

The Truth About Swiss Internees

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Editor's Note This is a follow up to the story that appeared in issue no 19 of the Torretta Flyer by Robert M Fosse, regarding USAF Aircraft landing in Switzerland during WWII. This piece deals with the experiences of the flight crews who were forced to land in Switzerland at great peril. Most of the interned crews were treated very poorly by Swiss authorities.

During WWII, the air war over Europe resulted in many battle damaged USAAF aircraft and high losses. Numerous damaged and malfunctioning aircraft, which could not return to base, believed they could reach Switzerland. An unknown number did not make it. Those who did wish to make the truth known!

In 1944, an American Diplomat, assigned to Sweden wrote to the US military that USAAF aircraft in Sweden and Switzerland were undamaged. He also made allegations of cowardice and desertion.

Since the end of WWII and on up through the years many books and magazine articles have been written. There have been unfounded and derogatory comments made about those who interned in Switzerland.

One magazine published a series of 13-17 pictures from the Swiss Archives. The author stated the ships appeared to be undamaged. The Group markings, date of entry, place in Switzerland, and ship's serial number assisted in the identification by the ship's pilot and/or crew numbers. the angle a photograph is taken can hide damage. In one example the photo was taken from the right side. What it didn't show was the left wing was in shreds, the number one engine was feathered, and number two was burned. The fuselage was ripped and only thirty (30) minutes of fuel remained on board.

Other authors have stated most aircraft feathered a good engine and went to Switzerland. There have been many comments and insinuations that internees had the great life, were shackled up in their apartments, and could travel all over Switzerland at will.

Another profound lie was that internees could leave Switzerland any time they wanted to. These statements were made by people who were not there. There have been a couple of escape stories by internees that have raised questions by other escapees as much of the stories were not commensurate with the facts.

A Fighter Group was briefed to shoot down USAAF bombers headed for Sweden or Switzerland.

There were other Americans in Switzerland who were in the same war. However, they had been shot down over Nazi territory and managed to evade the Nazis. God bless them! They reached and walked across the Swiss border. They were called Evadees and were accorded entirely different arrangements than the internees. The internee arrived in an aircraft and parachuted, crash-landed or landed in Switzerland.

Many internees were told and many signed statements that they would not tell what they witnessed or about events in Switzerland. Now, they are telling their truths!

Now let's go back and look at what followed our Diplomat's charges. General Spatz termed the statements slanderous and absolutely untrue. He demanded U.S. military men be allowed to examine the airplanes. A Lieutenant Colonel and ground crew examined all the aircraft in Switzerland. In September, 1944, there were no USAAF airplanes in that country without justifiable cause. The volumes "US Air Forces in WWII" also carries that statement. Furthermore, the Lieutenant Colonel remained in Switzerland and checked new arrivals. He remained in Switzerland and supervised the repair of disabled aircraft until well after the war ended.

U.S. and Swiss records state: 176 USAAF aircraft entered Switzerland. 96 of the planes were salvaged as junk. 11 were repaired after 15,600 hours were spent repairing them. They were then flown to Burtonwood, England for salvage. One L-5, one P-51, thirty B-17's and thirty-nine B-24's were flown back. Does this represent no damage?

What really happened when a crippled airplane crossed the Swiss border? Numerous ships were jumped by Swiss ME-109's or Moranes. There are Swiss newspaper accounts about the shooting down of USAAF aircraft by Swiss fighters also from American crew members in those airplanes. Many others were shot at by Swiss Antiaircraft batteries. One incident was witnessed by two USAAF crews at the Swiss Air Force Base, Dubendorf. Furthermore, a USAAF Captain was in the tower, a Captain who had been ordered to teach Swiss pilots to fly B-17's and B-24's by the U.S. War Department. Some of the B-24s and B-17's had been repaired by the Swiss cannibalizing other ships. The Captain was an internee.

A B-17 started his approach to land and only one wheel of the landing gear came down. An AA gun fired at point blank range and the plane fell into the Griefensee. The Bombardier was the only survivor. He had been thrown through the plexiglass nose upon impact and was picked up in the water by a Swiss in a boat. Of course he was seriously injured.

Regardless of how an internee landed; by parachute, crash-landing or landing on an airfield (all Swiss runways were too short for B-24's and B-17's), the Swiss army appeared quickly, brandishing bayoneted rifles and machine guns. Each crew member was interrogated, photographed and finger printed. They were under armed guard 24 hours each day.

They were transported under armed guard to villages high