ROUNDEL

September 2020 The Swiss Branch Newsletter

Swiss Branch Battle of Britain Ceremony 2020

Covid-19 did not prevent the Swiss Branch from holding its annual Battle of Britain Ceremony for the 80th Anniversary at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery, Vevey on Battle of Britain Sunday in glorious weather. As earlier Coronavirus restrictions had prevailed, the 75th Anniversaries of VE and VJ Days were also belatedly commemorated.

The Branch Committee had agreed that rather than organize the usual 'open house' assembly followed by the traditional lunch down by the lake, a restricted gathering would be more in line with Covid-19 so only a dozen invited people were present.

As can be seen in the photograph the Union and Branch Standards were draped over the sides of the memorial. The short ceremony included readings of the Association's Dedication, Binyon's Ode, the Kohima Epitaph and a prayer for those Members and Friends unable to be present in this challenging time; wreaths were laid by the Assistant to the Defence Attaché on behalf of the Embassy and by the Branch Chairman. In the absence of the Branch Bugler the Last Post and Reveille were played on a CD by courtesy of a Musician from The RAFA Concert Band, MD Peter Skellon BEM.

Bryan Pattison OBE and Margaret Duff BEM

The 'Comet' Line

Monique Hanotte was 19 years old in May 1940, when two men walked into her family's hotel in the Belgian village of Rumes and her life changed forever. It was a fortnight after Germany had invaded Belgium, and the men – a pair of officers from the British Expeditionary Force – had become separated during the retreat towards Dunkirk.

They pleaded with Hanotte's father, a First World War veteran, and mother to help them get over the French border, just a mile or so away, and evade capture. They dressed the men as coal merchants and walked them past the customs post and into France.

Those officers would prove the first of nearly 140 Allied airmen the family would rescue over the ensuing years. And, from that point on, it was Hanotte herself who would walk with them over the border or accompany them on trains to Paris and Lille.

Each time she did so, she placed herself and her family in mortal danger, risking torture and being sent to a concentration camp.

One day shortly after the Dunkirk evacuation, a member of MI9, the War Office department tasked with assisting Allied airmen who had been shot down over Europe to get home, arrived at the Hanotte residence and politely inquired over coffee whether they would lend their daughter to the British intelligence agencies.

Hanotte became one of the most prolific members of the Belgian resistance network known as the Comet Line, which saved more than 800 airmen and soldiers from captivity during the Second World War. She recently celebrated her 100th birthday and is one of the last surviving witnesses to their extraordinary bravery, with just half a dozen or so Comet Line members now left alive.

A master of secrecy, her reticence remains drilled into her after all these years

The average time between signing up as a member of the Comet Line and being captured by the Nazis was just three months. But sitting in her apartment with her medals – including an MBE – pinned to a cushion and surrounded by birthday cards, Hanotte batted away any praise. "It was our natural instinct to help," she says (in her socially distanced interview).

Such was her skill for evasion that she was later recruited by the British intelligence agencies and taken to England, where she was trained up as an operative with the Special Operations Executive (known as Churchill's secret army, which waged war behind enemy lines).

Here, she was given the code name "Monique" instead of her real name, Henriette. She has used her wartime moniker ever since.

Rumes, where Monique's family lived, was a key staging post, situated only a mile or so from the border with France, split by a railway line and dotted with custom posts. It was the perfect place for a resistance cell. And Hanotte, a diminutive teenage girl in a bonnet and skirt, was to prove the perfect operative.

As a youngster, she attended school in the French town of Bachy just over the border, and travelled every day on foot. She was a regular sight to the customs officials and knew every secret path snaking through the hedgerows. "For me, there was no border," she says. "I went backwards and forwards across it every day."

From that first visit in 1940, the Hanotte part of the Comet Line network was up and running by 1942. Generally, the airmen would arrive by train and come to the nine-room family hotel opposite. Hanotte's mother, Georgette, would cook the men a meal and then spend the next few days teaching them to properly pronounce the new francophone names they had been given on their counterfeit paperwork. They were also given scraps from German magazines to make them appear more authentic.

