

German–American Friendship: Flight of *Die Drei Luftmusketiere* and their Visit to St. Louis

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Introduction

The Wright Brothers made the first powered, controlled flight of a heavier-than-air craft in 1903, touching-off an extraordinary expansion of aeronautical research and development work that continues to this day. Regular airmail service had already been established in several countries by the next decade and biplanes had become effective military instruments in the First World War (1914–1918). The period after the War experienced an even greater boom, as the airplane became an increasingly visible part of the socio-economic fabric of the industrialized world. Numbers of aircraft manufacturers were multiplying and there were growing peacetime efforts for advancing aviation science and engineering, as well as a fledgling commercial air travel industry. But, what captured the general public's attention in the 1920s were the air races, barnstorming, and record-breaking attempts for feats of speed, altitude, distance, navigation, and endurance. And among all the daring knights of the sky, the most famous was undoubtedly Charles Lindbergh, the *Lone Eagle*, who in May 1927 made the first non-stop, trans-Atlantic flight from New York City to Paris. Flying solo in the *Spirit of St. Louis*, he made the west-to-east trip in roughly 34 hours, achieving instant stardom and a place in the history books.

Around this same time, there were also serious attempts at a non-stop east-to-west flight, which was considerably more difficult because of unfavorable weather patterns and adverse air currents. Lindbergh himself believed that such a flight was not possible at that time, given the current state of aeronautical technology [1], and the statistics of the day certainly supported his opinion. At least 7 known east-to-west attempts by experienced aviators* had already been made, most ending in tragedy. The French team of Captains Charles Nungesser (Fig. 1a) and Francois Coli, flying a Levasseur PL8 biplane, disappeared over the north Atlantic, never to be seen nor heard from again. The same fates had also befallen two British teams, one consisting of Princess Anne of Löwenstein–Wertheim–Freudenberg (Lady Anne Savile, Fig. 1b), who financed an attempt in a Fokker Trimotor, and her two pilots Lieutenant Leslie Hamilton and Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Minchin. The other British team was comprised of Lady Elsie Mackay, who financed her own attempt in a Stinson Detrouiter, and her pilot Captain Walter Hinchliffe. Like the others, they disappeared over the Atlantic, never to be seen again. Aeronautical engineers and manufacturers were becoming ever more concerned that the advancement of aviation science and the goal of safe, routine air travel for the general public were being increasingly overshadowed by the media-stirred sensationalism of daredevil attempts and dead aviators [2].

Two of these unsuccessful attempts actually set the stage for our story here. One was by the German team of Baron Günther von Hünefeld and Captain Hermann Köhl and the other was by the Anglo-Irish team of Major James Fitzmaurice and Captain Robert McIntosh. Both had to abandon their respective attempts, turning back because of adverse weather and wind conditions, but both teams managed to survive, setting their ships down safely. However, Lindbergh's triumph had stirred incredible resolve across Europe to complete the round-trip circuit with a successful east-to-west flight and this resolve was not going away.



(a) Captain Nungesser



(b) Princess Anne

Figure 1: Charles Nungesser and Princess Anne of Löwenstein–Wertheim–Freudenberg were among the many aviators who were presumed lost at sea after attempting east-to-west air crossings of the Atlantic. (respective photos courtesy of the George Grantham Bain Collection of the US Library of Congress and the National Portrait Gallery, London.)

*Most of the pilots were or had been in various military flying services and most had accumulated high flying-hour tallies in combat during the First World War.

The Bremen and its Historic Flight

Few had more desire and enthusiasm for completing the east-to-west route than Baron von Hünefeld (Fig. 2). Lindbergh had been financed by deep-pocket backers, but Hünefeld was wealthy in his own right, and, following the European model of aristocratic self-sponsorship, decided to personally underwrite his next attempt. In 1927, he had purchased a single-engine W-33 monoplane from Junkers Aircraft and Motor Works in Dessau, christening it the *Bremen*. Unlike most fabric-skinned craft of the day, the W-33 was all metal with cantilever wings, unburdened by the usual struts and braces of conventional airplanes, which dramatically increased aerodynamic drag. It was a somewhat more advanced ship than several that had already been lost on previous attempts.

