

= L 'Oiseau Blanc =

L 'Oiseau Blanc (commonly known in the English @-@ speaking world as The White Bird) was a French Levasseur PL.8 biplane that disappeared in 1927 , during an attempt to make the first non @-@ stop transatlantic flight between Paris and New York to compete for the Orteig Prize . The aircraft was flown by French World War I aviation heroes , Charles Nungesser and François Coli . The aircraft disappeared after its 8 May 1927 takeoff from Paris . Two weeks later , Charles Lindbergh successfully made the New York ? Paris journey and claimed the prize , flying the Spirit of St. Louis .

The disappearance of L 'Oiseau Blanc is considered one of the great mysteries in the history of aviation . Many rumors circulated about the fate of the aircraft and crew , with mainstream opinion at the time being that the aircraft was probably lost in a squall over the Atlantic . Investigations starting in the 1980s suggest that the aircraft probably reached Newfoundland , and may have crashed in Maine .

The disappearance of Nungesser and Coli has an extensive legacy , and is referred to in many films and museums . A street in Paris is named after the aviators , and a commemorative postage stamp was issued in 1967 . A statue at the Paris Le Bourget Airport honors the attempted flight , and there is a memorial on the cliffs of Étretat , from where their aircraft was last seen in France .

= = Background = =

In 1919 , New York hotel owner Raymond Orteig offered a USD \$ 25 @,@ 000 prize , the Orteig Prize , to the first aviators to make a non @-@ stop transatlantic flight between New York and Paris during the next five years . With no takers , he renewed the offer in 1924 , when aviation technology had advanced enough at that point that many people tried for the prize . Most were attempting to fly from New York to Paris , but a number of French aviators planned an attempt to fly in the opposite direction , from Paris to New York .

François Coli , age 45 , a World War I veteran and recipient of the French Legion of Honor , had been making record @-@ breaking flights across and around the Mediterranean , and had been planning a transatlantic flight since 1923 . His original plans were to fly with his wartime comrade Paul Tarascon , a flying ace with 12 victories from the war . They became interested in the Orteig Prize in 1925 , but in late 1926 an accident destroyed their Potez 25 biplane . Tarascon was badly burned , and relinquished his place as pilot to 35 @-@ year @-@ old Charles Nungesser , a highly experienced flying ace with over 40 victories , third highest among the French .

Nungesser had been planning an independent attempt at a solo crossing to win the Orteig Prize , but initial discussions with designer Pierre Levasseur had led to the company owner insisting that Coli be considered as his navigator in a new two @-@ place variant of the production Levasseur PL.4.

= = Design and development = =

At the Pierre Levasseur Company in Paris , Nungesser and Coli , working closely with Chief Engineer Émile Farret and production manager Albert Longelot , assisted in the design of the new Levasseur PL.8 biplane . Based on the Levasseur PL.4 developed for the Aéronavale to operate from the French aircraft carrier Béarn , the PL.8 was a conventional , single @-@ bay , wood and fabric @-@ covered biplane that carried a crew of two in a side @-@ by @-@ side , open cockpit .

Major modifications included the reinforcement of the plywood fuselage , and removing two of the forward cockpits so the main cockpit could be widened to allow Nungesser and Coli to sit side @-@ by @-@ side . The wingspan was also increased to approximately 15 m (49 ft) . Two additional fuel tanks were mounted aft of the firewall , meaning the PL.8 's three fuel tanks held a total of 4 @,@ 025 l (1 @,@ 063 US gal) of gasoline .

The PL.8 also incorporated several safety features in case of ditching at sea . Apart from small floats attached directly to the undersides of the lower wing , the main units of the fixed , tailskid

undercarriage could be jettisoned on takeoff , in order to reduce the aircraft 's weight . The underside of the fuselage was given a boat @-@ like shape and made watertight for a water landing . Nungesser and Coli 's plan was to make a water landing in New York , in front of the Statue of Liberty .

A single W @-@ 12 Lorraine @-@ Dietrich 340 kilowatts (460 hp) engine was used , with the cylinders set in three banks spaced 60 ° apart from one another , similar to the arrangement used in Napier engines . The engine was tested to ensure it would last the entire flight , and was run for over 40 hours while still in the Parisian factory .

