

The First and Last Mission of the Lonesome Polecat

by
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In the history of the Eighth Air Force, the month of March 1944 is best remembered for the first American bombing missions against "The Big B"—Berlin. The German capital was attacked no less than five times that month, with 4799 tons of bombs falling from Air Force B-17s and B-24s.

In the middle of the month, however, Europe's ever unpredictable weather made attacks on northern German cities a risky waste of valuable aircraft and aircrews, and the Eighth's high command decided it was time to go south and hit hard the factories producing the Nazi fighters that were taking such a heavy toll of the Allied bombers.

On 16 March 1944, about 500 B-17s of the First and Third Air Divisions were sent to attack the

Messerschmitt factory at Augsburg, while 200 B-24s of the Second Air Division went to work on aircraft plants in Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance. Weather in the area wasn't as good as expected, and it was the leading Third Air Division which received intense attention from rocket firing Me 110s and Me 410s.

Among the aircraft on this mission was a brand-new B-17G called the *Lonesome Polecat*. Flown by 1st Lt. Robert W. Meyers, this aircraft was to meet a fate much different than any of the other participants of this raid.

THE AIR FORCE GETS A NEW B-17

On 3 January 1944 the U.S. Army Air Force took delivery from

the Douglas Aircraft Company's Long Beach, California plant a B-17G-30-DL serial number 42-38160. It was sent to the Cheyenne Modification Center in Wyoming and departed the United States in February 1944 for the Eighth Air Force.

It was on 2 January that a young second lieutenant from Mount Vernon, Washington, helped pick up another brand-new B-17G "Flying Fortress" at Kearney, Nebraska. From there he started the long flight to join the Eighth Air Force. Flying as copilot, 2nd Lt. Boyd J. Henshaw flew with the crew of 2nd Lt. William T. Vance in delivery of Boeing-built B-17G 42-31706 to Goose Bay, Labrador, via Detroit and Manchester, New Hampshire. After a delay because of the weather, the

The Lonesome Polecat as displayed in St-Moritz, Switzerland, in the early 1970's. (Photo: Rutz Photo Optik)



crew flew nonstop to Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The core of the *Lonesome Polecat* crew was already together on this ferry flight. In addition to Henshaw, other crewmembers to fly together two months later were the navigator, 2nd Lt. Robert T. Williams, S/Sgt. John Miller Jr., S/Sgt. Louis Liening, S/Sgt Charles W. Page, S/Sgt. Elbert E. Mitchell, and S/Sgt Jarrell F. Legg. After a brief training period learning the ways of the 8th Air Force, the crew was assigned to the 550th Squadron of the 385th Bomb Group in February, 1944.

In England at this time was T/Sgt. Carl J. Larsen. Larsen had trained to be a flight engineer on Martin B-26 "Marauders" after joining the U.S. Army Air Forces in July, 1943. He was assigned to the B-26 flown by Victor Linton. "We trained to fly B-26s but were moved to B-17s when arriving in England in December of 1943," Larsen recalls. At the time, the Eighth Air Force was discovering attrition of aircraft and aircrew was much higher than headquarters planners had expected.

It was the mission to Augsburg, Germany, on 16 March 1944, that was to see Larsen join the others who had flown over in January taking into combat B-17G 42-38160. The olive-drab and gray Flying Fortress was now called the *Lonesome Polecat* and carried the "Square G" of the 385th Bomb Group (H) on her tail, with the letter "J" just below the serial number.

"There is not much to tell about our plane the *Lonesome Polecat*," Larsen says. "This flight where we went down was the first and only mission it flew. It was new. This was a common occurrence since we lost so many bombers at that stage of the war."

1st Lt. Robert W. Meyers was to be the pilot of the new aircraft.



Blue Champagne was the B-17 selected by the 385th Bomb Group public relations as the backdrop for this crew photo taken in 1944. Back row, left to right, are Charles W. Page, ball turret gunner; John Miller Jr., top turret; Robert Brown (not on the Polecat mission); Elbert Mitchell, left waist gunner; Jarrell Legg, tail gunner, and Louis Liening, right waist gunner. Front row, left to right, Thomas Vance (not on 16 March mission), Robert Williams, navigator, Robert Dewey (not on mission) and Jack Henshaw, co-pilot. (Photo: Jack Henshaw)

Henshaw was copilot, while Larsen was assigned as the bombardier. It was to be his 13th mission. Also in the nose of the aircraft was 2nd Lt Williams, navigator, with S/Sgt Miller (top turret gunner), S/Sgt Liening (right waist), S/Sgt Mitchell (left waist), S/Sgt Page (ball turret gunner), and S/Sgt Legg in the tail. Newcomer to the crew was T/Sgt John E. Wells, who was to take care of the radio and the radio room's 50 caliber Browning machine gun.

