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History of Swissair

First commercial flights

Civil aviation in Switzerland had its beginnings in January 1919, when Major Arnold Isler, then commander of the Swiss Air Force, 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. At first they carried only military mail between the air force base at Zurich and army headquarters at Berne. Experience that had been 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. At the same time he put it at the disposal of the public. At first only mail was admitted, but from June the service also carried passengers. The single-engine DH-3s, which had a maximum still-air speed of about 75 m.p.h., 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 2 hours and 20 minutes and cost 300 francs. 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.

Between 1919 and 1931 other private airlines were founded, one of them, Ad Astra, merged with two other companies, and Balair.

Foundation of Swissair

On March 26, 1931, Balair and Ad Astra decided to merge into an enterprise for the whole of Switzerland and with a capital of 800 000

francs founded Swiss Air Transport, Ltd., Swissair. The new company owned eight three-engine Fokker F-VIIbs, two single-engine Dornier-Merkurs, one single-engine Fokker F-VIIa, a single-engine Messerschmitt M-18d and a single-engine Comte AC-4, totalling 86 passenger seats. The small number of air crews comprised 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 2800 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, which caused quite a sensation. Their cruising speed was 162 m.p.h., or 63 m.p.h. more than any other plane then in use in Europe. Powered by a Wright-Cyclone engine of 575 HP, this low-wing monoplane had a range of 590 miles. With a payload of 1797 lbs it accommodated four passengers apart from the pilot. On May 2, Swissair inaugurated an express service from Zurich to Vienna via Munich with its two Lockheed-Orions. The distance of 379 miles required on average only 140 minutes and the commercial success was outstanding, with the load factor averaging 82%. The purchase of the Orions contributed materially to making Swissair

Swissair was the first European airline which used air-hostesses. (Photo Swissair)





DC-8 (Photo 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 the 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 fourteen-seater twin-engine Douglas DC-2s. With these, and in co-operation with the British company Imperial Airways Limited, Swissair set up a link between Zurich and London via Basle, for the first time carrying the white cross on the red field 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 within a short time

lost both of its directors who in their six years' work had earned the company great repute and a sound position. But their work had 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, a confidence which has never been disappointed and which led to the future equipment policy of the Swiss Air Transport Company.

Resumption of services after the war

After an interruption of almost six years Swissair resumed services 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 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 over all parts of 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.

Transition to the jet era

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. A refusal of this kind would have meant disappearance from world-wide operations within a few years. Realising this, and encouraged by the favourable operating results hitherto 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,

Swissair becomes the national carrier

In February, 1947, Swissair officially became the national airline of Switzerland, with some State participation. Public institutions took over 30% of the share capital, while the other 70% remained in private hands. This proportion has never been changed since. Swissair is therefore not a nationalised company.

Economic progress

The company naturally grew in size as business expanded. In 1965, when the network totalled 135 998 km and production amounted to 546 588 619 ton-kilometers, a staff of 9000 was adequate. At the end of 1980, however, with an overall capacity offered of more than 2500 mil-

lion tkm and a network length of 270 884 km, covering 93 cities in 64 countries on all continents except Australia, the company employed 16 000 people, of whom about 3300 were working in 190 branch offices outside Switzerland. Total revenue, which amounted in 1946 to not quite 15 million francs, rose in 1980 to 2.9 billion francs.

Good-bye to the Swissair arrow

On December 15, 1978 Swissair decided to change its 25-year-old outer image by abandoning the Swissair arrow as a trademark and to replace it by a new logo and company emblem. It also was decided to give the fleet a new paint-coat.



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