The aircraft , christened L 'Oiseau Blanc , was painted white , and had the French tricolor markings , with Nungesser 's personal World War I flying ace logo : a skull and crossbones , candles and a coffin , on a black heart , painted on the fuselage . The biplane carried no radio and relied only on celestial navigation , a specialty of Coli from his previous flights around the Mediterranean .

In 1928 , a second PL @-@ 8 , and equipped with a Hispano @-@ Suiza 12M , 375 kW (500 hp) engine , was built .

= = Operational history = =

In April 1927 , the PL.8 @-@ 01 was shipped from the factory for Nungesser to begin a series of proving tests to determine aircraft performance . Most of the flights were conducted around Villacoublay and Chartres . Although full fuel loads were never carried , during one flight , he reached a speed of 207 kilometres per hour (129 mph) and flight elevation of 4 @, @ 900 m (16 @, @ 100 ft) .

The evaluations proceeded successfully through the flight envelope without major changes required to the basic design . The only incident of note was a fire that broke out in the hangar where the PL.8 @-@ 01 had been stored . Scorched fabric on the top wing was the result with effective repairs carried out shortly after . On 7 May 1927 , after the tests were complete , the aircraft was prepared for its record flight , flying from Villacoublay to Le Bourget Field .

= = = Transatlantic flight = = =

Nungesser and Coli took off at 5 : 17 a.m. , 8 May 1927 from Le Bourget Field in Paris , heading for New York . Their PL.8 @-@ 01 weighed 5 @, @ 000 kg (11 @, @ 000 lb) on takeoff , extremely heavy for a single @-@ engined aircraft , barely clearing a line of trees at the end of the field . Gathering an escort of French fighter aircraft , Nungesser and Coli turned back as planned , and at low altitude , immediately jettisoned the main undercarriage .

The intended flight path was a great circle route , which would have taken them across the English Channel , over the southwestern part of England and Ireland , across the Atlantic to Newfoundland , then south over Nova Scotia , to Boston , and finally to a water landing in New York .

Once in the air , the biplane was escorted to the French coast by four military aircraft led by French Air Force Captain Venson , and sighted from the coastal town of Étretat . A sighting was made by the commanding officer of the British submarine HMS H50 , who recorded the note in his log , that he observed a biplane at 300 m altitude , 20 nautical miles southwest of the tip of Needles on the Isle of Wight . In Ireland , an aircraft overhead was reported by a resident of the town of Dungarvan and a Catholic priest reported a sighting over the village of Carrigaholt , then no further verified reports were made .

Crowds of people gathered in New York to witness the historic arrival , with tens of thousands of people crowding Battery Park in Manhattan to have a good view of the Statue of Liberty , where the aircraft was scheduled to touch down . Rumors circulated that L 'Oiseau Blanc had been sighted along its route , in Newfoundland , or over Long Island . In France , some newspapers even reported that Nungesser and Coli had arrived safely in New York , evoking a wave of French patriotism . L 'Oiseau Blanc had been carrying a sizable load of fuel , 4 @, @ 000 litres (1 @, @ 056 @. @ 7 US gal) , which would have given them approximately 42 hours of flight time . After this time had passed , with no word as to the aircraft 's fate , it was realized that the aircraft had been lost . In

France , the public was scandalized by the newspapers such as La Presse which had printed false reports about the aircraft 's arrival , and outrage was generated against the companies involved , with demonstrations in the streets .

In the immediate aftermath of their disappearance , an international search was launched to find Nungesser and Coli . Aviation Digest sponsored a well @-@ known pilot , Floyd Bennett to search the area between New York and Newfoundland for nine days . The Canadian government search and rescue organizations also sent out two search aircraft (one of which crashed) . Searchers including the French Navy , the U.S. Navy , and the Royal Canadian Navy that scoured the route , including Labrador , the northeast coast of the U.S. and the area around the St. Lawrence River . Subsequently , with no sign of the aircraft , further search efforts were abandoned .

