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# 50 YEARS OF SWISS AIR TRANSPORT

## From Modest Pioneering to Intercontinental Routine Flights

On 8th January 1919, Major Arnold Isler of the Swiss General Staff and at that time Commandant of the new Swiss Air Force, decided with the approval of the General Staff Department to make men and materials available for civilian use, partly to prove the usefulness of military aircraft for peaceful purposes and partly in order to give Swiss pilots increased opportunity to carry out compulsory monthly training. To begin with, a daily courier service was flown around lunch time between the airfield of Duebendorf (Zurich) and the General Staff's department in Berne. From 1st February, the line was extended to Lausanne (La Blécherette) and on 30th April to Geneva (St. Georges). The planes were of the Swiss Häfeli DH-3 type, equipped with 150 PS Hispano-Suiza engines which could reach a speed of 120 km (abt. 75 miles) per hour.

Letters, parcels and even telegrams were carried on the open observer's seat, for the service had been made available to the public by then in agreement with the Federal Postal Administration, and the entire route was flown to a timetable.

Following foreign examples. Major Isler took a further step at the beginning of June in accepting passengers. As far as the weather — services were only flown in summer and in good weather — and the volume of mail permitted, a single passenger could be accommodated in the open observer seat of the Häfeli DH-3. A flight cost a passenger 500 francs Zurich-Geneva return. He had to wear a flying suit and wear protective glasses.

The innovation was always intended as an experiment; on 1st November 1919, operations were again suspended, after a total of 23,530 letters, 35 packets and an unknown number of passengers had been carried in the previous six months on this first Swiss airmail and passenger service.

Major Isler had had no intention of starting a commercial state-owned air service; it was really his endeavour to stimulate private initiative by his practical example. The service had to be stopped again because it was too expensive. But the idea had caught on: between April and December of the same year three private companies were set up in Zurich and Geneva, which subsequently merged into "Ad Astra" Schweizerische Luftverkehrs A.-G. (Aviation Suisse S.A.)" with headquarters in Zurich and a branch in Geneva. 'Ad Astra', founded fifty years ago, was one of the two predecessor companies of Swissair, which itself was established in 1931 and became Switzerland's national carrier in 1947, although remaining a privately controlled enterprise.

They were courageous beginnings, and the stories of numerous pioneers have been anchored in the annals of Swiss aviation: Isler, Zimmermann, Mittelholzer, Comte, Bider, Real, Rihner, Schwarzenbach, Pillichody and Frick are just a few of the enterprising pilots. Who does not know of the adventurous flight over the Pyrénées on 24th January 1913 by the young Baselbieter pilot of 21: Oskar Bider! On 7th July this year, a commemoration service took place on the 50th anniversary of his death which occurred when he was less than 30, whilst carrying out air acrobatics at the Duebendorf airfield. The service took place at Langenbruck, his birthplace.

And who does not know of the intrepid Walter Mittelholzer? At the end of March 1922, he was preparing to fly a military pursuit plane from Milan in Italy to the Swiss airport of Duebendorf near Zurich. The flight led straight over the alpine range. Unfortunately, in a thick fog and with counterwind, Mittelholzer penetrated too early into a heavy cloud of fog, north of the Alps. His plane crashed at a height of 8,202 feet by hitting a rocky slope of a mountain in Canton Glarus. The badly hurt flyer could reach the village of Matt in the Sernftal and later recovered from his accident. The 120 HP Le Rhone rotation motor of Mittelholzer's plane together with other historic plane motors are now displayed in the Aviation section of the Swiss Institute of Transport and Communications in Lucerne. That was only one of his many exploits. Sad to say, he lost his life in a mountaineering accident.

Of the first 49 pilots who acquired their licence between 1910 and the outbreak of the first world war in August 1914, ten are still alive, among them a woman. The first licence was issued on 10th October 1910 to Ernest Failloubaz. During those four years 18 pilots lost their lives while flying.

At the end of January, the Aero Club of Switzerland paid homage to another pioneer in Lucerne, engineer Jakob Spalinger from Hergiswil (Nidwalden), who was one of the first to get his gliding licence in 1926. He was the father of Swiss gliding who began with the construction of his own glider in 1915. At the ceremony in Lucerne, he was awarded the "Diplome Tissandier", one of the highest international honours for aviation activities.

On 17th July, it was 50 years since the first plane landed on a glacier. The then First Lieut. Robert Ackermann, together with the Commandant of the Swiss Air Force, Major Isler, landed an ordinary military machine on an alpine glacier on the Jungfrauoch.

