

## The Irreverent

# Ace

If someone wanted to make a film about Frenchman Charles Nungesser's life, there would be no need for embellishment. Kathleen Hanser details just some of his daring exploits

**Right**  
An informal study of Nungesser standing beside a Nieuport adorned with his 'Knight of Death' motif in late 1917. The same emblem was painted on the side of the Levasseur PL.8 when it disappeared in 1927. SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

**Centre right**  
Croix de Guerre medal. ISTOCK

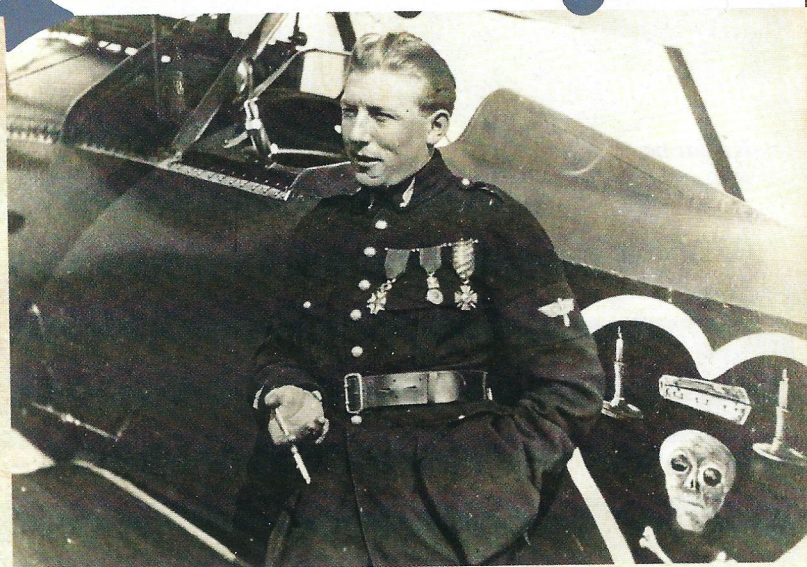
**Far right**  
Adorned with numerous military decorations including the Légion d'honneur, Croix de guerre and US Distinguished Service Cross, Charles Nungesser gained a boisterous reputation – both on and off the battlefield. MALCOLM V LOWE COLLECTION

Taunting German opponents with menacing markings on his aircraft, the handsome, blue-eyed Great War aviator Charles Nungesser flew under the sinister moniker 'Knight of Death'. Gaining a reputation for being fearless, he also frequently appeared with beautiful women on his arm day and night. Despite being grounded repeatedly due to insubordination and sustaining horrifying injuries, he went on to become the third highest-ranking French ace of the war. He continued his remarkable life by becoming a Hollywood stunt pilot, and later disappeared while attempting to become the first to fly the Atlantic non-stop. The makings of a great movie...

### Bold move

Charles Eugène Jules Marie Nungesser was born in Paris on March 15, 1892. Competitive from an early age, as a youth he excelled in cycling, football, swimming, running and boxing while enjoying a keen passion for mechanics. During his teenage years, his aspirations turned to the more stimulating and challenging pursuits of motor racing and flying.

After quitting school and moving to South America to find his elusive uncle, Nungesser began working as a



technician at an automotive assembly factory. He realised his dream of becoming a racing driver when he was just 17 and quickly gained notoriety and prowess as a 'speed demon'.

One day while at an airfield in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he came across another Frenchman who had just landed in a Blériot aircraft. Allegedly, Nungesser asked the pilot if he could take control – despite having no flying training. When the aviator sneered at such a ridiculous notion, an angry Nungesser simply jumped into the aeroplane and took off. To everyone's astonishment, he managed to make a rough landing after a short time in the air.

This impulsive, dangerous, yet successful act earned him a reputation for boldness and piloting aptitude. Taking lessons, he soon became a skilful 'stick-and-rudder' exponent and became notorious for getting airborne in any kind of weather. But his South American flying came to a halt when France declared war on August 3, 1914. Nungesser immediately sailed home to enlist and joined a French cavalry

unit – the 2e Régiment de Hussards – as a private.