Twelve days after Nungesser and Coli 's departure , Charles Lindbergh , flying solo in the Spirit of Saint Louis , took off from New York on his own famous journey . After a flight of 33 hours , 30 minutes , he received a hero 's welcome when he arrived in Paris , even as the French mourned the loss of Nungesser and Coli .

= = Mystery = =

The mainstream view was that L 'Oiseau Blanc crashed over the Atlantic due to a squall . Nonetheless , 12 witnesses in Newfoundland and Maine claimed to have heard the aircraft as it passed overhead . Residents at Harbor Grace , Newfoundland reported sighting a white aircraft circling in haze or fog , late on 9 May 1927 . With no aircraft on the island and no overflights taking place , the local newspapers highlighted a " mystery " aircraft . If these stories were true , they would have meant that the flight was far behind schedule , as they would have been in the 40th hour of flight . This delay may have been explained , however , by the fact that the aircraft was flying against the prevailing weather pattern . Fishermen off the coast of Newfoundland reported that the weather had turned cold and foul , which might have caused the delay . In May 1927 the US Coast Guard found an airplane wing in Napeague Bay at Fort Pond Bay Long Island Sound ; reportedly aircraft wreckage was seen in August 1927 , 200 miles off the New York Coast .

Many rumors swirled around the aircraft 's disappearance , including a theory that was proposed that the aviators had been shot down by rum @-@ runners with tommy guns , as well as the belief that Nungesser and Coli were still alive and living with Indians in Canada . In 1930 , claims circulated that L 'Oiseau Blanc 's engine had been located in Maine , but nothing was confirmed . Later stories emerged in 1948 , from reports that caribou hunters and fur trappers had found aircraft wreckage in Great Gull Pond .

A fresh round of interest in L 'Oiseau Blanc began in the 1980s , after freelance writer Gunnar Hansen of Northeast Harbor , Maine , researched and published an article in the June 1980 issue of Yankee Magazine , titled " The Unfinished Flight of the White Bird " . Hansen revealed how Anson Berry (d . 1936) , a hermit living near Machias , Maine , claimed late in the afternoon of May 9 , 1927 to have heard a sputtering aircraft fly over his isolated camp at Round Lake , Maine . Berry had not been able to see the aircraft because of fog and low clouds , but had heard what sounded like a crash or forced landing in the distance . Hansen and others did a great deal of research during the 1980s , and located multiple other witnesses who reported memories of the aircraft in a line from Nova Scotia down to eastern Maine on that date .

In 1984 , the French government made an official investigation , concluding that it was possible that the aircraft had reached Newfoundland . In 1989 , the NBC television series Unsolved Mysteries advanced the theory that the two aviators made it across the ocean , but crashed and perished in the woods of Maine . One of Nungesser 's relatives , William Nungesser , made several trips to Maine to search , focusing his energies around the north slope of Round Lake Hills in Washington County , Maine , as well as the area around Lake Winnepesaukee .

Famed author Clive Cussler and his NUMA organization also attempted to solve the mystery , searching for the aircraft in Maine and in Newfoundland . They made multiple visits in the 1980s , and interviewed dozens of elderly witnesses : hunters , fishermen and others who said they had seen or heard the aircraft pass by in 1927 . The NUMA expedition was named " Midnight Ghost " ,

after Lindbergh 's quote in his book *The Spirit of St. Louis* , where he said that Nungesser and Coli had " vanished like midnight ghosts " . In 1992 , divers traveled to Newfoundland and attempted to locate and search Great Gull Pond for a wreck , but found nothing , and were not even sure that they had located the right lake . Other lakes were also searched , from Machias , Maine , to Chesterfield , Maine .

Certain pieces were found which , though not conclusive , did suggest that L 'Oiseau Blanc had made it to the continent . Little of the aircraft would have remained , since it was created primarily from plywood and canvas . The parts most likely to endure would have been the engine and the aluminum fuel tanks . In Maine , bits and pieces of struts were found , and wood similar to the kind used to build the biplane . Engine metal was also found near the town of Machias , that was not typical to the United States or Canada . Two local residents described a large metal object , a " really big motor " which had been dragged out of the woods for salvage , along a path allegedly made by a logging operation .