Captain Köhl was eager to join another mission, and, as an experienced flyer in the Great War and a high-ranking pilot with *Deutsche Luft Hansa*, his skills and flight hours would put him in the pilot's seat. Hünefeld and Köhl discretely busied themselves with shakedown and training flights with the new airplane. In the meantime, the Weimar government of Germany had ordered air controllers to deny take-off permission for any pilots foolishly attempting to cross the Atlantic again. However, the two aviators were already several steps ahead; unbeknownst to Weimar officials, they had visited Ireland (or the Irish Free State, as it was then known) a few months earlier to scout take-off sites, deciding on a military base near Dublin. On March 24, 1928 at Berlin's Tempelhof airfield, Köhl filed what appeared to be a flight plan for another routine training run in the *Bremen*, but it was a ruse and the team took off instead for Ireland [1]. They would launch their flight from there.

The Irish authorities had a sympathetic "hands off" philosophy regarding cross-Atlantic attempts, but there was another reason for the team to choose the Emerald Isle as their jump-off point. Namely, they could recruit Major Fitzmaurice as co-pilot and navigator, picking him up, as it were, on their way across the Atlantic. The next 2 weeks were spent readying for the mission and waiting for favorable weather conditions. At 5:38 am local time on April 12, 1928, the *Bremen* lifted off from Baldonnell Aerodrome outside of Dublin [3]. Their destination was New York, from which Lindbergh had initiated his own historic flight the prior year.

In order to keep their intentions hidden from the authorities, Hünefeld and Köhl had only been able to do limited testing and simulation of flight conditions back in Germany, so there were an uncomfortably large number of variables for which they could only make estimations. All were rooted in a few over-arching themes, namely the weight and aerodynamic loads on the *Bremen* itself, the weather and its effects, and the ability to maintain accurate navigational bearings. Indeed, there had already been a close-call at take-off. With its crammed fuel reserves of more than 2,500 liters of gasoline, calculations suggested a take-off run of 600 yards, i.e. the length of 6 football fields, but the *Bremen* still had not hauled itself aloft at this mark. Instead, it lumbered on for another 300 yards before lifting off, clearing some sheep and a stone wall near the end of the field by only a few feet.

Captain Köhl would later say that he was certain of their success, provided the over-loaded *Bremen* could actually get off the ground. And, indeed, the weather for the first leg of the trip was favorable, but it progressively deteriorated as the flyers continued further west over the Atlantic. First was heavy fog, after which sleet started to pelt the *Bremen*; this went on for several hours. But, the parade of potentially disastrous problems grew even worse. An electrical fault blacked-out the interior, making instrument readings extremely difficult during the night, and there was a potentially fatal oil leak for which Fitzmaurice managed to cobble an impromptu repair. Yet, perhaps the most serious issue was the accumulating error in their navigational heading. The sleet storm certainly took its toll, but Baron Hünefeld would later attribute more of a contribution to magnetic variances in their on-board compass [4]. The *Bremen* flyers had been on the wrong course for quite some time and were now thoroughly lost...over the ocean.

Köhl and Fitzmaurice had been alternating pilot duties, 3 hours on then 3 hours off, while Hünefeld continued to monitor fuel from his aft position and manually pump it from large reserve tanks in the wings and fuselage into the proximal engine tank. As the hours ticked away, concerns mounted about making land, given their dwindling fuel supply. Shoreline was eventually sighted, to their overwhelming relief, but now a new problem became apparent. Mile after mile of snow-covered forest wilderness furnished no discernible clearing in which to actually land the plane. And, of course, they still had no idea where they were at. After wandering about the skies for another 4 hours and nearing the bottom of their fuel tanks, the crew sighted a lighthouse and set the *Bremen* down on what turned out to be a frozen lake on tiny Greenly Island wedged between Labrador and New Foundland in Canada. They had been in the air for more than 34 hours and had flown more than 2100 miles...but they had also just completed the first successful east-to-west non-stop airplane crossing of the Atlantic.



