Sensation–at 162 mph

CIVIL aviation in Switzerland had its beginnings in January 1919, when Major Arnold Isler, then commander of the Swiss Air Fore, set up an air service between Zurich-Dübendorf and Berne-Oberlindach.

Swiss-built military Häfeli-DH-3 aircraft flown by Air Force pilots were used, but at first they only carried military mail between the air force base at Zurich and army headquarters at Berne.

But experience gained with air links between Berlin and Weimar in Germany and between London and Paris encouraged Major Isler to take a further step. At the beginning of February he extended the service to Lausanne and at the end of April to Geneva, and opened it to the public.

Only mail was allowed first, but from June the service also carried passengers. The single-engine DH-3s, which had a maximum still-air speed of about 75 mph, had room for one passenger in the open observer's seat behind the pilot.

The flight from Geneva to Zurich with stops at Lausanne and Berne took two hours and 20 minutes and cost Sfr. 300. After a trial period of six months, during which a total of 23,530 pieces of mail and 246 passengers were carried, this first Swiss air service was suspended on November 1, 1919.

Technically and operationally the result had been satisfactory, but hopes of covering the costs from revenue had not been fulfilled.

In the same year, three private air transport companies were formed. In the middle of April the Aero-Gesellschaft Comte, Mittelholzer & Co. was founded in Zurich, followed on June 25 by Avion Tourisme Ltd., in Geneva.

At the beginning of July the former chief flying instructor of the Swiss Air Force, Lieutenant Oskar Bider, formed a "committee to promote a Swiss company for air tourism" which led on September 20 to the foundation in Zurich of Frick & Co. On December 15 this third company became the Ad Astra Swiss Air

Loading a Lockheed-Orion in 1932.
It carried four passengers plus the pilot.

Transport Company with a capital of Sfr. 300,000 francs.

However the existence side by side of three companies all with the same aim meant an uneconomical splitting-up of efforts. The board of Ad Astra therefore decided in February, 1920, to buy up Comte, Mittelholzer and Co. and in April of the same year it bought Avion Tourisme Ltd.

The new organisation was called Ad Astra Aero. Its fleet consisted of 16 aircraft, including five flying-boats.

On June 1, 1922, it opened the first route from Switzerland abroad, from Geneva to Nuremberg via Zurich, using a Junkers F-13 – the first real commercial transport plane in the world. Swiss air transport had thus entered the international field.

In September, 1925, a

second air transport company was founded in Basle with a capital of 100,000 francs and called Basle Air Transport Ltd, or Balair. With a fleet of six Fokker aircraft it ran regular services between Switzerland and Germany.

Three years later Ad Astra embarked on an outstanding pioneering venture with the first European "express service" on the 425 mile route from Zurich to Berlin, then the longest non-stop service in Europe. The flight took about five hours.

While Balair made losses only in its first two years, Ad Astra's balance sheet showed considerable deficits each year. On March 26, 1931, they merged and founded Swiss Air Transport Ltd, or Swissair.

The new company owned 13 aircraft with a total of 86

Baggage handler Anton Malt in his 1931 uniform. The only Swissair employee with 50 years' service, he retired as general manager last year.

passenger seats. The small number of air crews consisted of ten pilots, seven radio-operators and eight flight-engineers. Operations were carried out only in the summer season, from March to October, and then only under favourable weather conditions. The route network covered 2,800 miles. At the end of 1931 Swissair's staff totalled 64.
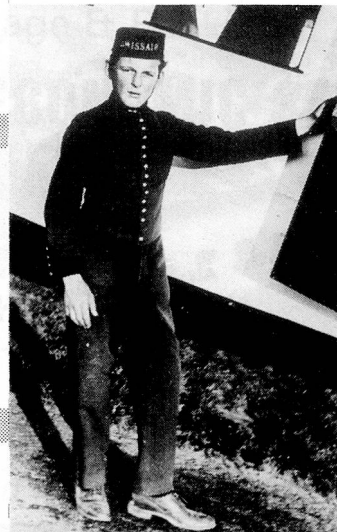
Under the able management of Balz Zimmermann and Walter Mittelholzer Swiss civil aviation now made great strides. In the middle of April, 1932, Swissair became the first European carrier to operate aircraft built in America, the Lockheed-Orion speed-planes.

They caused quite a sensation. Their cruising speed was 162 mph or 62 mph more than any other plane then in use in Europe. They had a range of 590 miles, and carried four passengers plus the pilot.

On May 2 Swissair inaugurated an express service from Zurich to Vienna via Munich. The distance of 379 miles required on average only 140 minutes and the commercial success was outstanding, with the load factor averaging 82 per cent. The purchase of the Orions contributed materially to making Swissair known throughout Europe and to inspiring confidence in the young company.

In 1934 Swissair put into service as a further innovation a twin-engine American Curtiss-Condor, which had room for 15 to 16 passengers. To look after what was at that time a large

number of passengers aboard an aircraft, Swissair employed stewardesses – again the first European carrier to do so.

