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The Swiss Observer

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FROM THE "BLERIOT" TO THE "MIRAGE"

The Editor's father kept a diary for her when she was a small child and not yet able to write. On one of the first pages of the dark red leather book — volume I of a very large number — it said that General Staff Captain Real came on a visit and was shown the new baby. She apparently took no interest whatsoever, oblivious of the fame which would attach to this young man who was to command the first Swiss Air Force.

In 1912, at the Delegates' Meeting of the Swiss Officers' Association, the initiative was taken to create a national collection in favour of military aviation. A number of farsighted men realised the military importance of what was then called "Aeroplan". When the war broke out early in August 1914, there was no hope of acquiring military aircraft from abroad as the belligerent nations themselves badly needed their planes.

In the meantime, a small group of young Swiss met on the Beundenfeld in Berne to form a flight section of the Army under the command of the above-mentioned Captain Theodor Real. Whatever could be found in Switzerland by way of flying machines was requisitioned. Seven aircraft were in private hands, four were on show at the National Exhibition in Berne. Three were immediately taken from the foreign exhibitors — two double-deckers LVG's (constructed by Swiss engineers in Germany) and a brand new French Blériot single-decker. If the whole Swiss airforce consisted of a motley collection of odd aircraft, the Swiss pilots were of the highest order. Oscar Bider's exploits are still well known (first crossing by plane of the Pyrenees and the Central Alps). Edmond Audemars was one of the few acrobatic pilots of the day with success in Europe and America to his name, the first man to fly from Paris to Berlin and back. Albert Cuendet, Alfred Comte and Agénor Parmelin had been test pilots in France, and the latter was the first man to fly over the Mont Blanc. Ernst Burri had been a pilot in the Bulgarian Army during the war in the Balkans, as well as a test pilot at the Voisin works in Paris. René Grandjean had been awarded prizes and achieved records in the aircraft he had constructed himself (with an Oerlikon motor).

Very soon it was evident that the Beundenfeld in Berne was too small as a training ground for Swiss pilots, and when the Dübendorf airfield was ready — it had been created from a swamp by engineering detachments of the Swiss Army — the whole squadron flew from Berne to Dübendorf on a Sunday in December 1914. Wooden hangars were erected, and gradually it became the most important military airfield in Switzerland, Payerne being the military aviation centre in the Suisse Romande and the Magadino plane near Locarno the basic training centre in the Ticino.

The Swiss Air Force had to fight hard for recognition and for preservation. It had always been difficult and expensive to keep abreast of new technical development. It was only shortly before the second world war that the Air Force was promoted to an independent fighting force. At the end of the war, there were some five hundred aircraft, which number was later reduced.

At the Golden Jubilee at Dübendorf this summer, the then head of the Swiss Air Force Divisional Commander Etienne Primault recalled the history of his troops and regretted that its harmonious development had at times been impeded by the fact that the men who had to decide on air force requirements often did not know them sufficiently from close experience. He then went on to elaborate on the excellence of the combination of "Bloodhound" and "Mirage" which would largely contribute to an adequate air defence in the future.

The air show at Dübendorf was repeated at Payerne and Locarno, and vast crowds had ample opportunity of seeing the Air Force in action, including the extremely fast and versatile "Mirage".

Since then many visitors to the Swiss National Exhibition will have seen the excellent and realistic film "Wehrhafte Schweiz" shown in the military pavilion of the EXPO. In conjunction with this picture of vigilant Switzerland, defence demonstrations on a large scale were held in September at Bière, the military centre of nearly 150 years' standing. There was a historic forces' show to illustrate the three epochs in Swiss military history — Wars of Independence up to 1515, mercenary service in foreign armies up to 1815 and cantonal militia forces up to 1848 and 1874 respectively. Then followed a march-past of the troops depicting the last fifty years, that is the development from battle on foot to mechanised fighting, from horse to helicopter transport, and finally from motor plane to supersonic jet fighter. Every kind of equipment and light and heavy arms were shown, armoured vehicles, "Centurion" tanks and "Venom", "Vampire" and "Hunter" aircraft. The combined exercises carried out by 2,500 officers and men were extremely impressive. As an instance of materials required and efforts needed we mention the fact that at Bière 230 km. of telephone cables had to be laid for communication purposes alone. A total of 90,000 spectators watched the demonstrations.

Also at the beginning of September, like in so many places elsewhere in Switzerland earlier in the summer, a special service was held commemorating the mobilisations of 1914 and 1939. A soldiers' monument was unveiled, a symbol of Switzerland's freedom, independence and neutrality.

Apart from the Air Force jubilee, several other anniversaries were celebrated this year. There was the centenary of the Swiss Non-Commissioned Officers' Association in Fribourg in June. A special film "Hedgehog Switzerland has many Spikes" was produced for the occasion. Its purpose was to show the voluntary aspect of some of the military activities outside compulsory service, but also that in spite of formidable modern weapons, the army of the future above all depends on the man.