Figure 2: Baron Ehrenfried Günther (Freiherr) von Hünefeld around the time of the historic *Bremen* flight at about age 36. (photo by Nicola Perscheid, 1864–1930.)

The News from Greenly Island

Greenly Island had a population of 14 people at that time and news of the *Bremen* landing had to be carried 12 miles by dog sled from the lighthouse to the nearest wireless station at Point Amour. Hünefeld composed a short message:

Made a safe intermediate landing on Greenly Island, necessitated by lack of fuel and strong head winds encountered on way.

It was relayed by a Canadian Government wireless station at Louisbourg, Nova Scotia (further down the Gulf of St. Lawrence), and was subsequently picked-up by amateur (ham) radio operators, including 18-year-old Stewart Davis in Manchester, New Hampshire, who flashed notice of the safe *Bremen* landing to the waiting world.

News wires exploded. Congratulatory cables streamed into Greenly Island from all corners, including from US President Calvin Coolidge, "my most heartfelt congratulations upon your safe landing after your fine westward flight across the north Atlantic", and from German President Paul von Hindenburg, "hearty congratulations to the bold ocean flyers on their fine success". Evidently, all was well with the Weimar government, now that the *Bremen* expedition had been successful, and any ideas of punishing the foolhardy German flyers were quickly forgotten.



Figure 3: The *Bremen* on Greenly Island after landing on April 13, 1928 (photo from Library and Archives Canada PA-126212). Note the absence of the damaged propeller. Baron von Hünefeld is clearly visible at the extreme right.

Luftmusketiere National Tour and Visit to St. Louis

Hünefeld, Köhl, and Fitzmaurice arrived in New York on April 28, 1928 to a heroes' welcome that they were not entirely prepared for. An estimated 50,000 were on-hand to cheer as their ship docked at Battery Park at the south end of Manhattan. It was the beginning of a grand victory tour that would take them across much of America. Among several events and a parade in New York, the *Luftmusketiere* were personal guests of Mayor Jimmy Walker at Madison Square Garden, sitting ringside for the Sharkey-Delaney fight. From there, it was on to Washington to meet President Coolidge, who, by special act of Congress, conferred the Distinguished Flying Cross upon each man (Fig. 4). They were now members of a supremely select confraternity that included Lindbergh himself, who

However, Hünefeld, Köhl, and Fitzmaurice, who by now were being called *Die Drei Luftmusketiere*, or the "three air musketeers", had larger concerns. The *Bremen* had broken partially through the ice and nosed-over during their landing, heavily damaging both the undercarriage and the propeller (Fig. 3). It would not fly out of Greenly Island in that condition. As the back-and-forth communications between the island and the outside world blossomed into a tidal wave, it became clear that requested replacement parts and fuel would not be able to be delivered immediately. It was increasingly looking like the *Luftmusketiere* would have to leave the island without their plane.

The marooned aviators were on the island for about 2 weeks, trying to effect makeshift repairs on their ship. Even with parts, fuel, and mechanics from the Junkers Company that had arrived by April 23, they were still unsuccessful. The necessary repairs were ultimately too extensive to perform in the field. The *Luftmusketiere* would shortly depart Greenly, reluctantly leaving the stranded *Bremen* behind.