Nungesser's pattern of excellence in all things continued throughout his initial combat experiences during World War One. Within the first month, he led a patrol that ended with them commandeering an enemy vehicle, killing its occupants and capturing important documents. They sped back to safety while being shot at by both sides. Nungesser later commented that the Germans had fired at their French uniforms and the French at the German automobile; ironically the car was a French-made Mors. This earned him France's third highest award, the Médaille Militaire (Military Medal) and the stolen car as a reward.

While in good favour with the army, Nungesser requested a transfer to the Service Aéronautique (Flying Service), which was duly granted. His flight training began on January 22, 1915 at the school of military aviation at Avord in central France, where he gained military pilot's certificate no.703 two months



*Nungesser progressed from the Nieuport to the SPAD XIII later in World War One. He flew this example, also bedecked with his personal artwork, in September 1918. ANDY HAY - FLYING ART*



Voisin, which had just arrived at the airfield and hadn't officially entered service. At the time, he was the standby duty pilot, but that didn't stop him from rounding up the duty gunner and taking the machine without permission. As they flew around looking for 'trade', the air-raid siren screeched at his home airfield as five enemy machines approached the area. As the duty pilot, Nungesser should have been ready to get airborne, but of course he was nowhere to be found – and neither was the new Voisin. Soon after searching for Nungesser, his superiors were informed that a German Albatros had been shot down. Despite this achievement, Nungesser was arrested on landing and jailed for eight days – the first of many disciplinary actions the pilot would face during the war. Notwithstanding his house arrest, he was decorated with the Croix de Guerre (War Cross) – a newly

later. After graduating he reported to Escadrille VB 106 at Saint-Pol on the country's northern coast on April 8. There he began flying reconnaissance missions, often returning with bullet holes covering his aircraft – something that was to become a typical occurrence during Nungesser's military career.

### Rule breaker

His first 'kill' came in July 1915 while flying a Voisin III, a two-seat, single-engined, pusher-configured bomber and observation type. Operating out of an airfield near Nancy in the east of the country, the adventurous Nungesser was lured into the air by the brand-new



created medal awarded to allied soldiers and airmen for valour in combat – and sent to fly fighters. By the time he left the unit in November 1915 Nungesser had flown 53 combat missions.

For his next move, the hot-headed pilot reported to Escadrille N 65, based near Nancy, where he would fly the French-designed Nieuport 17. Shortly after his arrival he painted a demonic motif on his aluminium-doped machine N1895, featuring a large black heart with a bullet-holed skull under a coffin, along with crossbones and two candles. This symbol, and his nickname, perfectly characterised the flamboyant aviator.

With Nungesser's 'kill' tally and awards mounting, he became an ace in April 1916. However, at the same time he was suffering hospital stays and disciplinary actions, while earning a boisterous reputation for his feats (both on and off the battlefield) almost as quickly. Reinforcing his status, Nungesser often drove to Paris for its nightlife and female companionship. It is known he would often arrive for duty the next morning still wearing the tuxedo from his antics the previous evening – normally with a woman on his arm.

Among the numerous honours he received were the Légion d'honneur (Legion of Honour – the highest French order of merit), British Military Cross and the American Distinguished Service Cross, along with decorations from Belgium, Montenegro, Portugal, Russia and Serbia. By the end of the war in November 1918, Nungesser's official victory tally sat at 43 (although some say 45), standing him in place behind fellow Frenchmen René Fonck with 75 and Georges Guynemer's 53.

