

Prof. Auguste Piccard †

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PROF. AUGUSTE PICCARD †

Professor Auguste Piccard died at Lausanne recently at the age of 78.

"The Times" writes:

Auguste Piccard was one of twin sons born at Basle on January 28, 1884, to Jules Piccard, head of the Department of Chemistry at the University of Basle, by his wife Hélène (*née* Haltenhoff). The other twin, christened Jean Félix, has likewise won distinction in science; and over considerable periods of their lives the careers of the brothers ran parallel. Both had their schooling at the Ober Realschule, Basle; both went, in 1902, to the Swiss Institute of Technology, at Zurich, and both graduated in 1907 — Auguste in mechanical engineering and Jean Félix in chemical engineering. Both brothers stayed on at the institute to carry out research for the degree of D.Sc. Auguste remained there as a teacher until 1922, for the last two years as Professor of Physics.

Both Auguste and Jean became keenly interested in the possibilities of lighter-than-air flight, and in 1913 they made together a 16-hour flight from Zurich by balloon, passing over large areas of Germany and France. In 1915, mobilized for service in the Swiss army, they chose the balloon section. Auguste gave up his post at the Swiss Institute of Technology in 1922 on appointment as Professor of Physics at the Institut Polytechnique in the University of Brussels. He kept in close touch with his brother (who, after teaching at Munich and Lausanne, continued his professorial career in the United States). As early as 1926 Auguste had conceived the idea of a high balloon ascent, to be undertaken for the purpose of making scientific observations, and within the next few years he began to make experiments for the production of the best type of gondola.

During 1930 Auguste Piccard evolved an airtight gondola, lifted by a hydrogen-filled balloon, and by May of the following year all was ready for an attempt on the stratosphere. On the 27th, with an assistant, Paul Kipfer, he took off from Augsburg, Bavaria, and achieved a height of 15,281 metres, easily beating the existing record, and descended safely at Ober-Gurgl. A further and more elaborate attempt followed quickly. This time Piccard used an aluminium globe-shaped cabin, with oxygen equipment, furnishing it with the necessary apparatus for the making of scientific observations, the total weight being 850lb., lifted by a gas-filled balloon of 33 yards diameter. On August 18, 1932, Piccard, accompanied by his Belgian collaborator, Max Cosyns, ascended from Zurich to a height of more than 16,201 metres. These flights not only showed that it was possible to travel in the stratosphere, but furnished valuable scientific data concerning radioactivity, atmospheric electricity, and the cosmic rays. They led Piccard to make the prophecy of very fast stratospheric flights between Europe and America, and the Belgian Aero Club recognized his achievement by the award of its gold medal.

Work in the War

Piccard escaped the onrush of the Germans in 1940 and during the period of the Second World War worked in the Swiss aluminium industry, designing precision instruments for physicists. When the war was over he

returned to his chair at Brussels, and he now turned his attention from the upper air to the ocean. His ambition was to beat William Beebe's 1934 record of 3,028ft. for an oceanic descent, to investigate conditions at great depths, to take photographs, and, if possible, to catch some of the fish which live at the deed levels. He designed a special form of diving bell which he called a "bathyscaphe". It consisted of a steel, watertight cabin hung from a box-shaped hydrostat filled with heptane, a form of aviation petrol. He planned to descend by the weight of scrap metal and to raise the bathyscaphe again by the use of the heptane. An attempt was made near Dakar, West Africa, in October, 1948, but Piccard found great difficulty both in launching and recovering the sphere, and had to abandon the project without having carried out his aims.

Five years later, however, Piccard and his son Jacques, a former assistant professor of economics at Geneva, took the bathyscaphe, Trieste, down 1,732 fathoms (10,392ft.) — then the greatest depth ever reached by a living man — in the Tyrrhenian pit off Capri.

This record was beaten early in 1954 by two French naval officers who went down more than 2,200 fathoms (13,200ft.). But in January, 1960, the record was regained in a bathyscaphe of his design which was piloted by Jacques Piccard and Lieutenant Don Walsh, an American submarine officer, to a depth of 35,800ft. in the Marianas Trench off Guam.

In 1956 Auguste Piccard's account of his various exploits was published in English, **In Balloon and Bathyscaphe**. He had retired from his chair in Brussels in 1945.

In 1920 Piccard married Marianne Denis. There were one son and four daughters of the marriage.

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