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SWITZERLAND TO VIETNAM & RETURN

Peter Arnold

The Furka Oberalp Bahn (FO) operated a fleet of ten powerful HG3/4 compound rack & adhesion tank locos. These had been built by SLM for the Brig-Furka-Disentis Bahn (BFD), forerunner to the FO, in 1913/14. Following electrification of the line in 1942, only four were retained for snow clearing duties and for use during dismantling and erection of the catenary between Oberwald and Realp each year.

By the 1990's only two of these four locos still survived in Switzerland. No.3 is preserved at the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway and has seen use on their adhesion line. No.4, still owned by the FO, saw occasional use by a group of enthusiasts until its last outing in 1993. In need of repairs, it has been stored ever since.

Of the other six machines, Nos. 1,2,8 & 9 were sold to CFF Indo China in 1947 for use on a metre gauge line which ran inland from the coast at Thap-Chàm about 185 miles north east from Saigon in what is now South Vietnam. This line had some rack sections, with gradients similar to those of the FO, on its 52-mile route to Da-Làt. The railway suffered badly during the 1968-76 Vietnam War and closed soon afterwards since when the jungle has steadily encroached.

Meanwhile, back in Switzerland, the FO was able to operate year round services between Oberwald and Realp for the first time with the opening of the Furka base tunnel in 1982. Soon enthusiasts began to consider the possibility of reopening the



DFB No 1 stands at Realp, 24/7/98

Photo: Peter Arnold

former mountain section. A year later a preservation society named Verein FurkaBergstrecke (VFB) was formed and quickly enrolled 300 members. By July 1984 the FO had agreed not to demolish the line and VFB volunteers were allowed to commence repair work.

In due course it was realised that a more professional organisation would be required to operate the railway and a share holding company, Dampfbahn Furka-Bergstrecke AG (DFB), was incorporated in February 1986. After a lot of hard work the first 2 mile section of line west from Realp to Tiefenbach was reopened using No.6 "Weisshorn", a former BVZ HG2/3 tank loco built by SLM in 1902.

The VFB had always realised that finding steam locos to work the future increasing length of reconstructed line would be a problem. Speculation arose concerning the whereabouts of the locos which had gone to Vietnam and this led to correspondence with the Swiss Embassy in Hanoi in 1984, but without success. Around that time, and purely by coincidence, a keen railway enthusiast returned from Vietnam with photographs of the locos. With this information the Vietnamese Government was contacted through the good offices of the Swiss Ambassador and enquiries were made about possible repurchase. After receiving an encouraging reply it was clear by 1986 that such a scheme was feasible in principle. For various reasons though it was not until 1988 that the Vietnamese Government invited DFB representatives to visit the derelict railway to inspect the locos.

As well as the four FO HG3/4 locos, in Vietnam there had also been a fleet of nine larger HG4/4 tank locos of which seven were supplied by SLM in 1924 & 1930 and two, to the same design, by Esslingen Engineering in 1929. The DFB team was successful in finding all the FO locos plus four of the HG4/4's. They considered that

Nos. 1 & 2 could be restored using Nos.8 & 9 for spare parts. Similarly they believed that two of the larger machines, using another for parts, could be rebuilt. After studying the team's report, the DFB Board of Directors decided to present an offer of purchase to the Peoples' Republic of Vietnam. Another two years of diplomatic wrangling passed until, in 1990, a Sfr 1.4 million deal was agreed. This sum included all four FO locos, the two complete HG4/4 locos, four bogie flat wagons, a goods van and a quantity of spares. The cost of retrieval and transport back to Switzerland would add a further Sfr 1/2 million.

In June 1990 two containers and low loader trailers were loaded with tools and equipment at Goldau. These went by rail to Rotterdam for onward shipment to Hô-Chi'Minh City (formerly Saigon), arriving six weeks later. A twelve-man team of VFB members arrived by air at the end of July and had a week to become acclimatised and to learn the local customs before the cargo ship arrived. The team eventually reached Thap-Châm by special train on 2nd August to find FO No.8 standing in the open minus cylinder covers & running gear.

For some, the journey to Da-Lât continued by bus whilst the team of drivers brought the low loaders using an ex-Soviet lorry. A stopover at Song-Pha gave a chance to look at FO No.2 which had been left in the shed there. This loco was in a pitiful condition. Having been stripped of parts, several piles of valuable nonferrous scrap metal had just been left on the ground.

Arrival at the terminus at Da-Lât gave cause for encouragement. FO No. 1, together with two of the HG4/4 locos, were in the shed and almost intact, thanks to years of guarding by former railway employees. Outside, and seemingly in a marsh, stood FO No.9 looking fairly hopeless. However, further inspection revealed that only the cog wheels and the drive

rods were missing; the latter were later found in a store room.

The three locos in the shed were made ready for transporting by road and rail. Eventually, despite being outside for 15 years, No.9 was found to be in reasonable condition. This loco had to be hauled sideways using the lorry winches and then rolled along a section of track laid by a Vietnamese gang before it could be loaded. By 11th August, No.2 had also been made ready and was loaded at Song-Pha.