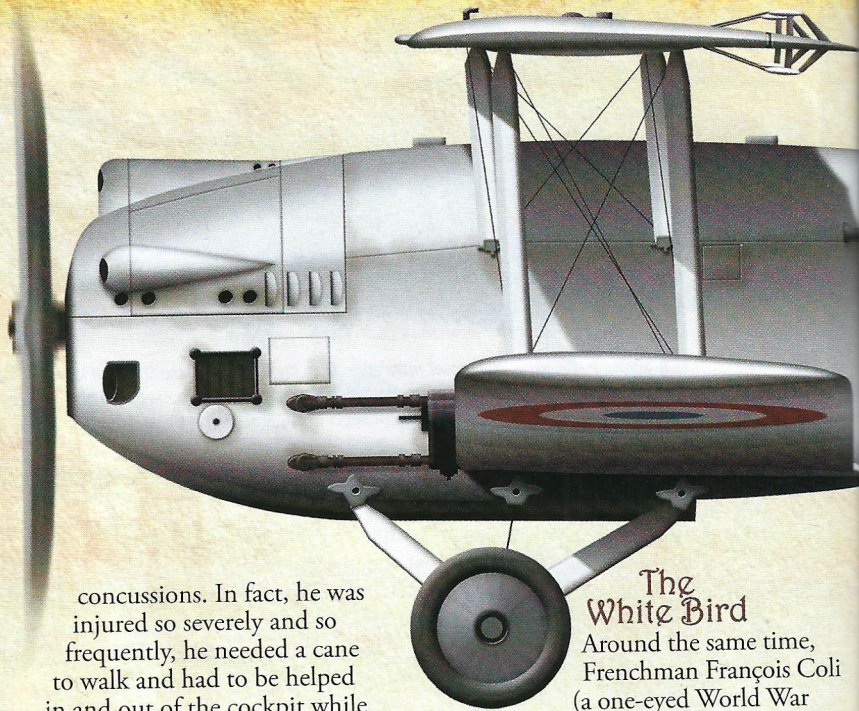
### Hollywood's iron man

The list of injuries he endured during his service was shocking – a broken skull, multiple internal trauma, five fractures of the upper jaw alone and two of the lower jaw. He had a piece of anti-aircraft shrapnel embedded in his right arm, dislocated both knees and re-dislocated his left knee. As if this wasn't enough, he also suffered several bullet wounds, including to his mouth and ear, weakened tendons in his left calf, a dislocated clavicle, wrist and ankle, the loss of several teeth as well as regular

concussions. In fact, he was injured so severely and so frequently, he needed a cane to walk and had to be helped in and out of the cockpit while still recovering – a testament to Nungesser's grit and determination. On many occasions he had to be carried to and from his aeroplane – or another wreck.

Following the war, Nungesser attempted various enterprises, among them a flying school and aircraft sales – but these ventures failed. Ever the thrill-seeker, he travelled to the US and joined the barnstorming craze sweeping across the country before turning his attention to aviation stunt work in Hollywood. He can be seen flying his Hanriot HD-1, adorned with the Knight of Death emblem, in Howard Hawks' famous 1930 motion picture *The Dawn Patrol*, renowned for its accurate dogfighting sequences. In addition, the pilot portrayed a character resembling himself in the 1925 silent film, *The Sky Raider*, which used the tagline "The World's Greatest Ace Plays the Ace of Hearts" on its posters.

Meanwhile, he became interested in the US\$25,000 prize being offered by New York hotel owner Raymond Orteig to be the first person to complete a non-stop flight between New York and Paris. Named the Orteig Prize, it was eventually won by Charles Lindbergh eight years later, by which time Nungesser was presumed dead. Wanting to compete, the intrepid flyer returned to France and began formulating a plan that involved flying from east to west – against the prevailing winds.