In the early winter morning of 16 March, the *Lonesome Polecat* took to the air along with 220 B-17s making up the 3rd Air Division contribution to the attack on Augsburg's Messerschmitt production facilities.

"We flew from Great Ashfield," remembers Jack Henshaw, which was AAF Station 155 in Suffolk, England. "Fully overcast, my log shows we broke out of the over-

cast at 13,000 feet. My notes don't show a time of departure from England. They showed we were awakened at 0330 hours. I would guess a 0630 hours takeoff. We were briefed for a nine hour mission; 7 hours on oxygen, 5 hours over enemy territory."

This was to be Henshaw's third combat mission, having already flown to Berlin on 8 and 9 March. Navigator Williams had also flown on these two missions, as well as the first mission to the "Big B" on 3 March 1944.

The formation flew across northern France, the *Lonesome Polecat* in the high element of the lead group at about 21,000 feet. The temperature was -30 degrees centigrade. About an hour from the target, the formation was attacked by 8 to 10 German Me 109s, details of which tail gunner Legg provided in the casualty questionnaire he filled out later.

"Number four engine was knocked out and the plexiglass nose destroyed, injuring the bombardier in the foot, but not very seriously," Legg wrote. "The chin turret and ball turret gunner were very severely [wounded]. We stayed with the formation for about 30 to 45 minutes, at which time we could not stay with the formation as number four engine was windmilling and number two was burned out."

Larsen says the German fighters attacked when the formation of B-17s was near Switzerland, and just "as our fighter escort was in the process of changing." He remembers how he was wounded in the foot as he was trying to shoot at the Me 109s making a head-on attack.

"As a result of fighter attack, we had the loss of number four engine with the prop windmilling out of control," confirms Henshaw. "The entire plexiglass nose section of [the] bombardier-navigator's compartment was blown away, and ball turret shot up with gaping holes...the drag on the ship was huge. We could not keep up with the formation. We dropped from high element lead group to tail end of the low group hoping a little lower altitude would help us keep up. But we were still losing speed and altitude.

"We decided to drop our bombs [which fell into an open field, according to Legg] and get rid of all the weight that we could," says Henshaw. "Everything we could get loose went: guns, ammo, radio. But all to no avail. Soon we were down to about 100 mph, at 10,000 feet, and alone.

DECISION TIME...

"It was decision time...what to do?" Henshaw remarks. "We knew that we had lost a lot of fuel, we could see it flowing out of the

holes. No gauges worked. No hydraulics. We thought we had no chance of making England, maybe Switzerland...so we tried Switzerland."

Pilot Robert W. Meyers turned the damaged B-17 south. At the border, two Swiss fighters appeared, one on each wing of the crippled bomber. "They were similar to the German 109s so they lowered their wheels and flaps and began to fire flares," Legg reported. "We acknowledged with a flare and they came in and tried to lead us to a landing field."

"I am sure they were trying to lead us to a field, probably Dübendorf," Henshaw continues. "We were losing altitude steadily, about 500 feet per minute, as I recall. We knew we could not follow [the Swiss fighters] over the mountains they were leading us towards. We saw this clear valley below and the lake and we had only one last chance. Everybody out."