In those days, the most important airport was Duebendorf. Today,

Switzerland's three international airports of Zurich-Kloten, Geneva-Cointrin and Basle-Mulhouse are amongst the busiest in Europe, especially the intercontinental one of Kloten which is used by 37 air transport companies. Whilst its net profits for 1968 showed a lower level than the previous year, it was still 1.06 million francs. For the first time, Swissair transport company carried over 3 million passengers. Swiss air transport today covers 160,000 km. and touches down in 71 towns in 50 countries and 5 continents.

The first postal service in 1919 carried 23,530 letters and 35 parcels in six months. Last year, the Swiss PTT services handled 156 million airletters and packages and over 600 million postcards.

When Kloten Airport was opened in the summer of 1953, it was considered a model example of perfect future-conscious planning, and it was thought that one had an airport sufficient to meet all needs for a very long time. Soon it was realised that the prognosis was put in the shade by incredibly fast developing air transport, and several extensions have had to be undertaken. By the time the second stage of development is completed, the airport will cost 14.5 francs per passenger using it. Problems increase annually, such as noise abatement, night flying, air pollution, preparations for the "Jumbo Jets", etc. A newly formed umbrella company called "Aerosuisse" will be dealing with a number of these and other problems in future.

One of the difficulties is to find enough pilots, and in order to enrol young men, a new film was put on show in spring "This is your Captain speaking", which has already had a great deal of success. In the 10 years since the "Schweizerische Luftverkehrsschule" (SLS) was founded, some 300 pilots were trained, 246 of whom were taken over as co-pilots by Swissair, a success unrivalled anywhere abroad. At Grenchen, the 30th introductory course for potential pilots was started by the school early in July. These courses of a fortnight each were started in 1956 in order to test young men with regard to their flying abilities. Over 700 pupils have so far been taking part in these classes. The SLS completed modernisation of its fleet in 1968, and the beginning of this year brought changes due to the fact that Swissair now uses jet planes only. We have already reported in an earlier issue that some of the training takes place at the Oxford Training School in England.

But let us return to Zurich Airport. Almost every month, a new building is finished. New freight transport offices and bigger hangars, a new restaurant, simplified customs offices, more auto-

mation etc., and another 30-million credit for yet more new buildings, a heating plant, more parking space. The Swiss Federal Railways opened their own office at Kloten in May, where passengers are served by multi-lingual staff and can buy tickets and reservations on Swiss and international trains.

The picture on the front page was taken last October. It shows the various approaches to Kloten Airport, the well-planned road network, some of the administrative buildings and vast car parks, runways and hangars. At the top end of the loop, slightly to the left, is the main passenger terminal complete with positioned aircraft. Indeed, an excellent picture of the modern inter-continental airport. Did Major Isler, Walter Mittelholzer and the other pioneers ever dream of such a sight? I wonder?

*(Compiled by the Editor from news and information received by the courtesy of Agence Télégraphique Suisse, Swissair and Swiss National Tourist Office).*

## SWITZERLAND AND THE MOON

The interest in Switzerland was no less marked than anywhere else in the world. The PTT reported that an additional order for 2,450 calls for early morning waking-up were made and 3,750 enquiries regarding the moon landing were addressed to the telephone information service.

The Swiss National Tourist Office has invited the three astronauts, their wives and children to spend a holiday in Switzerland. The invitation was put into a coloured SNTD photo book on Switzerland, "Panorama Schweiz" with the slogan, specially coined by the SNTD as early as 1966 "Bound for the Moon? Explore Switzerland first!"

The Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne had three sets of gold jewellery specially made for the wives of the astronauts as a memento of their husbands' achievement.

The wine-growers of St. Saphorin in the Canton of Vaud have sent a few cases of their produce called "La

Planète", and 134 Swiss had booked a passage to the moon by midday on Monday, 21st July.

Comments in the Press, whilst congratulatory, strongly upheld the protest by many that to spend vast sums for space research was not right at a time when more than half the world's population was still starving or living in poverty.

The former Federal Councillor Wahlen said that the moment had come for the two super powers to co-ordinate their efforts in space research and to limit them to reasonable proportions. Only thus could the enormous *Nachholbedarf* in social welfare and development aid be covered.

Federal Councillor Bonvin reminded us that seen in the light of Creation, we should not feel too much pride in this human achievement, but think of the Divine Creator who had made it all possible in the first place.

(A.T.S.)



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