There was the Golden Jubilee of the Swiss federation "Volksdienst-Soldatenwohl", the welfare organisation started by Mrs. Else Zueblin-Spiller, which opened the first "Soldatenstuben" at Glovelier and Bassecourt in November 1914. Three years later there were already 178, and today this body runs soldiers' canteens, welfare offices, laundry services, etc. Its jubilee was celebrated on the Bürgenstock in August, when the chief of military training, Corps Commander Frick, officially expressed the Army's thanks for the important contribution the organisation was making to the well-being of the soldiers.

In spring it had been twenty years since the first "Pädagogische Rekrutenprüfungen" were held. Comparative results show that the largest increase of recruits, occupation-wise, has been in the skilled workers, whereas farmers and unskilled workers have decreased in numbers, a sure sign of the times. There are more university students but fewer specialised technical students which shows the need for more technical training colleges.

Incidentally, young Swiss still join the French Foreign Legion whose recruiting campaign started again with full swing in 1963. The number of objectors to military service on religious grounds went up from 29 in 1962 to 47 last year, 7 were conscientious objectors for other reasons and 16 refused because of rebellion and anger. An advisory office for conscientious objectors was formed in Zurich recently.

In this connection, the activities of the movement for the country's spiritual defence are of great importance. National Councillor Peter Dürrenmatt chaired the second conference on the problems of this aspect of national defence in Berne early in September. "Heer und Haus" which is the soldiers' own periodical can also play some considerable part in the moral and spiritual condition of the Swiss armed forces.

A year ago, a credit of 268 million francs for military buildings and army centres was asked for by the Federal Council. The proposed centre in the Franches Montagnes has been the object of very heated argument, but the authorities insist on it. Another discussion concerned the use of the Thun centre for armoured troops.

The "Mirage" affair and its consequences have put in the shade somewhat the reports of various manoeuvres of the Army. There were several recently, the exercise of the communication services comprising the whole of Switzerland in September, manoeuvres of the Third Mountain Army Corps and of the First Mechanised Division in October, and early in November, those of the Fourth Army Corps in Eastern Switzerland.

The debate in Parliament on the "Mirage" has already been reported. The compromise has been made and the number of aircraft ordered reduced. There are doubts, however, about the wisdom of the reduction from 100 to 57 with regard to the original demand based on exigencies of defence.

A reorganisation of the Federal Military Department with closer parliamentary control over its actions was voted for by the Upper House.

The vote came a few hours after an announcement that Corps Commander Jakob Annasohn, the Chief of Staff, had offered his resignation and that Colonel Etienne Primault, the air chief, had been dismissed, in connexion with what has become known as the "Mirage affair".

The resignation offer by Corps Commander Annasohn was announced by the President of the Confederation. It was stated that he had been asked to remain in his post for the time being to ensure continuity while a successor was found. Colonel Primault is relieved of his duties immediately and his official "resignation" will take effect from 1st January 1965.

Colonel Annasohn will still be at the disposal of the Federal Council for special duties.

Two other senior officers — Brigadier Oskar Keller, the head of the war materials department, and Brigadier Othmar Bloetzer, head of the pilots service — have been moved to other posts while members of the Federal Court determine their responsibility in the affair. In making his announcement Federal Councillor von Moos stated that confidence could not be re-established without certain changes of personnel.

In the words of "The Times" "The theme of the debate in both Houses was that such a thing should never be allowed to occur again. Mr. Paul Chaudet, the political head of the military department, who came under heavy fire, said he would draw from this experience the lessons which it imposed."

The Federal Council has appointed Dr. Mark Hauser, a lawyer from Zurich, as Commissary for the revision of the "Mirage" contracts.

The Federal Council, in consultation with the Defence Commission have decided on the following changes in army personnel:

The new Chief of General Staff is Corps Commander Paul Gygli, hitherto Commander of the Fourth Field Army Corps. He is 55 and citizen of Utzendorf (Berne). He studied law. Readers may remember him when he was Military and Air Attaché at the Embassy in London. His successor is Corps Commander Ernst Uhlmann, hitherto in charge of the Second Field Army Corps.

The new Commander of the Second Field Army Corps is Divisional Commander Alfred Ernst, born 1904 and citizen of Berne and Aarau. He will be promoted to Corps Commander.

For the first time, a Corps Commander will be in charge of aviation and anti-aircraft troops. This is Divisional Commander Eugen Studer. He is 51, a citizen of Trimbach and Solothurn.

Brigadier Fritz Gerber, aged 61, has been appointed Chief of the Swiss Air Force in succession to Colonel Primault.

Generally, the changes have been accepted with a sense of subdued optimism and a certain feeling of relief, though the thought persists that justice has not necessarily been done in all quarters. It is felt by experts, however, that the changes are a step in the right direction towards overcoming the crisis in Switzerland's defence policy.

(Based on news received by courtesy of A.T.S. and "Basler Nachrichten".)

SWISS TELEVISION WINS AN INTERNATIONAL AWARD

The Onda Prize, given for the best scientific television programme, was won in Barcelona by the Swiss TV. The award was made for one of Hans A. Traber's broadcasts on the "Wonderful World of Microscopy".

[O.S.E.C.]