The family was invited to numerous weddings by airmen they had saved

After two or three days, they were given their final documents and a sandwich, and then it was down to Hanotte to help them on their way.

Sometimes it was straightforward; walking the airmen six miles or so through the patchwork of fields to hand them over to the next operative. If possible, she would pick a route that avoided the custom posts – and German pillboxes – which were situated around the village and can still be seen today. If she did come across an official, she would pretend the men were new boy-

-friends. Often, though, she was required to travel further afield, accompanying the men on buses and trains to Lille and Paris. She recalls one of many close encounters when she and two British airmen were travelling in a first-class carriage to Paris. At one stop, a Nazi officer walked in and asked to borrow one of the German newspapers the airmen were pretending to read.

"I quickly gave him mine instead so they wouldn't have to speak," says Hanotte. "It was a very scary moment."

Normally, once at the Gare du Nord in Paris, Hanotte would hand over the airmen to a resistance contact and return back home, but sometimes she would stay over in a safe house – on the fourth floor of an apartment block on Rue Rochechouart. On one day in 1944, she headed to the apartment but discovered the Paris network had been arrested. Hanotte had been denounced by a Belgian collaborator.

The British spymasters decided to bring her in. She was ordered to follow the same escape route taken by the airmen, over the Pyrenees and into Spain and then Gibraltar, where she was flown back to London.

She was taken to the Royal Patriotic School – an MI9-run clearing centre for newly arrived immigrants – and then on to Manchester, where she was trained to be a secret agent and parachutist. A picture from the time shows Hanotte in the uniform of the Auxiliary Territorial Service complete with her parachutist wings (which she regretfully admits she has now lost).

She was trained to drop into the Ardennes counter-offensive, but was never sent. This remains a source of great regret to Hanotte as she was not in Belgium when it was liberated in September 1944.

She remained in England until the end of the war. She recalls joining in the VE Day celebrations in London in May 1945, before being driven back to her village by the British for an emotional reunion with her parents.

Despite having saved so many lives, she says there is not a single airman who stands out in her mind today – although, after the war, she and her parents received numerous invitations to wedding receptions of British airmen they had saved.

During the war, she had a lover who was a Belgian border guard, and in 1945, they were married, having two children together.

With the benefit of 75 years of hindsight, Hanotte remains insistent that she didn't do anything out of the ordinary. "I was trying to protect my family and they were trying to protect me," she says. The strength of such a bond is enough to bring down even the most powerful of enemies.

Save the International Memorial to the Many

Here is a 'crowdfunder' for the more digitally-minded of us. The charity, Lincolnshire Bomber Command Memorial, which owns and runs the International Bomber Command Centre, in Lincoln, was set up to finally recognise and remember the **Many**, those brave men and women from 62 nations who served or supported Bomber Command.

The project has been entirely funded through donations and grants and receives no central government support. It took the team over 8 years to raise the necessary funds to build this multi-award winning centre and Memorial, which provides the only place in the world **where all 58,000 lives lost in the Command are commemorated, individually, by name.**

https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/save-the-international-memorial-to-the-many

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The Team:

Editor, John Hannon, roving reporter, Alain Dardelin, photographers, Régis Pizot and Simone Meyer, contributing reporters and lifesavers, Alan Baker, Margaret Duff and Graham Robertson.

The year 2020 is two-thirds over. Many of our events have either been cancelled or postponed. At time of writing France and Switzerland are out of 'lockdown', though each country is doing things its own way. The vast majority of our members fall into the 'at risk' group of the population. Stay sane, stay safe. Meantime, our newsletter will continue. Chin up; we'll see each other soon.
Ed.

Knickebein

(continued from the previous Roundel.)

80 Wing

In August 1940 No 80 (Signals) Wing was formed as a radio countermeasures unit to provide electronic intelligence and counter the German beams. The Wing's air arm, later to become No 109 Squadron, carried out regular flights to locate German beams. To narrow the search area for the Ansons, manned receiving stations were set up by lashing garden sheds to the tops of the towers of a few selected Chain Home radar stations. Braving the freezing cold in these high-level shacks the operators could pass Wing HQ the *Knickebein* frequencies used on any given night together with which side of each station the beams lay. Since the beams were turned on well before each night attack this gave time to identify the probable target and set up the jammers.