In 2011 , the *Wall Street Journal* reported that an unofficial French team was focusing on theories that the aircraft crashed off the coast of Canada after flying over Newfoundland .

= = Legacy = =

The disappearance of L 'Oiseau Blanc has been called " the Everest of aviation mysteries " . TIGHAR , The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery , has called the aircraft , " History 's Most Important Missing Airplane " . Although it has been claimed that " if the aircraft had successfully completed its journey , Lindbergh would not qualify for the Orteig Prize , the sole reason for his attempt . When Lindbergh did succeed with his own flight across the Atlantic , the international attention on his achievement was probably enhanced because of the disappearance of ' L 'Oiseau Blanc just days earlier . It is also suggested that it was Lindbergh 's historic success which gave a major boost to the American aviation industry , without which the course of America 's military and industrial accomplishments might have been quite different .

A monument was erected in Étretat in 1927 , to mark the last place from which the biplane was seen in France , but it was destroyed in 1942 by the occupying German army . A new 24 m (79 ft) high monument , the " Monument Nungesser et Coli " , was erected in 1963 atop one of the cliffs . There is also a nearby museum .

Another monument in France was inaugurated on 8 May 1928 , at Le Bourget airport . Honoring Lindbergh , Nungesser , and Coli , it is inscribed , " A ceux qui tentèrent et celui qui accomplit " (trans : " To those who tried and to the one who succeeded ") . The French issued a commemorative postage stamp in 1967 , 40 years after the flight , to honor Nungesser and Coli 's attempt . A street , " Rue Nungesser et Coli " is named after the aviators , along the Stade Jean Bouin in the 16th arrondissement of Paris .

In 1928 , the Ontario Surveyor General named a number of lakes in the northwest of the province to honour aviators who had perished during 1927 , mainly in attempting oceanic flights . Amongst these are Coli Lake (51 @. @ 32 ° N 93 @. @ 59 ° W ? / 51 @. @ 32 ; -93.59) and Nungesser Lake (51 @. @ 49 ° N 93 @. @ 52 ° W ? / 51 @. @ 49 ; -93.52) .

The fate of L 'Oiseau Blanc is occasionally mentioned in films . The 1999 made @-@ for @-@ TV Canadian film *Restless Spirits* , a children 's film with the alternate title *Dead Aviators* , uses the mystery of Nungesser and Coli 's disappearance as the key plot device . A young girl , who struggles with her pilot father 's death in an aircraft crash years before , visits her grandmother in Newfoundland . While there , she encounters the ghosts of Nungesser and Coli , whose restless spirits constantly relive their own unheralded 1927 crash in a nearby pond . The girl decides to help the pair move on to the afterlife by assisting them in rebuilding their aircraft and completing their flight so they may be released and , by doing so , works through her own emotional distress over her father 's test flight death . And in the opening montage of the 2005 film *Sahara* , based on Cussler 's novel , a French newspaper article is displayed reporting a fictional story of NUMA finding the aircraft .

As of 2008 , the landing gear is the only confirmed part of the biplane remaining , and is on display

at the Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace (French Air and Space Museum) , in Le Bourget airport in Paris , the location from which L'Oiseau Blanc took off .

= = Operators = =

France

= = Specifications = =

General characteristics

Crew : Two

Length : 9 @. @ 75 m (31 ft 11 in)

Wingspan : 15 m (49 ft in)

Height : 3 @. @ 89 m (12 ft 9 in)

Wing area : 61 @. @ 0 m² (656 ft²)

Empty weight : 1 @, @ 905 kg (4 @, @ 200 lb)

Gross weight : 5 @, @ 000 kg (11 @, @ 000 lb)

Powerplant : 1 × Lorraine @-@ Dietrich W @-@ 12ED , 340 kW (460 hp) each

Performance

Maximum speed : 193 km / h (120 mph)

Cruising speed : 165 km / h (102 mph)

Range : 7 @, @ 000 km (4 @, @ 350 miles)

Endurance : 40 hours

Service ceiling : 7 @, @ 000 m (22 @, @ 965 ft)