LESSONS LEARNED: THE HARD WAY

"IS THAT THE GROUND COMING UP SO FAST?" REFLECTIONS ON THE CRASH OF AN EX-SWISS AIR FORCE JUNGMANN

BY JOHN LEAR

In the two-seconds of flight that remained for me before impact, there was scarcely time to realize that, but for a miracle, I would soon be dead. As a matter of fact, I can remember using those two-seconds to plan a cover story for what had happened. The thought process near death is somehow vastly speeded up and I still (optimistically) planned to recover from the spin with maybe only the loss of the landing gear and I was already considering a "gear gone" landing back at Geneva's strip.

I didn't remember the actual second of crashing until three-years later when I had a total recall under an unusual circumstance.

I was in the back of a Swissair Douglas DC-8 on final for Geneva, over approximately the same area that I had crashed. At about 800-feet, the altitude from which I had started the near fatal spin, something triggered. I vividly recalled the crash, including the impact, the enormous weight that threatened to cave-in my back and my face plunging through the instruments in the panel. I jerked violently in the passenger seat at the memory as it had been so real, so accurate, and so momentary. Never again have I experienced such a "flashback."

The little yellow Bucker Jungmann, with the Swiss registration HB-URG, and I had started the day in an early morning takeoff for a flight to Berne, Switzerland. I had gotten the green light from Geneva's Cointrin tower and had taken off on the grass Runway 23. Flying the Jungmann was a delight in simplification compared to the Twin Beech and Lodestar that I flew for a living as copilot. Directional control on takeoff was a piece of cake and handling in the air was both harmonized and responsive. As I turned right for a downwind departure, the big blue Jura range of mountains stretched from southwest to northeast.

Within a radius of 30-miles from my present position, I had escaped serious injury from potential aircraft accidents no less than twice in the past week. The crash that afternoon was as inevitable as the yearly fatality figures that come from NTSB.

Yet I didn't feel like a dangerous pilot. Nobody ever does. After all, I had a Commercial License with Instrument Rating, Single and Multi-Engine endorsements and a type rating in the Lockheed L-18 Lodestar. Further, I had successfully completed the Swiss Aerobatic Rating course and now held the coveted *Vol de Virtuosite*. And I hadn't hesitated to point all this out early that summer morning when the dispatcher for the Aero Club of Geneva, to whom the Bucker belonged, informed me that the little craft was restricted to local flight only, due to the recent loss of their first Jungmann, and that the proposed trip to Berne would be prohibited.

After much pompous oratory on the subject of my pilot qualifications, as compared with those of the pilot who had wrecked the previous Bucker, I cowed the dispatcher into releasing — us for the flight, much to his continued consternation.

Barely one-month before, the Aero Club had lost their first Bucker Jungmann in a forced landing near the Saleve Mountains to the east of Geneva Airport. The beautiful little trainers were hard to come by and a few of the last remaining aircraft were in the hands of the Swiss Air Force who released them piecemeal to the Swiss Aero Clubs. Having had their first replaced, it was unlikely that they would receive another. Hence the conservative flight restrictions.

It was 24 June 1961, and the Mont Blanc stood out clearly for this season. Between myself and the continent's highest peak rose the curiously pointy-topped mountain, La Mole. The 108-hp Hirth climbed us rapidly in the fresh, cool, Swiss air. Farther to the right of the Massif du Mont Blanc the Dents du Midi, another range of formidable Swiss peaks.

The route I was to follow took me over the towns of Nyon, Rolle, Lausanne — all on the Lake of Geneva — and Fribourg. In spite of my warm suede jacket, gabardine pants, and the long white scarf (on which I was about to trip) I found it too cold at my selected cruising altitude of 3000-meters (10,000-feet) and started a descent over the Rochers de Naye peaks at the north end of the lake.

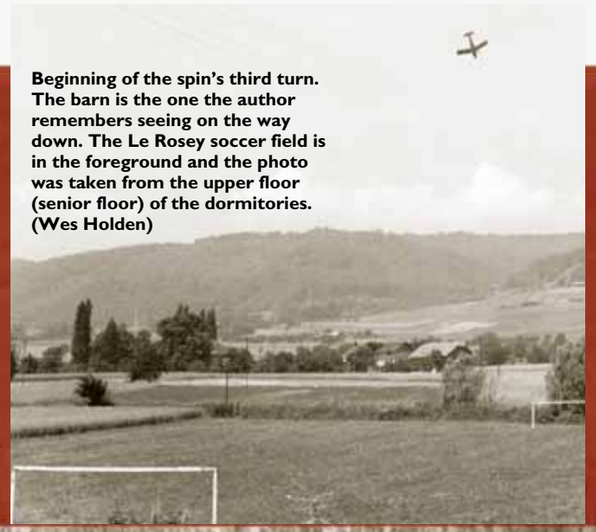
A huge castle lay nestled in these peaks above Montreaux, belonging to the Moral De-Armament group. I dropped down to about 1000-meters on the other side of this range and sped along the warm green countryside, waggling my wings at the farmers and generally hamming it up.

At Berne, I entered the traffic pattern and landed to the north on the longer right strip. As I parked the airplane, I looked around for a suspect to prop me when I got ready to go. The aircraft was not equipped with a starter. I pulled the mixture, switched off the mags, popped open the side panels, and climbed out.

I walked out the minor stiffness of the hour and 15-minute flight and went over to hitch a ride downtown.

After a two-hour visit to Berne, which involved getting some information for a friend on Swiss regulations governing the licensing of foreign airmen, I proceeded back to the field and talked one of the locals into propping my Bucker.

I was now anxious to get back to Geneva, to do those things which are most important to 18-year-olds on a warm summer day. I flew a direct course back at 2500-meters. A haze had formed in the



Beginning of the spin's third turn. The barn is the one the author remembers seeing on the way down. The Le Rosey soccer field is in the foreground and the photo was taken from the upper floor (senior floor) of the dormitories. (Wes Holden)

The Jungmann is, and was, one of the most popular European aerobatic aircraft. At the time of the author's accident, the Swiss Air Force was able to replace the destroyed Jungmann with another example. The price? $750! (Alpha Archive)

The aftermath — the crumbled remains of the little yellow Jungmann in the Swiss field. (Swiss Federal Aircraft Accident Investigation Office)