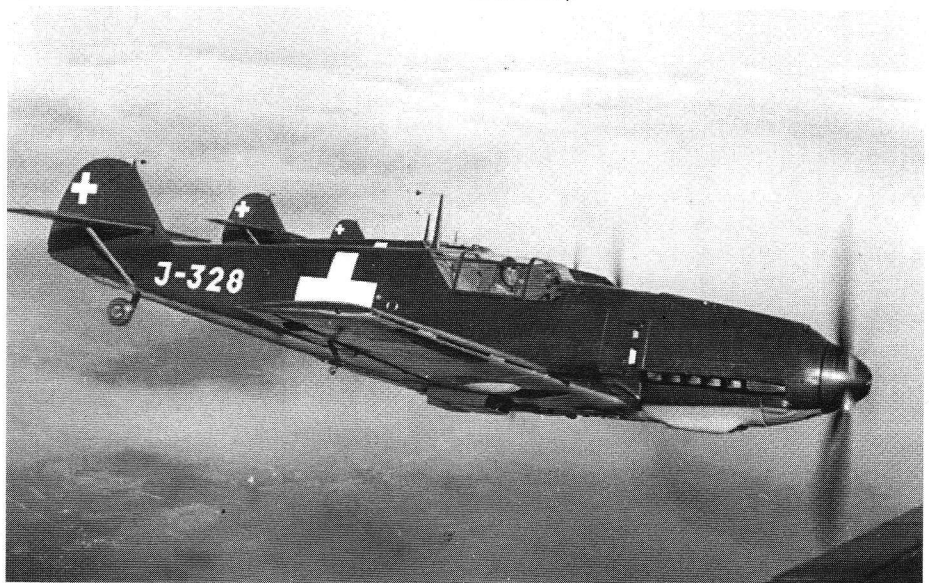
It was over the city of Baar, located just a few miles north of Zouger See, or the Lake of Zug, that 1st Lt. Meyer ordered his crew to bail out. The aircraft was at

about 500 feet when the crew started to leave the aircraft, everyone leaving by the rear door except Henshaw, the last to leave, who jumped through the open bomb-bay doors. "I was about 500 feet when I pulled the rip cord while standing by the bomb bay doors, held the chute in my arms, and dropped," Henshaw says. "The chute opened just an instant before I hit the ground. It was my first and last parachute jump."

In his casualty report, Jarrell Legg said that navigator Williams and bombardier Larsen came to the aircraft's radio room after the ship had been hit, and that the navigator's chute apparently had been blown off of him. Later he was given a square chest-type chute in good condition. Lt. Williams probably didn't realize how low the aircraft was when he jumped from the side door...in a note of irony, Williams had told his crewmembers before they jumped that he would see them on the ground, and he warned them not to open their chutes too soon.

But Lt. Williams had waited too long. He hit the ground before his

Swiss Air Force Messerschmitt Me 109E fighters (1941 photo). Messerschmitt, along with Swiss-built Morane-Saulnier fighters, guaranteed the protection of Swiss airspace during the war. (Photo: Swiss A.F. Museum)



parachute opened completely, and he hit the ground in the town of Baar. He was still conscious when the Swiss found him, and he was taken immediately to the hospital in the town, only to die a short time later.

Jarrell F. Legg reported that he landed in the middle of a railroad track, while he saw two others land in an orchard, one in the front yard of a house, one on the top of a house and another in an open field.

But while all this was going on, Meyer was now all alone in the plane, getting closer to the city of Zug, which borders on the small lake of the same name. With only two good engines, he managed to steer clear of the populated area, and put the unflyable Fortress on the lake. After coming to a halt, Meyer managed to pull himself from the cockpit. He was later picked up by Swiss in a row boat.

It is interesting to note that at least three shots were fired at the crew as they came down in their parachutes, nervous Swiss riflemen apparently thinking they were enemy parachute jumpers.

And so the *Lonesome Polecat* sank to the bottom of the Lake of Zug. On 23 March 1944, *Oberst* (Colonel) Karl Hoegger, chief in charge of the Technical Department of the Swiss Air Force in Dübendorf, completed a report for the Swiss Army describing the dramatic arrival of the B-17 in Switzerland, one of more than 160 American combat aircraft that arrived during the war in one condition or another. He wrote that the aircraft had sunk at a depth of about 40 meters (120 feet), and that following experience of trying to raise another B-17 which had crash landed on Lake Constance (certainly a reference to B-17F *Raunchy* of the 100th Bomb Group which crashed on 6 September 1943), it

was decided that it wasn't possible to refloat the aircraft with the means available.

With hindsight, it is also possible to assume that considering the quantity of B-17s and B24s arriving in Switzerland on an almost regular basis, it obviously wasn't worth trying to recover the aircraft.

So, although it seemed all was over for the airplane, it wasn't for the crew.

