scenery in the whole of the continent of Europe.

As they swing Swisswards in their thousands, it is boom time for the airport-cities of Geneva, Zurich, Berne and Basle.

And it is boom time, too, for Switzerland's national airline.

Twenty-four-year-old Swissair has been smashing record after record since it resumed operations following the war.

With its fleet of 25 — headed by six of the long-range DC-6Bs — it is now flying nearly eight times its 1946 mileage, and nearly double that of 1950.

Passenger figures totalled 62,000 in 1946,

soared to 191,500 by 1950, and last year reached the dizzy heights of 545,000.

Most airlines are notorious trumpet-blowers. But not Swissair. While steering clear of the headlines, it performs its duties conscientiously and efficiently and has built up a reputation that is unequalled anywhere else in the world.

The Swissair story — a story of hard-won success — started in 1931 with the amalgamation of two competing companies, Ad Astra and Balair.

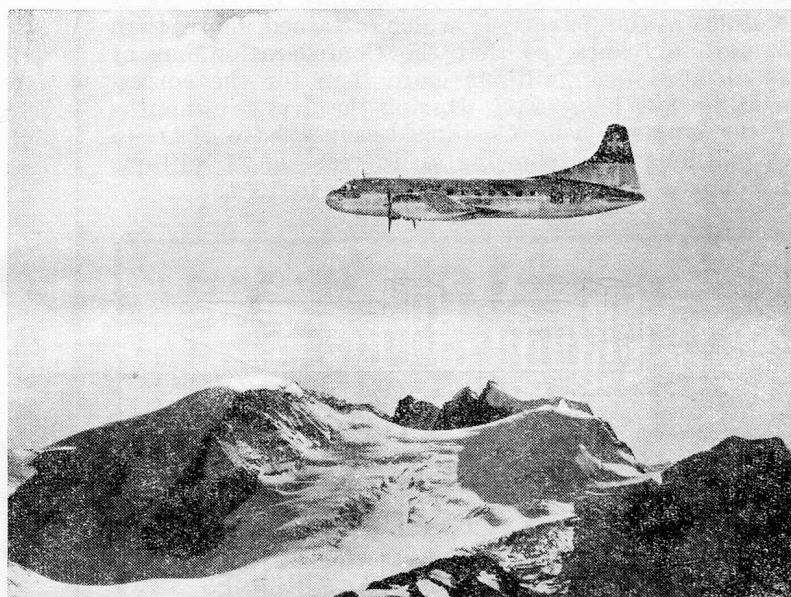
Recently Swissair has come in for much criticism for its seemingly lack of interest in the modern turbo-prop aircraft, but its reluctance to buy Viscount is probably connected with its long-standing tie-up with the American aviation industry. This goes back to 1932, when it became the first airline in Europe to operate an American plane.

The determination to fly American that is still with the Swissair management means that while all BEA services from United Kingdom airports to Switzerland are flown by Viscount, Swissair still relies on four planes from the American stable — DC3, DC4, Convair and DC6B.

But I forecast that when the first American turboprop plane takes the air in a few years time the name of Swissair will be prominent on its order-book.

Star of the present Swissair fleet is the DC6B, a giant plane which is more than a hundred feet long and has a maximum take-off weight equal to five fully-loaded motor coaches.

This is an airliner that is ideal for transatlantic routes. The fact that it is also being used for the more uneconomical flights between Britain and Switzerland highlights Swissair's determination to do all it can to satisfy its passengers from Britain — just one example of the policy that has put this small but go-ahead company high on the list of the world's top airlines.



One of Swissair's most popular planes, the Convair, seen crossing the Alps.