



Obscure Objects: “Knight of Death” Airplane Insignia

You can't read anything about French World War I pilot Charles Nungesser that doesn't include descriptors such as flamboyant, audacious, undisciplined, rakish, and insubordinate. You'll also find ace, fearless, bold, tenacious, and brave. He was the very definition of a dichotomy.

Nungesser was born in Paris, France, in 1892. As a child he excelled in competitive sports and dreamed of being a race car driver or pilot. In his mid-teens, he quit school and set out for South America, where he had an uncle. There, both his childhood dreams were fulfilled: he became a race car driver and learned to fly.

His first flying experience foreshadowed the daring-do he would later become known for. When a Blériot flown by a fellow Frenchman landed at an airfield where Nungesser happened to be, he asked the pilot if he could take the plane up, despite the fact that he had never been behind the controls of an airplane. Outraged when the pilot scoffed at such a ludicrous idea, Nungesser jumped into the cockpit and took off. Amazingly, he managed to fly the plane without mishap, except for a rough landing. That day, his flying career was launched, and his skills as a pilot grew rapidly.

But World War I interrupted his South American sojourn. Being a loyal Frenchman, he immediately returned to France to enlist when the war broke out in 1914. He joined the 2nd Hussars, a cavalry regiment, where he quickly earned a medal when he and others killed the occupants of a German patrol car and commandeered the vehicle. Nungesser leveraged the good will generated by the situation by applying for a transfer to the Flying Service and his request was granted.



Informal portrait of Charles Nungesser, French World War I ace, standing beside his Nieuport 23. Nungesser's personal insignia can be seen on the rear fuselage at lower right: a skull and crossbones beneath a coffin with candlesticks at each side, on a black heart with white border.

Nungesser reported to Escadrille (Squadron) V.B.106 in April 1915. Flying a Voisin 3LAS, he shot down his first plane, a German Albatros, in July 1915. Unfortunately, he was assigned to non-flying duties at the time, and had taken up the brand-new Voisin without permission, resulting in eight days house arrest for insubordination. Despite the disciplinary action, Nungesser was decorated with the Croix de Guerre and sent to train in Nieuport fighters.

Nungesser painted a menacing insignia on his airplanes to taunt his German opponents. It began as a simple skull and crossbones, but evolved in a more elaborate design: a large heart with black and white outline, a skull with a bullet hole under a coffin, a pair of crossed bones, and two funeral candlesticks. He called himself the "Knight of Death."



The Knight of Death insignia in the Museum's collection.

The Museum has in its collection an original Knight of Death aircraft insignia, reportedly cut from one of his Nieuport aircraft. It measures 55 x 71 cm (22 x 28 in.) and is painted on a camouflage pattern of various shades of green and tan. It was donated to the Museum by Mary E. "Mother" Tusch, an avid aviation memorabilia collector, and is not on display.

Nungesser joined Escadrille No. 65 in November 1915, and his list of victories grew rapidly along with the number of awards he received, wounds he obtained in the air, and injuries he suffered in crashes. Rarely did he wait until his injuries were healed before jumping back into the fray. Many times he was hurt so seriously it appeared his flying days were over, but his firm resolve to keep fighting was a potent antidote. Eventually he was so infirm he had to be carried to and from his airplane. According to the encyclopedia worldheritage.org, a report of his injuries at the end of the war read:

"Skull fracture, brain concussion, internal injuries (multiple), five fractures of the upper jaw, two fractures of lower jaw, piece of anti-aircraft shrapnel imbedded [sic] in right arm, dislocation of knees (left and right), re-dislocation of left knee, bullet wound in mouth, bullet wound in ear, atrophy of tendons in left leg, atrophy of muscles in calf, dislocated clavicle, dislocated wrist, dislocated right ankle, loss of teeth, contusions too numerous to mention."

In May 1917 an incident occurred in which his insignia possibly caused a British pilot to mistake Nungesser for a German. The pilot attacked, and Nungesser, thinking it must be a German in a captured British aircraft, fought back, downing the plane, much to his regret once he discovered

the pilot was an ally. This led him to paint red, white, and blue bands on his wings to make it easier for his airplane to be recognized.

Apart from his flying exploits, Nungesser was known for his flamboyant personality and love for the proverbial wine, woman, and song, not to mention fast cars. He was very popular in France and the newspapers publicized his exploits. He spent most of his off-hours out on the town in Paris, and rumor has it he would occasionally turn up for morning flying duty in the tuxedo he had worn the night before, sometimes with a woman on his arm. He was a stereotypical romanticized World War I flying ace.



Portrait of Charles Nungesser in uniform with decorations, dated January 28, 1924. Throughout his career he received dozens of military decorations from France, Belgium, Montenegro, the United States, Portugal, Russia, and Serbia. Photo: Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM A-41913).

In August 1917, Nungesser was injured so seriously that the war was over for him. After 45 total aerial victories (some sources claim 43), Charles Nungesser ended up France's third leading ace. Had he not been in the hospital so often and forced to quit flying before the war's end, who knows how much longer his list of victories might have become.

After the war, Nungesser tried a variety of enterprises, including flying stunt planes for Hollywood movies. In addition, he portrayed himself in a silent film, [The Sky Raider](#), in 1925.

Nungesser's death was as grandiose as his life. He was lost during an attempt in May 1927 to be the first to fly nonstop across the Atlantic. He and his navigator, François Coli, departed from Paris a week before Charles Lindbergh's record-setting flight and after passing Le Havre were never heard from again.

Kathleen Hanser is a writer-editor in the Office of Communications at the National Air and Space Museum.