There then followed many days using the low loaders to take all six locos and the other rolling stock by road through the jungle down to Thap-Chàm. At one point there was a weak road bridge so that each journey involved unloading, pushing the load across an adjacent railway bridge and reloading - an operation which had to be performed more than twenty times, sometimes in tropical heat, sometimes in torrential rain! However, by 1st September everything had been transported safely to the main line rail-head.

After four days spent loading, the 16 vehicle special train set off on its 185-mile journey to Hô-Chi'Minh City which was to take 36 hours. Pressed for time, some team members flew home whilst the remainder busied themselves transporting their prized possessions to the docks before they too flew home on 25th September. On 2nd November, the cargo ship reached Hamburg whence No.1 and the two HG4/4 locos went to Lucerne Transport Museum for display during winter 1990/91.

Nos. 2, 8 & 9 were stored as parts at various locations in Switzerland. After a thorough inspection No.1 was found to need a new firebox, whistle, injectors and ejector whilst the cab and water tanks were riddled with bullet holes and the rear buffer beam was badly damaged. Eventually it was discovered that the cost of a new welded boiler in former East Germany would cost less

than a new firebox alone in Switzerland. Accordingly in 1992 Meiningen Works, the former East German State Railways workshops, won the contract to overhaul both Nos.1 & 2 using some components from Nos. 8 & 9.

On 27th March 1993 the ceremonial handing over of No.1 to DFB took place at Meiningen Works. Acceptance trials were carried out on the Works' specially laid track during April with transport by rail to Brig in mid-May. No. 1 was transferred to DFB metals at Realp on 27th May.

In a further ceremony, on 10th July, No.1 was named "Furkahorn". As well as these name plates, brass plates were unveiled on both sides of No.1's coal bunker to record the sponsorship for the rebuild provided by Interdiscount AG, a Swiss hi-fi & photographic dealer. On 23rd July No.1 entered passenger service between Realp & Tiefenbach sharing the two train operation with No.6 "Weisshorn". The service was extended to Furka on 30th July.

Meanwhile, on 21st July No.2 left Meiningen Works and ten days later received the name "Gletschhorn", back at last in her home country. Following running in and adjustment to bearings, No.2 entered service on 27th August.

These two magnificent machines are now the mainstay of services which run between Realp and the summit at Furka from late June to early October each year.

During 1998 DFB further increased its share capital to Sfr 11.23 million to finance the rebuild of No.4 which has been donated on permanent loan by the FO. This loco is still in original condition and will make an interesting contrast to Nos.1 & 2 which were fitted with enlarged coal bunkers whilst

in the Far East. The ex-BVZ loco "Weisshorn" is also presently undergoing an overhaul but DFB hope to run trains through the summit tunnel and down to Gletsch for the 2000 season. At some future date, and with the assistance of the two HG4/4 locos when rebuilt, services will be extended to Oberwald.

The repatriation of Nos. 1 & 2 from the Vietnamese jungle to the Swiss Alps will surely go down as one of the most amazing feats in the annals of railway preservation.

Close up view of the Sponsors and name plates of DFB No 1. 24/7/98 Photo: Peter Arnold



Locotrol Will Increase Capacity In Alps

Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) has carried out tests successfully with GE Harris' Locotrol locomotive control system on freight trains operating on the steeply-graded St Gotthard route. Installation of the system would enable SBB to increase capacity on this busy international route across the Alps.

Locotrol is a radio system to control remote locomotives in a train. GE Harris supplied four permanent units to SBB, which were fitted to class 460 electric locomotives. Four portable units were also supplied to improve the flexibility of the system, but these can only be used in the leading locomotive.

Traditionally on the St Gotthard route, the brakes on the locomotive at the front of the train were insufficient to brake the train downhill between Erstfeld and Chiasso on the Italian border. But the pneumatic brakes on the wagons can only be applied intermittently to prevent overheating. This results in a low average speed.

Normally, a banking locomotive is used to push the train uphill from Chiasso to

Erstfeld where it is detached from the train. In the tests, a locomotive fitted with Locotrol was coupled to the rear of the train for the descent from Erstfeld to Chiasso. The driver at the front of the train is able to control the rear locomotive's braking system remotely using Locotrol. This avoids the need to use the air brakes on the wagons.

Using Locotrol, SBB was able to increase train speed from an average of just 45km/h to 75 to 80km/h downhill, which is almost as fast as an intercity passenger train. SBB estimates that it could increase the number of trains a day on the St Gotthard route from 250 to 270 if all trains were fitted with Locotrol.

In addition, there is no need for a driver in the rear locomotive, more energy is returned to the catenary, braking noise is lower, and there is no snatching. SBB is now considering whether to order about 30 fixed and 60 portable Locotrol units.

German Rail plans to start testing Locotrol soon on three different types of locomotive. Knorr-Bremse is the main contractor for the tests.

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