WELCOME TO SWITZERLAND

It was Carl Larsen whom Legg saw land in the orchard. He was later interrogated by the Swiss military, and was to spend two weeks in a hospital in Baar along with ball turret gunner Charles W. Page. Later Larsen was sent to Adelboden, where he shared a sparsely furnished room with two other American servicemen.

In his casualty questionnaire completed after his return, left waist gunner Elbert E. Mitchell reported that he last saw S/Sgt Page in December 1944, still taking treatments for a very bad wound in his leg at a hospital in Bern.

Jack Henshaw, who had landed in a field uninjured, was immediately taken in custody by two Swiss in uniform, and walked to the Baar police station. There he found some of the other crewmembers. "They tried to keep me separate from the men, but I wouldn't move...their pushing and shoving to no avail, I guess they didn't want to pick me up and carry me away. After their shouting and arm waving and arguing among themselves died down, they let me stay with the crew. Everything was taken from me," he continues. "I remember all I was left with was my comb and handkerchief."

Henshaw was taken to the

hospital in Baar to see Larsen and Page, and then to a small chapel where he was to see the body of their dead navigator. After much interrogation and transfers to such cities as Dübendorf, Bern, and Gurten Kulm, Henshaw said the crew members who could be returned to Baar for the funeral and churchyard burial of navigator Robert L. Williams. (In 1948, he was disinterred and reburied in Indianapolis.)

On April 11, 1944, Henshaw was in Adelboden, in the Swiss Alps. "Officers were at the Nevada Palace Hotel, the enlisted men at the National Hotel," he recalls. Although food was severely rationed, he remembers that the Swiss were good hosts. "Once in a while we would encounter Swiss Nazis and they did try to make things miserable. But mostly Swiss civilians tried to be very good to us," Henshaw says. "We were, after all, uninvited illegal intruders and at war."

During the time of internment, the American servicemen were able to wander where they wanted, just as long as they stayed in town and away from the railway station and highways, and if a Swiss guard on the edge of town told them they were going too far, turn back. Henshaw said his college German "returned to me rapidly, and put me in good stead."

But remaining in Switzerland until the duration of the war didn't interest a lot of Americans, and that included members of the *Lonesome Polecat* crew. Carl Larsen, along with two other American servicemen, managed to sneak out of Switzerland in mid-December, and were aided by the French underground in finding the Allied lines. Evasion by American servicemen was very elaborately planned, usually with the aid of friendly Swiss. To illustrate

this it is interesting to describe in detail the escape of two other *Lonesome Polecat* crewmembers, copilot Jack Henshaw and gunner Louis Liening.

Jack Henshaw wanted to get back to his group, finish his tour, and go home. Although each internment camp had its ongoing "Escape Committee," it was only in the weeks following the Allied invasion of Europe that success was truly achieved as the Germans pulled back from central and southern France.

Henshaw's chance came while he was staying in the town of Wengen. He was asked to take three enlisted men with him, and one of them was the *Polecat's* right waist gunner Louis Liening. With forged passes, and dressed in uniform, the men bought train tickets for Bern, the Swiss capital. There, in a prearranged plan, the men were taken to a bare room in a building where a contact provided nondescript, ill-fitting, civilian clothes, and then they spent the night. The next morning another contact came in a cab.

"We were to be driven to a park in Bern to change to a private car to go to Fribourg," Henshaw recalls. "But there was a glitch. The car wasn't where it was supposed to be and there were Swiss Army all over the place. I told the driver to keep going just like we were tourists. We waved at the people, and when we came out of the park, we drove into the city again. No one followed us. The contact said he would have to hide us for a couple of days."

Two days later, the four airmen walked individually to the trolley line, and went to the Bern railroad station. "We did not gather together, but stood where we could see each other. A contact I knew was there. He had a ticket for each of us to Fribourg. All five of us boarded at the con-

tact's signal. We did not board together or sit together, but were in the same car," Henshaw remembers.

After arriving in Fribourg, when the contact got off the train the four Americans followed individually, and, one-by-one, got into a waiting car. Taken to the home of a friendly Swiss woman in her sixties, who tried to make them feel at home, the Americans started to think about the final steps they'd make before getting to France.

