

Commercial activities at *Colombier*
aerodrome

AVIATION
Par *j.-a. lombard*

Air Espace : the light aviation niche

Watchmaking and, to a lesser extent, vineyards have made the Canton of *Neuchâtel* famous abroad. If today we revel in, for example, reviving often fragile hopes, or in keeping rash promises with regards to the word "diversification", it is by remembering that various experiments have already been carried out with varying degrees of success. The aviation industry is a perfect example since it was born in the aftermath of the war in the favorable soil of a region where precision and good workmanship are cultivated. This type of industry had a very important success in Neuchâtel and recently it disappeared, interrupted in full development by an outside force.. Once again, the decision escaped the people of Neuchâtel, and the industrial flagship that was Transair was dismantled down to the last bolt by its new owner, Mr. Roland Frayssinet, who preferred the luxury of Cointrin to the provincial charm of Colombier. Today, hovering over the coastal airfield are the shadows of the hundred or so highly skilled technicians and employees who had given their all to this company that sacrificed its Neuchâtel identity and personality to adapt to its changing needs, without paying enough attention to the risks and the costs of a painful relocation.

The departure of *Transair* certainly contributed to covering with a veil of mourning the coastal airfield where the installations, the vast halls, the deserted workshops are nowadays, the only traces of an activity that was once intense and passionate. However, this does not mean that all aviation trade has disappeared from the canton. There remains a single "jusqu'au boutiste" [diehard], *Mr. Gérard de Chambrier*, founder, leader and sole promoter of the company Air Espace society, seller and purchaser of aircraft.

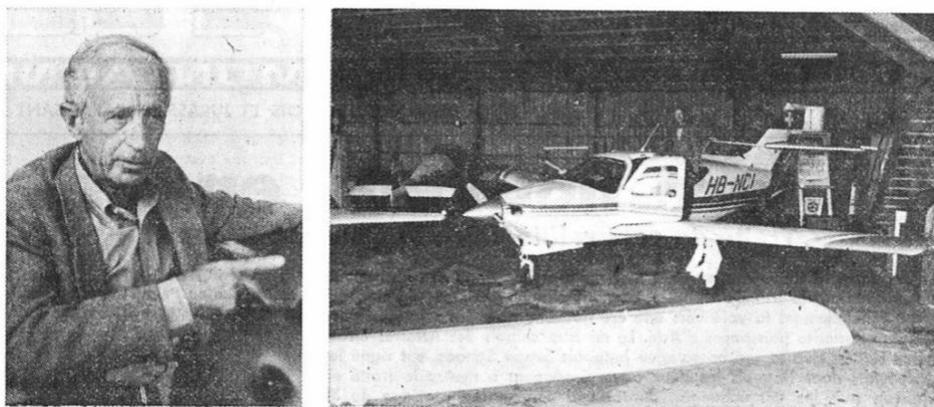
Gérard de Chambrier is the complete aviation specialist. After studying at the *technicum in Bienne*, he attended the former aviation technical school in *Altenrhein*, then the *Swissair* navigation courses. For two decades, from 1939 to 1958, he was a military pilot and, at the last minute, made the transition to a jet (Vampire at that time) due to the shortage of pilots suffered by the army. But since 1946, *Gérard de Chambrier* and his cousin *Jean-Pierre de Chambrier* founded ... *Transair*. A wonderful adventure, the result of the will of his "fans" supported by some private circles that believed in them and that were right to do so. *Transair's* business was not only the aircraft trade (as a *Beechcraft* dealer in particular), but also the maintenance and repair of equipment for civilian as well as military customers. They were Renowned throughout Europe.

Fifteen years ago, the company faced expansion problems.

The aircraft were expensive (a Beech twin-engine Beech was already worth a million francs), the American manufacturers required their dealers to purchase demonstration aircraft, and the necessary investment was constantly increasing due to the evolution of technology — reasons, among others, that obliged *Transair* to seek new liquidity. The solution was found with *Roland Frayssinet*, of the famous shipping company *Frayssinet*, a military pilot, senior officer of the French reserve, an aviation enthusiast who now found a way to create a Swiss branch of his French aeronautical companies. He would allow *Transair* to double its capital, but on condition that he become a majority shareholder. With *Mr. Frayssinet*, this meant becoming Lord and master. We know the rest...

In 1963, Gérard de Chambrier left *Transair*; his cousin does the same a few years later.

With his extensive knowledge of the aviation business, his depth of experience and his determination to do something in Neuchâtel, Gérard de Chambrier immediately, in 1963, founded his own company: Air Espace. At the cost of great sacrifices, he built a hall the following year, where planes and offices were housed.



On the left : Mr. G. de Chambrier, founder and CEO of Air Espace; on the right : a very nice machine, the Rockwell Commander 114 with 260 HP. (Pictures Impar-Bernard)

THE SELECTION : THREE MANUFACTURES

After some stutters in the second-hand market, very uncertain, *Air Espace* began representing *SIA Marchetti*, a famous Italian brand, which halted its civil production half a dozen years ago after being acquired by *Agusta-Bell*.

Since then, *Air Espace* has represented the great American brand *Grumman-American*, whose light aviation division builds splendid machines, of revolutionary design in the field, benefiting from military technology. *Air Espace* distributes three models: the *Trainer*, a two-seater of 100 HP, the *Cheetah*, a four-seater of 150 HP, and the *Tiger*, a four-seater of 180 HP, particularly aerodynamic aircrafts where modern glues have replaced the traditional rivets, improving air penetration and, at the same time, performance. *Grumman* is now the fourth largest manufacturer of light aircraft after the big names in the field: *Piper*, *Cessna* e *Beech*.

In 1973, *Air Espace* also took over the representation of light aircraft built by *North American* subsidiary of *Rockwell International*, a US aeronautics and aerospace giant. *North American* produced the famous *Aerocommander* twin-engine high-wing aircraft. The heir to this tradition is an ultra-modern luxury single-engine, the *Rockwell Commander* — four seats, retractable landing gear, variable pitch propeller, extraordinarily equipped and elegant, available in three versions: 200 hp, 210 hp with turbocharger and 260 hp with or without turbo. A wonderful machine that guarantees its 300 km/h cruising in optimal conditions of comfort and safety.

Recently, *Air Espace* has again obtained the exclusive concession for the sale in Switzerland of *Robin* aircraft, a French manufacturer with production plants in Dijon, where a particular engineer well known to the *Neuchâtelese* works: the *Chaux-de-Fonnier Michel Brandt*, specialist of

aerobatics, member of the Swiss aerobatics team. *Robin* produces the 2000 series, from 108 to 160 HP, a two-seater metal training aircraft that allows the training of pilots up to aerial acrobatics, the 400-180 R "*Remorqueur*", which, as suggested by its name, is intended for towing gliders, its excellent performance (a high rate of climb) are popular with clubs, and the *Aiglon*, a fast and spacious four-seater that just got its certification on September 19th in *Dijon*.

And what about the future? Regarding the development of business aviation and small club aviation, there is a certain optimism. The market is far from saturation, considering that there are 17,000 travel and leisure aircraft in the Common Market compared to the 170,000 aircraft in the United States. *Air Espace* obviously occupies a very modest place in this massive industry, but it sells 12 to 18 aircraft on average. *Mr. de Chambrier* during his career has already sold from 6 to 700.

In *Colombier*, *Air Espace* wants to maintain the pace.

JAL