



International Buecker Meeting 31.08. until 02.09.2018 Airfield Thun, Switzerland

Thun, 3. March 2018

MEDIA BULLETIN 02

Aircrafts made in Thun.

Today, the Airfield Thun is a small and busy airfield for sport and leisure flying. From August 31st to 2nd September 2018 there will take place an international Buecker Meeting. This is wonderful for the region, but for the aviation in Switzerland it is comparatively insignificant. However, this was not always like that. In Thun, Swiss aviation history had been written.

Even in 1910, some Swiss were already among the European aviation pioneers. However, the Swiss army missed to decide to get airplanes as observing vehicles early enough before the First World War. The balloon troops based on the Beundenfeld in Bern, today's BEA site, still had to perform this task until the interwar years. After all, the question of a military airfield in Thun had already been discussed in 1913. But the Burger community did not want to give away land for free to the federal government on the Burgerallmend. Only the Federal Councillor Motta's directive in May 1914 led to the fact that all existing military areas were to be made available to the aviation industry - and therefore also the armoury area in Thun, the Grosse Allmend.

Cavalry captain as chief pilot

Shortly before the outbreak of the war, cavalry captain and pilot Theodor Real was entrusted with the construction of an air force. At the beginning the cavalry comprised nine pilots. With the outbreak of the war in summer 1914, the six biplanes ordered in Germany by LVG Schneider, so named after the Swiss chief designer at LVG in Berlin, were retained by the Prussian army administration. In return, Switzerland requisitioned three German aircrafts which were exhibited at the national exhibition in Bern: 2 LVG Schneider B1 and 1 Aviatik P. 14. The remaining aircrafts were brought in by the nine pilots themselves, some of them provided personally with their own machines to the service on the Beundenfeld in Bern!

In 1915, the Federal Military Commission commissioned the construction workshops in Thun (K+W) to build aircrafts and to employ August Haefeli as chief designer. Haefeli immediately began building the aircraft workshop and developed a two-seater biplane with an open cockpit, a double fuselage and a pressure propeller (DH-1). The first military aircrafts were mainly used for observation from above and only had a machine gun on board for defence purposes.

Haefeli's starting difficulties

The pilots of the air force did not like the DH-1 very much. In the meantime the pilots had been transferred from Bern-Beundenfeld to Dübendorf, Zürich. The successor model DH-2 as well was not accepted. This plane was a two-seater biplane with a double deck, included a draw propeller and a fuselage which was made of simple fabric. The troops preferred the apparatus of engineer Wild in Uster, near Zürich. Only Haefeli's further development of the aircraft DH-3 in 1918 was quite successful. It could do the clearing up and could be used for training. After the prototype of a hunting aircraft with only one seat (DH-4), in the same year the DH-5 followed, which flew at a speed of 180 km/h with a real strong engine.

The aircraft department of the K+W company in Thun grew from 12 to 150 employees within a few years, while the number of workers of the K+W Thun grew from 600 to 1250 in the same period.

Concerning home affairs, the procurement of war material was a shark tank in which the private armaments industry in particular asserted its interests against the state.

After the armistice of 11 November 1918, the Swiss Air Force consisted of 68 aircrafts with 81 pilots. For a large part of the aircrafts and pilots, a military use was no longer needed. The K+W's Flight department was reduced to 60 employees and built further DH-3 (in total 109) and DH-5 (in total 83) biplane series until 1931. From 1918 onwards, four wooden hangars were built on the Rütlistrasse, which were pulled down in 1970. Further southwest, closed to the Waldmeier estate, the federation constructed the wooden halls 20 and 22. They were used as hangars in the lower part, and in the upper part as a construction office for Haefeli. These wooden halls as well had to give way to the construction of the armour-plated halls in the 1970s. In 1922, the

large hangar for the final assembly of the aircrafts was put into operation at the Burgerstrasse. It is still there

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today and can be easily recognized by the tower, which was added later.

With the dog against cows

The space Allmend was not only intensively used by cattle herds, strollers, artillerymen, horsemen and the air force, but also by the test pilots of the K+W for their more than 600 aircrafts manufactured here. The tight space conditions led to various extensions of the grass runways and sometimes conflict situations which failed to be solved well. Once a cow had rushed onto the runway and collided with the plane DH 3 when it was taking off in 1919. Later, the "pilot dog" Rex often had to drive away the cattle from the runway. According to a Newspaper note of October 20, 1922 in the Oberländer Tagblatt, he did so especially on the call "now the cattle comes". In addition, it is said that Rex flew several times in an aircraft as a (blind) passenger.

An accident heralds Haefeli's end

A black day for the aircraft development in Thun was the 25.1.1928, when the popular test pilot Max Cartier died in the crash of the over-engineered prototype M-8a on the Kleine Allmend. The chief designer August Haefeli left K+W in the same year. Among a new management, more aircrafts were built in Thun for about 10 years, but almost exclusively French and Dutch licensed aircrafts. Only in 1939 another aircraft was developed in Thun, the C-36. It was a single-engine all-metal aircraft. However, the K+W Thun did not experience serial production anymore, because in 1943 the aircraft construction was moved from Thun to Emmen for safety reasons.

The Thun military airfield remained for many years even after the aircraft production moved to Emmen. In summer 1951, when the National Council debated the abolition of the airfield in favour of the tank troops, the Oberländer Tagblatt wrote in September 1951: "The people of Thun are concerned about the consequences of this decision." An action committee was formed to maintain the airfield for military, civil and sports aviation. This committee included also neighbourhoods and housing cooperatives. However, since the flight demonstrations of a jet aircraft of the type De Havilland DH-100 Mk. 1 Vampires in 1948, there were also sceptics who did not want a training airfield for the noisy jet planes. In 1952, the local council informed the EMD (today VBS, in English The Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport DDPS) that Thun did not wish to develop into a training airfield for jet aircrafts. Therefore, the EMD decided to cancel the military airfield in Thun at the end of 1955. This finally cleared the way for the civilian use of the site. Now, this year an international Buecker meeting will take place from 31 August to 2 September 2018.

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BOX: Register now!

Pilots with their historic aircraft coming from Switzerland and abroad can now register for the international Buecker Meeting from 31 August to 2 September under the following link: <http://air-thun.ch/bueckertreffen-2018/en/bueckermeeting/pilot-registration/#start> .

Important: The number of spaces is limited and depends on which aircraft types are reported. Bueckers and planes related to Thun (e. g. Dewoitine, C-36 etc.) are given preferential treatment.

Pictures

At <https://www.eigenedateien.ch/c/index.php/s/3kyPLf2ow5TS8Op> you will find pictures, sources and captions documenting the history of aviation in Thun.

The password to download the images is Media-2018