That evening another contact arrived at the house, with detailed instructions. "He said that we would be taken to a French border location on a fordable river and about midway between two border guard stations. We would be let off near a cultivated field where we were to lie hidden in the furrows. The land sloped towards the stream, and we could see the border path or road," according to Henshaw.

"We were to lie hidden until two guards on bicycles appeared. If they came from our right, as soon as they disappeared over the rise to our left, we would have 20 minutes to cross the stream into France. If they came from our left, we must wait 10 minutes until they returned and disappeared to our left. After crossing the stream into France, we were to go straight away from the stream. In approximately a mile we would come to a road where we would turn left and in less than a couple of miles we would come to a very small French village. There would be an inn, and the inn owner would get us in touch with U.S. Army troops."

After the contact left, towards midnight the American's hostess came to tell them that it was time to leave. "She saw us to a nearby car, waved cheerily, and left," says Henshaw.

This time all went as planned. The driver left the airmen by the furrowed field, in some slightly rolling hills with a mix of farmland and forest. They could see the border road next to the stream not more than a half-mile away.

"We were prone in the furrows when the guards appeared from our left," he continues. "They disappeared to our right and very shortly came again headed to our left. Then they stopped, dismounting right between us and the river. They seemed to be talking and gesturing excitedly, shining their flashlights around the area. The light beams could not reach us and their voices were too far away to be understandable. Soon they were back on their bikes and disappeared over the rise to our left."

"I can still hear the loud angry shouts of a border guard ordering 'Halten sie! Halten sie!'"

"I whispered to the men to run for the river and just as we were entering the stream I heard shouting. I looked down the road and here came the guards," Henshaw explains. "They raised their rifles, dropped the bikes, and started running towards us."

"But they were too late. Probably in less than a minute we were emerging on the French side of the stream."

It was that night on 28 November 1944 that 2nd Lt Jack Henshaw left his last footprint on Swiss soil. "I can still hear the loud angry shouts of a border guard ordering 'Halten sie! Halten sie!'. I halted a few minutes later, in France, tired, cold, soaked to the ear lobes in stolen civilian clothes and no ID."

RECOVERING THE LONESOME POLECAT

It was after the war, during the summer of 1952, that a Swiss gas station owner from the city of Suhr decided that he was going to do what the Swiss Army thought was too difficult to do during the war: refloat the crashed B-17, and then transform it into a filling station, an idea which occasionally came to certain American gas station owners after the war.

Martin Schaffner, who came to be known as "Bomber Schaffner," was an ambitious man. After negotiating for two years with Swiss and American authorities, he finally received the green light to try and bring back to the surface of the Lake of Zug the badly damaged B-17. The big Argovian was to become legendary in Switzerland during the early 1950s for his efforts to reclaim old Allied bombers from Swiss lakes. He was to recover another B-17G, *Little Chub* of the 384th Bomb Group, which came down in Lake Greifensee on 24 April 1944, and

Avro Lancaster ND 759, which came down in Lake Constance on 28 April 1944.

Schaffner constructed a raft which floated on two huge gasoline tanks of 64,000 litres capacity. He had installed three large winches with heavy-duty cables, while on a smaller raft he built a ladder which went down about 140 feet into the water. In four days Schaffner's diver found the aircraft about 3 feet below the end of the ladder. Its nose and one wing were buried 20 feet in the mud at the bottom of the lake. The diver continued his shuttle between the surface and the raft, a telephone line keeping him in touch with Schaffner who remained on the surface to direct operations.

Over a period of weeks, Schaffner's team managed to get the aircraft out of the mud, and slowly started to advance the main raft towards the edge of the lake. Success was almost theirs when the *Lonesome Polecat* decided that she wasn't ready yet, the cables broke, and she fell back to the bottom of the lake.

Schaffner wasn't a man to give up easily. Over the next 15 days his crew recuperated the bomber with a mind of its own, and finally got it to the edge of the lake. A giant crane was brought in to pick up the B-17, but it was only after the remaining gasoline in her tanks was emptied that Lake Zug finally gave up her bomber. The Swiss crew then had to find a means of making the landing gear come down, the battle damage and that caused by the forced landing not making things any easier.