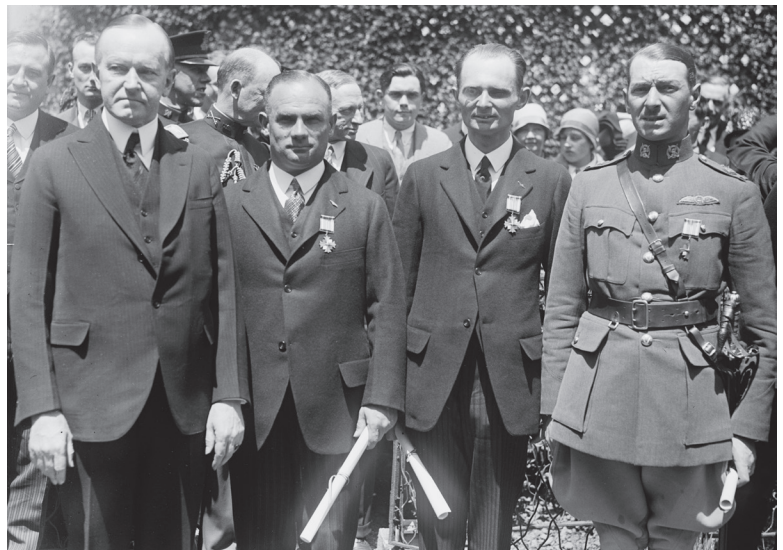


Figure 4: The *Luftmusketiere* were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross at the White House on May 2, 1928. Standing in the White House garden left-to-right are US President Calvin Coolidge, Captain Hermann Köhl, Baron Günther von Hünefeld, and Major James Fitzmaurice. (Image from the Harris and Ewing Collection of the US Library of Congress.)

was able to meet with the *Luftmusketiere* and congratulate them during their Washington stay.

By now, a fairly large press corps had attached itself to the aviators in order to transmit stories back to their respective newspapers to satisfy hungry readers eager to know more about these 3 men and their aeronautical triumph. G. P. Putnam's Sons, a major New York publisher, quickly inked a deal for a *Luftmusketiere* autobiography (Fig. 5), and Baron von Hünefeld would later recount in this book that their tour would take them not only through New York and Washington, but also to Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Detroit, Boston, and several additional cities in Canada [5]. Hünefeld was not especially eager for celebrity status or accolades, but he did enjoy the American tour that the *Luftmusketiere* found themselves on. He had only one request and that was to make sure their tour passed through St. Louis. Hünefeld would explain to reporters that his father had regaled him as a boy with stories of St. Louis, especially of the 1904 World's Fair, and he wanted to be sure to see the city in person [6].

The *Bremen* crew did finally arrive in St. Louis at Lambert Field on May 14, 1928 to the usual fanfare, with about 2,000 people turning out to greet them. A subsequent hop saw them land at the old airmail field at Forest Park, the very site of the 1904 World's Fair that Baron von Hünefeld had fond recollections of hearing about from his father. He was very pleased to set foot on this ground. There was a prepared reception immediately following their landing and an honorary dinner that evening hosted by German Consul Georg Ahrens at the University Club. As with the other cities on their tour, the *Luftmusketiere* would only be in St. Louis for a very brief period, so their social schedule would be packed.

A large municipal parade commenced the next morning, Tuesday May 15, at 9:30 am sharp, starting from the intersection of Lindell and Union and proceeding to City Hall, following the same route as Colonel Lindbergh's parade had taken the prior year. By 1 pm, the flyers had been ushered to 2345 Lafayette Avenue for a groundbreaking ceremony for the new Deutsches Haus, i.e. the German House. This "house" would actually be a \$300,000 temple that would provide a collective home to many of the St. Louis' German–American organizations and for their cultural and social events.** Its enormous size was commensurate with the fact that a large fraction of the St. Louis City population in those days consisted of German–Americans and German immigrants and that the city sported 2 major dailies printed in German, the *Westliche Post* (morning edition) and *Anzeiger des Westens* (evening edition).