In 1935 it was among the first airlines in Europe to operate 14-seater twin-engine Douglas DC-2s. With these, and in co-operation with the British company Imperial Airways, Swissair set up a link between Zurich and London via Basle. For the first time the white cross on the red field flew across the sea on a scheduled service.

Favourable experience with the DC-2 led to the decision to continue services during the winter. The winter timetable effective from December 16, 1935, marked the start of year-round operations, at first on the Zurich-Basle-London route.

In 1937 Swissair lost both of its directors who in their six years' work had earned the company great repute and a sound position. Walter Mittelholzer was killed in a mountaineering accident on holiday, and five months later Balz Zimmermann died after a short illness contracted on a bear hunt in Rumania. Of Mittelholzer Lord Beaverbrook said: "For me Swissair will always be associated with the memory of my friend, Walter Mittelholzer. He guided my first steps along the paths of the sky. He set an example to civil aviation which we must all try to follow.

"His fame as a pilot and a pioneer of air travel exceeds beyond the airline of which he was the director. It is part of the epic of man's conquest of the air."

The work of Mittelholzer and Zimmermann had formed a solid basis for further progress, which took shape in the purchase of Douglas DC-3s. On them was founded Swissair's great confidence in Douglas products and led to the company's future equipment policy.

On the outbreak of war in 1939 Swissair had to suspend regular services for almost six years. But it was back in business on July 30, 1945, and enlarged the fleet by the acquisition of several DC-3s. In the following year it ordered four Douglas DC-4s, its first

The imposing DC-2 at Zurich in 1932 before a flight to London. The flag told the control tower the plane was ready to take off.

four-engine planes.

During the war enormous technical progress had been made in the construction and equipment of aircraft. At the same time, rail and road transport had suffered severely from war damage. In shipping, too, there was a great shortage, notably of ocean-going vessels.

In these circumstances civil aviation made very rapid headway and expanded all over the world to an extent no one had foreseen. Flights across the North Atlantic and other long distances were no longer difficult.

The keen demand that prevailed for transport facilities in the immediate postwar years also opened new fields of action to Swissair. Air transport was about to develop rapidly into a world-wide industry. Every effort had to be made to release Switzerland completely from the shackles of its geographical

position and to secure its participation in world air traffic.

It was with these new perspectives in view that the company decided on August 26, 1946, to raise the share capital from one million to 20 million francs.

In February, 1947, Swissair officially became the national airline of Switzerland, with some State participation. Public institutions took over 30 per cent of the shares, while the other 70 per cent remained in private hands. This proportion has never been changed since.

Swissair has never been a nationalised company. It is managed on the lines of a private enterprise. It draws no subsidies from the Government, enjoys no fiscal privileges and pays the same taxes and fees as foreign carriers do at Swiss airports.

On May 2, 1947, a Swissair aircraft, a DC-4, flew for the first

time from Geneva to New York. Regular North Atlantic services, however, did not start until the end of April, 1949.

A setback was suffered in 1949. European air fares were based on the pound sterling and the devaluation of the latter brought Swissair a very considerable decline in traffic revenue. The company was suddenly in a difficult situation and was obliged to ask the Swiss Confederation for help.

The Government came to its aid, buying and chartering to Swissair two long-haul DC-6Bs, thus relieving Swissair of the necessity of raising the purchasing credit of Sfr. 15 million francs.

No effort was now spared to build up long-haul traffic. With this objective in mind, the Board decided in the middle of January 1951 to order a third DC-6B, which was followed in October by an order for three more planes of the same well-proven type. Since then Swissair has built up and consolidated its position without interruption.

In the autumn of 1955 the first orders for pure jet airliners were placed in America. Among the world's air carriers this was the starting signal for a veritable race to maintain their competitive position.

Swissair, which meanwhile had gained rank and reputation as an intercontinental carrier, could not refuse to participate in this new development. To do so would have meant disappearance from world-wide operations within a few years. Realising this, and encouraged by the favourable operating results so far achieved, the board of directors on January 30, 1956, ordered two Douglas DC-8 jet liners and increased the order to three on September 24 of the same year and to four on October 30, 1962.

The last scheduled service by the old Convair-440 took place on October 31, 1968, and on November 1, with the beginning of the winter timetable, Swissair was in a position to operate an all-jet fleet. It was the third airline in Europe to become an all-jet carrier, following BOAC (now British Airways) and the Portuguese TAP.

ON September 6, 1970, flight SR 100 flying from Zurich to New York, operated that day by a DC-8, was forced to change course by two Palestinian terrorists shortly after take-off and was hijacked to the desert air strip, Dawson Field, in Jordan. Passengers and crew were held by the Front for the Liberation of Palestine as hostages for three terrorists imprisoned in Switzerland.

Shortly after the hijacking Jordan was involved in a civil war but all the passengers and crew members were unharmed. The three Palestinians held in Switzerland were released and all hostages returned.

However the four hijacked aircraft (the Swissair DC-8, a TWA Boeing 707, a BOAC VC-10 and a Pan American Boeing 747) were blown up and completely destroyed.