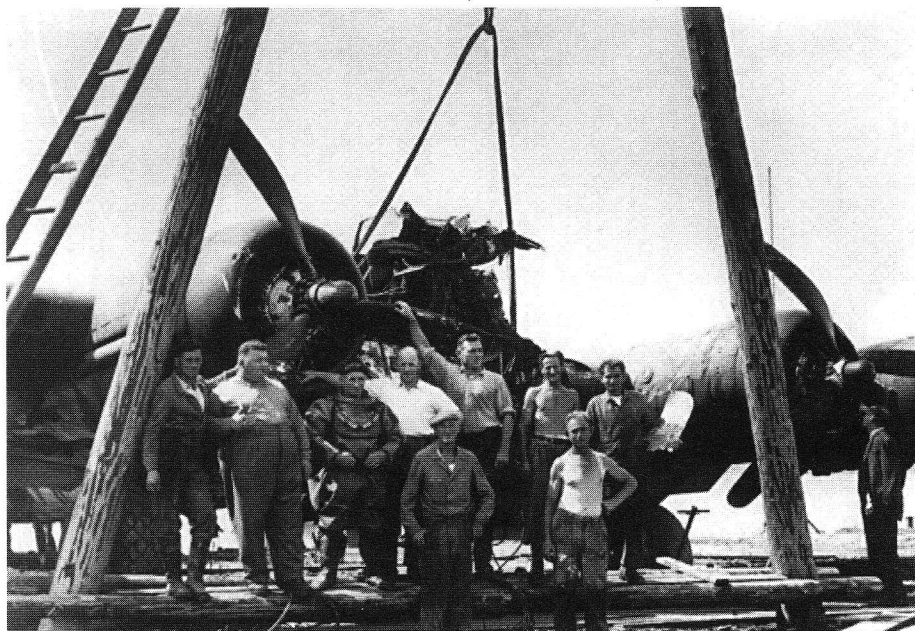
According to one source, the guns remaining on the aircraft were still operational, and so was the ammunition.

Schaffner, who weighed over 320 pounds, also had big ambitions for the Flying Fortress. He started exhibiting the aircraft in different Swiss cities, asking a small admission charge to try and recuperate some of the cost he had to pay to bring the *Lonesome Polecat* to the surface. The idea of turning her into a gas station didn't work out, however, since the fire department said she was a fire hazard.

Among those who saw the aircraft on exhibit was Eric W. Wagner, of Bucks, England. He was a young man of 15 years old when his parents took him on vacation to Switzerland to visit "various aunts and uncles in the summer of 1953." An avid air enthusiast, he visited a number of Swiss airfields, and at Biel/Bienne, he saw an interesting tail sticking up from behind an 8-foot high wooden fence.

Wagner remembers that the aircraft looked like it has just been pulled from the lake, and that no effort had been made to restore her. It was not possible to climb inside, but he remembers that there was a ladder to climb up and get a look into the cockpit.

"Bomber Schaffner" (second from left) poses with his crew in front of the *Lonesome Polecat*, summer 1952. (Photo: Henshaw)



With the idea of using the *Lonesome Polecat* for a gas station shot down by the local fire department, the aircraft was stored for a while in Schaffner's back yard. After his death, it was seen in St. Gallen, Switzerland, where it was thought the old bomber, still missing her nose plexiglass, the left wingtip and her original well-bent propellers, would become part of a small air museum.

It was around 1969-1970 that the *Lonesome Polecat* was taken apart once again, this time to be exhibited in another Swiss city, the ski resort of St-Moritz. But her days were now truly numbered. It's owners wanted 30,000 Swiss francs for the aircraft (about \$90,000 at the time), and when no buyer was found, she went to the scrap heap, a relief for the owners of the luxurious apartments which could be seen springing up around her, but with a note of sadness for aircraft enthusiasts who saw one of the last genuine 8th Air Force combat aircraft disappear.

According to Swiss writer Jean-Pierre Thevoz, it is believed that part of one turret still is resting on the bottom of the Lake of Zug. Now, if...

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B-17G-30-DL, serial 42-38160, as displayed in Biel/Bienne, Switzerland, on 2 September 1953. Note the missing nose plexiglass and presence of turrets still with their guns. (Photo: Wagner)

President, 385th Bomb Group Association; Eric W. Wagner, Gerrards Cross, Bucks, England. Also Rutz Photo Optik, St-Moritz, Jean Pierre Thevoz, Lausanne, and Hermann Stucki, my Swiss Me 109 specialist, for translations.

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