Meanwhile a more sophisticated antidote for *Headache* was being developed by the Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE) in Worth Maltravers. This countermeasure was aptly named '*Aspirin*'. Each unit was a 500W transmitter. When a *Knickebein* raid started *Aspirin* units were netted onto the frequency and transmitted dashes with the same modulation at exactly the same rate as the real transmitter. When the jamming signal was strong enough, pilots on the correct track continued to hear dashes, causing them to diverge from it. This even resulted in several bombers flying in circles. Navigation became so unreliable that some German bombers landed in England instead of at their home bases. At least one inexperienced young bomber crew, who had not been taught to navigate at night without the *Knickebein* beams, bailed out of their aircraft when they found that they were jammed.

When the start of systematic *Aspirin* jamming revealed that *Knickebein* had become well understood by the RAF, many German bomber pilots preferred to keep out of the beam entirely, since they feared (mistakenly) that night fighters or aerial mines might be waiting for them all along the route to the target. This psychological effect may actually have caused more disruption than the jamming itself. By the autumn of 1940 raiders no longer considered *Knickebein* usable enough for target identification, although it was several months before the young German pilots plucked up the courage to tell Göring that the system was useless.

How I Began

It is surprising what gems of yesteryear may be discovered whilst using enforced restrictions such as the Covid-19 lockdown to reduce old files. During my many years as Branch Honorary Secretary, I had found myself the safe depository for many old RAFA files, Minutes and photographs from bygone days.

Amongst a large sheath of fading papers appeared speaking notes for a presentation by one **C.R. Fairey**, dated 8 February 1938. "Ho-ho", thought I, might this person have been a member of the illustrious Fairey Aviation Company of Hayes and elsewhere, makers of many aircraft types – notably the Swordfish and later, the Gannet? The following is a brief precis of 9 typed foolscap sheets of script that Mr Fairey had been given a mere 15 minutes to present! I have only added a little background to this great aviation icon.

Sir (knighted in 1942) Charles Richard Fairey, was born in 1887 to a London City merchant and educated at Ardingly College, where he had a taste for electrical engineering and chemistry. His father's early death led to family financial difficulties and C.R's placement with the Jandus Electric Company of Holloway, at a lowly 5 Shillings a week for his toil. The upside was that young C.R.(or Richard as he preferred to be called), drew ideas from the Janus arc lamps that lit up many London streets at the time.

Evening classes at Finsbury Technical College and elsewhere were by the early 1900s offering theoretical and technical training courses at almost no cost to those keen to progress. Young Richard seized this opportunity to improve his life, enduring long working days followed by two years of long evenings spent in Finsbury. He even lamented on the One Penny cable tram's fare! The end product was a successful entry into the world of an electrical

engineer and a new job as an analytical chemist with Finchley Council. Nice – but what about aviation?

The great technological strides of the Victorian era would not stop upon Queen Victoria's death. Steam was already surrendering some of its fascination in favour of electricity and the internal combustion engine. Engineers were convinced that no material problem was insurmountable (*and would not frighten the horses*). Conquest of land and sea had been achieved in full. Now must come the air.

Richard was amongst the younger generation of optimists who avidly read the works of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and others, asking themselves "Why not do it?". He had started by designing models of flying machines at school, for which he endured the wrath of conservative thinking teachers but not of Sir Alliott Verdon-Roe (*Saunders-Roe*). That led to his first aviation-related job, based on the Royal Aero Club's Eastchurch airfield on the Isle of Sheppey, studying structural and other problems besetting the tailless Dunne aeroplane. (This beast was defined as a frail apparatus with wing loadings down to 2 lbs per square foot). A visit by some Cambridge undergraduates and their own ideas soon convinced our hero to aspire to owning his own aeroplane building company.

