

# NUNGESSER'S 1895

## *A Speculative Answer to an Old Problem*

*by Mike Pearce*

CHARLES NUNGESSER is one of the most interesting aviation heroes of WWI. Frequently, the young men who fascinate the members of CCI so much, had very short careers, often coming straight from school into the Forces, leading brief, violent and heroic lives for a time and then, all too often, falling in action, or in silly accidents due to their recklessness, soon after the war which had spoiled them for a peaceful life.

Nungesser is not quite in the same category. He led an interesting *Boy's Own Paper* type life before the beginning of the War (although some of his adventures need to be taken with a pinch of salt)<sup>1</sup> and a brief but fascinating career in the cavalry in the early days of hostilities. In spite of everything, he survived the War years – and it was touch and go on many occasions too – and then continued with a number of projects after the end of the conflict. His death in 1927 remains mysterious but is still in the heroic mould.

A brief review of his incredible war-time career in aviation might be appropriate here. Nungesser transferred from the cavalry at the end of 1914, saying that he already knew how to fly. This somewhat dubious statement was not taken entirely at face-value and he went through the usual period of training before being assigned to V.106, stationed at St Pol, on the outskirts of Dunkirk, on the non-specialised duties which all squadrons carried out at this period. With the Voisin squadron, he took part in many bombing raids and reconnaissance missions, in various sections of the Front, besides scoring two aerial victories.

The latter accomplishment gained him a transfer to a fighting role towards the end of the year 1915. He already held the *Médaille Militaire* and was a member of the *Légion d'Honneur*. He wore

*The Black Heart was the only distinguishing feature of this well-known Nieuport, N1490, camouflaged in the dark earth colours introduced during the battle of Verdun, which Nungesser flew in the summer of 1916 when he visited the Escadrille Lafayette in July. It had a cône de pénétration and was armed both with a synchronised Vickers and an overwing Lewis gun.*



*This is N1571, which he flew in Cachy during the late summer of 1916, with a cône, synchronised Vickers and overwing Lewis on a Moreau mounting. The finish is the new standard Aluminium based dope which had now superseded the dark colours. It seems to have the Nieuport 'hollow' style wing and the inversely tapered ailerons characteristic of the type. The engine was probably a Le Rhone 110hp, with the cowling divided horizontally. There appear to be tricolour bands on the top plane.*



the *Croix de Guerre* with two or three bronze *Palmes*, having several citations in orders in his name.

This promising career came down to earth (literally) on 29 January of the New Year. It always seems to me that Nungesser was never quite the pilot he believed himself to be and on that day, flying a Ponnier M1, a nasty vicious little aeroplane, he proved it by losing control just after take-off and spinning into the ground. His horrific injuries included fractures of both legs and his left arm, dislocations of both of his knees, his left shoulder and right wrist, plus internal injuries. The worst damage however, was to his head. He

had a fracture of the skull from the cockpit coaming and the top of the control stick had entered his mouth, fracturing both upper and lower jaws and splitting his palate. In comparison, his bad case of concussion seemed to be an almost minor inconvenience.

The surgeons were obliged to stitch his palate and rebuild his jaws by wiring the fragments of broken bone together with gold wire before addressing the other injuries. He was back at the squadron by 29 March, walking on crutches and cursing the accident which kept him out of the great battle of Verdun!

The many accounts of his life and career show clearly that the remainder of Charles Nungesser's wartime service has been baffling to some writers in the past. He had, in fact, been examined by a Medical Board which, not unnaturally, had offered him a full medical discharge from Military Service, which he refused. Whilst he was formally hospitalised for virtually the remainder of the War, he nevertheless continued to serve, to fly and to fight.

The fact that France permitted this sort of thing is the point which puzzles