During the national tour that the *Luftmusketiere* had now been on for the past 2 weeks, their speeches and conversations repeatedly emphasized friendship and understanding between Germany and the United States, and their addresses at the German House groundbreaking were no exception. Köhl hoped that the new facility would "stand as an emblem of liberty and tolerance", while Hünefeld made a direct reference to the First World War, proclaiming "may all discord be buried in this earth which we break today". This was perhaps a more profound statement than one might first appreciate. As soldiers in opposing armies, Fitzmaurice in one and Hünefeld and Köhl in the other, they had fought against each other on the Western Front 10 years prior. All three had been wounded in action and Köhl had even been shot down twice, had been a POW, and had even

**The \$300,000 cost of the German House translates to about \$5.2 million today. Among various types of events, it would host a good many *Männerchor* singing performances. For more on *Männerchor* in St. Louis, see the prior issue of the *Rundschreiben* [7].



Figure 5: The *Luftmusketiere* jointly recounted their autobiographies and reflections of their historic flight in this book from Putnam's Sons. The cover (left) and title page (right) depict a silhouetted Bremen, showing only the registration number it flew under, D-1167. It was published in both English and German and was dedicated to Floyd Bennett, who had contracted and subsequently died of pneumonia during the evacuation operations from Greenly Island (German first edition: author's collection).

escaped. But these enmities had all melted away long ago in the face of their fellowship toward a common goal. They were now blood brothers of the air and were spreading their philosophy of unity and friendship to whomever came to hear them speak. In the main address to the roughly 2,500 people who were on-hand for the groundbreaking, retired Missouri Congressman Richard Bartholdt repeated their message in somewhat more flowery terms:

My first obeisance is to our guests of honor, the three courageous men who overnight earned world-wide fame by accomplishing what no one else before them has succeeded in doing...In admiring their bravery, we also felicitate them not only upon the success of their daring feat, but also upon the deeper significance of their mission. For they have come to us as friendly messengers of peace and benign carriers of new ties of amity between Germany and the United States.

The world had had enough of the Great War and its peoples were eager to continue on a peaceful path forward into the future. A May 15 article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* proclaimed the *Luftmusketiere* the “godfathers of the German House”.

The final event of the afternoon was a car trip out to August A. Busch’s country estate in southwest St. Louis County. Busch, who was president of Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association and one of the leading German-American industrialists in St. Louis, managed to have the afternoon visit to his place inserted into the *Luftmusketiere* social schedule. A caravan of cars trundled more than 10 miles down rough Gravois Road to the gates of his estate and up the drive to the “Castle” (Fig. 6). Busch reveled in the quiet sanctuary of his estate, which he enjoyed showing to visitors.

That day, the dining room table was set for 22 guests, which, in addition to the *Luftmusketiere*, included Harold Bixby, chair of the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce and one of Lindbergh’s financial backers, Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, German Consul Georg Ahrens, and City of St. Louis Mayor Victor Miller. The group spent a quiet afternoon, which was a welcome respite for the flyers, and the visit concluded around 5 pm, giving everyone time to regroup for a final banquet at the Chase Hotel later that evening. The aviators’ stay in St. Louis concluded the following morning, when they departed for their next stop in Indianapolis. They would eventually arrive back in Europe and by late June were in Berlin, but the days of *Luftmusketiere* camaraderie would soon come to an unfortunate close.