That ambition led to a change of company in 1914, from "Dunne" to the Short Brothers in Rochester and a lasting relationship with Horace Short, credited by Richard as being a genius and the greatest practical engineer that he had ever met. Aircraft were by then behaving more efficiently, fitted with wireless transmitters and "*having generators with a rotary spark gap that gave alarming indications of a Catherine Wheel – unavoidably in the vicinity of the petrol tank"* !

The Great War was now but months away and the Admiralty was taking urgent steps to strengthen its fleet of ships and aircraft. Step forward Charles Richard Fairey to form his own Fairey Aviation Company and to produce a wide mix of aircraft, successful or otherwise, that provided British, Commonwealth and other air forces with a constant flow of equipment until the 1960s.

Having spoken modestly about *How I Began,* and not knowing what lay ahead of him, his company and the World, Richard ended his talk by comparing British democratic institutions with those of autocratic and totalitarian states, where politics and not ability or ambition ruled the day. This script was, after all, written and presented in 1938.

Footnotes:

Sir Charles Richard Fairey MBE, FRAeS, witnessed two World Wars begin and end before his death, at the young age of 69, in 1956. The RAF and Royal Navy have much to thank him and his company for, amongst them the Firefly, Swordfish, Albacore, Barracuda and Gannet.

The Fairey Aviation's prime manufacturing site lay near to the Nestle factory in Hayes, Middlesex. As a teenager, your scribe was cycling past its gates when almost blown away by the deafening noise and wind created by a Fairey Rotodyne helicopter taking-off from its yard. Not by far the most successful Fairey product, it was designed as the greatest of STOL "airliners", but no airline or air force chose to buy it. Now, some 60 years later, it holds a quaint similarity to the American CV22 Osprey. Fancy that.

Alan Baker.

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Daniel Koblet—the Boss at Bex

The Swiss aero scene is in mourning for the loss of a very special personality. Daniel Koblet left on his last flight on 14 January this year. He came from an aviation family - his grandfather was one of the founder members of the Winterthur gliding club and his mother and uncle were glider pilots. He devoted his entire life to aviation.

Daniel Koblet earned his glider pilots' wings at Bex at age 17. His log books show entries for over 1,000 hours. At the beginning of the 1980 he obtained his pilots' licence for powered aircraft. He was particularly interested in historical aircraft. The trained mechanic soon turned to professional aviation full-time and founded Mobile Air Services in 1986. He later sold the company to his two long-term partners Laurent Calame and Arnaud Gabin in 2018. People considered Daniel to be a highly qualified

aircraft mechanic, restorer and test pilot on 'old-timers' and warbirds. His ultimate work of art was his Morane D-3801. It was the last flight-capable model of its type and Daniel kept it in tip-top condition and had shown it at many air shows across Europe.

He also took part in a number of film productions including 'Dien Bien Phu' and 'Amelia'. Visitors to air shows will long remember his demonstrations in a variety of aircraft. He also made his knowledge and experience available to the Federal Civil Aviation Office where he worked as an aircraft inspector and inspector for air show display authorisations. He was also director of Bex Aerodrome for several years.

Once retirement beckoned he took on the restoration of a Cessna 185 and a Socata TB-30 Epsilon. He used his newly found free time to travel around by air with his friends in his Van RV-7 which he had built himself.

His family, friends and all those who knew him mourn the passing of a brilliant great-hearted individual, calm, amiable and good-humoured. When something wouldn't work on an aircraft, his favourite phrase was "No worries, we'll fix it".

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Thoughts on war and peace

Rosemary Billinge

Whilst watching recent programmes on the television commemorating the end of the last World War and seeing also an interesting one on the Spitfires, I started to think of how different the world is today. Britain is not under attack thank goodness, but still has a deadly enemy to combat ,- a virus which is threatening the whole world.