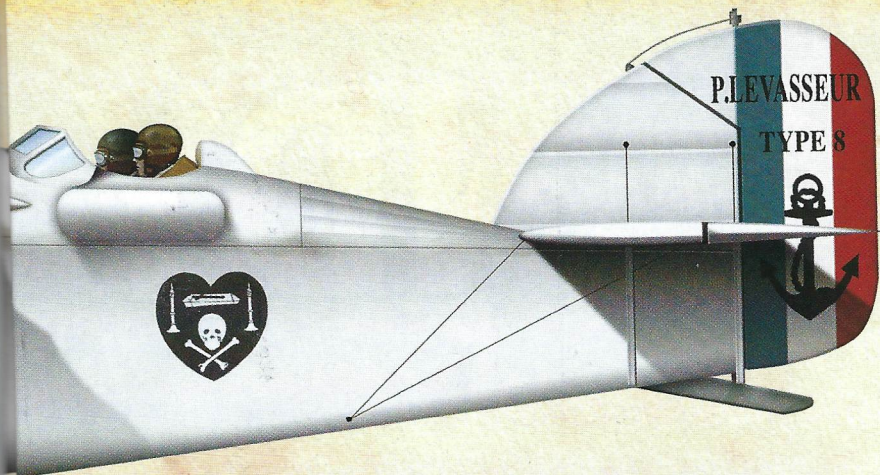
### The White Bird

Around the same time, Frenchman François Coli (a one-eyed World War

One ace) was preparing to attempt a similar flight from Paris with wartime cohort Paul Tarascon. Besides his flying acumen, Coli had been a sea captain for 14 years and was skilled in astronavigation. However, after their aircraft was destroyed and Tarascon was seriously injured in late 1926, fellow Légion d'honneur recipient Coli teamed up with Nungesser.

The two worked closely with the Levasseur firm to build a suitable aeroplane for the record-breaking flight. Based on its existing PL.4 – a three-seat aircraft carrier-based reconnaissance biplane – the new aircraft was designated the PL.8. Work was carried out in earnest by the company, with the machine gaining a widened open cockpit area to allow the pilots to sit side-by-side, as well as an increased wingspan. A reinforced, watertight, boat-shaped under-fuselage section was added to facilitate the planned water landing in front of New York's Statue of Liberty. The undercarriage was modified so it could be jettisoned immediately after take-off to eliminate its associated weight and drag. Two additional fuel tanks increased the total capacity to 879 imp gal (4,000 lit), for an aerial endurance of 42 hours. Powered by a 450hp Lorraine-Dietrich W-12ED 'broad arrow' engine, the aeroplane also eschewed a radio to avoid excess weight. Painted white with French tricolour markings and Nungesser's Knight of Death emblem as a good luck charm, the PL.8 was christened 'l'Oiseau Blanc' (White Bird).

Right  
The Levasseur  
PL.8 Nungesser  
and Coli used for  
their transatlantic  
crossing attempt.  
ANDY HAY – FLYING ART



**"The *White Bird* was last spotted off the Irish coast as it started out across the North Atlantic. After that, Nungesser and Coli were never seen again"**



### Luck runs out

At 0517hrs on May 8, 1927 Nungesser managed to get the 11,000lb (5,000kg) aircraft off the ground from Paris Le Bourget Airport in front of a large crowd of well-wishers and reporters. Heading

towards the northern French coastal town of Étretat, plans called for the intrepid pair to cross the English Channel and take the great circle route – England to Ireland and across the Atlantic before heading south over Newfoundland in Nova



**Above** Charles Nungesser, in portrait sometime after his World War One exploits. Despite being grounded frequently due to rebelliousness and sustaining horrific injuries, he went on to record 43 victories. MALCOLM V LOWE COLLECTION

**Left** Posing with the so-called 'l'Oiseau Blanc' PL.8 on May 8, 1927 Charles Nungesser (left) and François Coli vanished without a trace soon after. SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

Scotia and on to New York. The *White Bird* was last spotted off the Irish coast as it started out across the North Atlantic. After that, Nungesser and Coli were never seen again.

Despite much research over the years, no one has determined what happened to the PL.8 or its adventurous pilots. Despite statements from several people in Canada and the US State of Maine claiming they saw or heard it overhead on May 9, it was first believed to have crashed into the ocean during a storm. During the 1980s, several investigations led many to believe *White Bird* had in fact reached the eastern seaboard, although no concrete proof was found. Like most unknowns, conspiracy theories surround the fate of the aeroplane, including claims it was shot down by Prohibition-era rum runners on the rum boat *Amistad*. Even more far-fetched was the belief that the two pilots were in fact alive and had taken up residence with Canadian natives.

Their disappearance remains one of the greatest mysteries in the history of aviation. As Lindbergh said in his book, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, the pair had: "vanished like midnight ghosts". Having managed to survive everything the Great War had thrown at him, Nungesser's ambition cost him dearly. ●