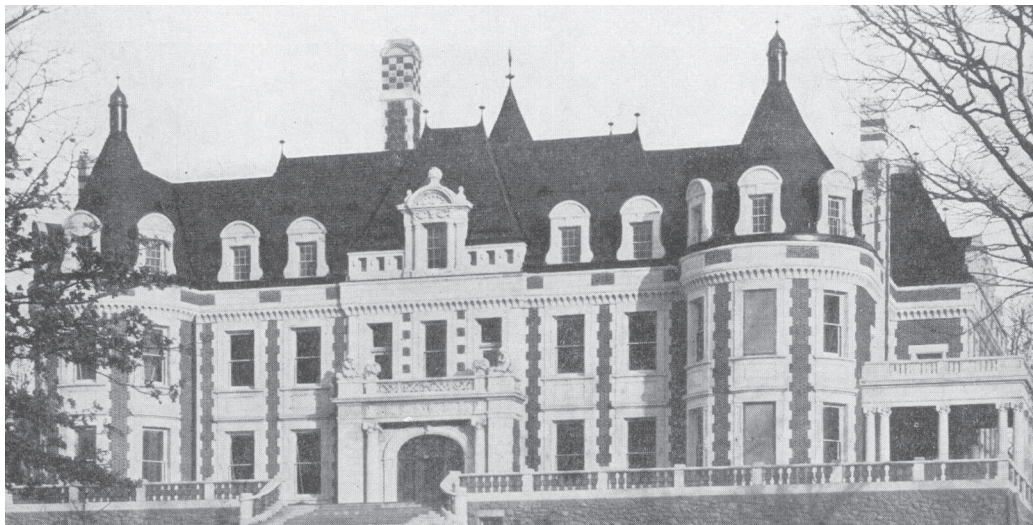


Figure 6: The “Castle” at August A. Busch’s country estate on Gravois Road circa 1913, shortly after it was built. It sits on more than 200 acres of land that had once been part of the much larger White Haven plantation owned by President Ulysses S. Grant’s father-in-law, Colonel Frederick Dent. (Image cropped from an original photo in ref. [8].)

Epilogue

Baron von Hünefeld died less than a year later in February 1929 from complications of stomach cancer. It is unclear whether he was aware of his condition at the time of the *Bremen* flight, but if he was, he certainly did not let on to his comrades or allow it to affect his role in the expedition. Major Fitzmaurice lived much of the 1930s in America, though he would later go back to Ireland, where he died in Dublin in 1965, close to the spot where the *Bremen* had taken flight almost 40 years prior. There is a street named after him in the city of Bremen. Captain Köhl returned to civilian aviation, but would leave *Deutsche Luft Hansa* in 1935 and pass away in 1938, aged 50. The city of Bremen has a street named after him too and the Bundeswehr named an army barracks in Niederstetten in his honor.

Mechanics eventually gave-up on trying to fly the *Bremen* off of Greenly Island and departed. In the meantime, it stood unguarded and by July of 1928 had been heavily looted and stripped by locals. It was later shipped off the island and refurbished and Baron von Hünefeld, who still held its title, offered to donate the plane to the Deutsches Museum [1], which inexplicably declined.

It wound its way through several owners and display locations after Hünefeld's death in 1929, ultimately falling into the hands of the Henry Ford Museum of Dearborn Michigan. It is currently on permanent loan from the Ford Museum to the Bremen International Airport in Germany (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: The refurbished *Bremen* on display at the Bremen Airport in 2007 (photo by Tomas Mellies, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

The east-to-west flight of the *Bremen* was an accomplishment of the first order, on par with the Wright Brothers' work, Lindbergh's Atlantic crossing, Eugene Ely's demonstration of shipboard landings and take-offs (prefiguring the aircraft carrier), and other seminal advancements in the early days of powered flight. The *Luftmusketiere* were, in essence, among the first test pilots of modern times, without whom the aviation sciences would have been unable to proceed. Yet, their feat is largely unknown today, undoubtedly due in part to anti-German sentiments that increased significantly during and after the Second World War and because of changing social views of who and what are considered to be commendable and noteworthy. But, the messages of peace and fellowship from a group of men, who in earlier years had been arrayed against each other by the unavoidable circumstances of war, continue to be as profound today as they were in 1928.

Acknowledgement

There was tremendous news coverage of the *Luftmusketiere* over the several months that bracketed their mission in 1928, many of the reports having been issued by the Associated Press news service. These updates were carried daily by major metropolitan newspapers. To that end, the archives of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* were especially helpful in researching this story.

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