I was five years old when the war in Europe ended and I remember lying in bed whilst listening to the street party outside my home . Our neighbour who was a piano teacher, had managed to get his piano out into the street, tables had been set up with food contributed by everyone and the joy and jubilation expressed by those present, could be well understood. Since the beginning of the war, people had been subjected to the hardships caused by the Nazi regime , read in the newspapers and heard on the radio of the terrible atrocities committed in the name of war. The bomb shelters were built all around even in people's gardens. My mum refused to go into them and I remember hiding in various places in my home. Luckily nothing fell in my home town of Buxton in Derbyshire but I remember the sound of the planes going over to attack Liverpool and Manchester but they were guided into the hills where they crashed.

So the joy and jubilation when all this ended can be well understood. However, my poor mother found it hard to join in the merry making as my father had been killed at the time of Dunkirk. He came home one day in 1939 ,- the year I was born,- to tell my mother that he'd signed up as a Medical Orderly in the RAF. Whilst at boarding school, he had fallen down the stairs whilst carrying a bottle of sulphuric acid down to the laboratory. This resulted in atrocious burns necessitating two years in hospital and putting paid to his dream of becoming a doctor. From photographs I've seen of him taken before this tragedy took place, he was a good-looking man and academically gifted.

After leaving hospital, he found a job in an insurance firm and there he met my mother.

After marriage, he helped our local doctor who recognised his abilities.

At the Battle of Dunkirk, he went out with the R.A.F. to help repatriate some of the British soldiers, but on the way out, a violent storm arose and the ship turned back towards Britain ,hitting a mine on the way which destroyed the boat and many of its passengers, my father amongst them. Sadly, they never found his body so he was deemed 'missing' and I have a letter from the Ministry of War and later one from the Queen acknowledging

his service and eventual death.

My mother was left with two small children, very little money and a mortgaged house, so although I remember lying in bed aged six and hearing the street party outside, I doubt whether my mother was one of the jubilant neighbours celebrating V.E.day.

Let us hope that never again will we experience a war such as the last, and although the future with the present Pandemic problem, doesn't look rosy, it may, in fact, bring forth feelings of 'togetherness ' resulting in kindness and concern for others, much more worthy than killing people and winning wars.

We regret to announce the passing of the following Member

Andrew Culliford, Life Member 17 May 2020

Colonel Sylvain Aebi 2020

Chuckles

- ◊ When one door closes and another door opens, you are probably in prison.
- ◊ To me, "drink responsibly" means don't spill it.
- ◊ Age 60 might be the new 40, but 9:00 pm is the new midnight.
- ◊ It's the start of a brand new day, and I'm off like a herd of turtles.
- ◊ The older I get, the earlier it gets late.
- ◊ When I say, "The other day," I could be referring to any time between yesterday and 15 years ago.
- ◊ I remember being able to get up without making sound effects.
- ◊ I had my patience tested. I'm negative.

ROUNDEL - Letter to the Editor

Several years ago, as fundraising opportunities - such as air show sales - became scarce, the Committee sought new ways in which to protect the solvency of the Swiss Branch Welfare Fund. Amongst the options open to us was to invite Members and their friends to contribute unwanted postage stamps and other Philatelic material for consolidation and dispatch to one of our UK-based Members for onward sale.

Due to the magnificent generosity of Members and others, as well as the hard work of Ian Crees, more than £1,000 has already been raised for our Fund.

Everyone will have heard and read about "*Operation Connect*", the Association's immediate response to the Covid -19 crisis and the top urgent need to raise cash in the sudden absence of normal fundraising opportunities. You will also know that the Swiss Branch has donated £1,000 to the Association's emergency appeal from within our Welfare Fund resources.

Unfortunately, the Coronavirus appears not yet to have run its course. RAFA, reflecting its membership age profile, still seeks the help of its Supporters in meeting the needs of those Members worst affected.

I am using the medium of Roundel to urge our Members and friends to again take a peep into those attics, "caves", drawers etc. and to kindly forward me any unwanted material for consolidation and dispatch to the UK (16 rue du Village, CH-1274 Grens) or to give me a call to collect (+41-22-363-1930).

Thank you very much for your support during these difficult times.

Alan Baker.

Royal Air Forces Association

Swiss Branch

List of events 2020

Watch this space