

GUNNAR LIHR – A LEGENDARY FINNISH AVIATOR

Carl-Fredrik Geust

*TO AIRLINER K-SALG,
STOCKHOLM.*

Helsinki 14.6.1928 21.48 PM.

Continue immediately from Turku to Helsinki Friday [15.6] stop departure to Spitzbergen same evening if possible buy maps northern sweden, norway and arctic ocean

aero

This telegram hit our calm aviator company like an explosive during our dinner in Hotel Foresta in Lidingö, Stockholm. Spitzbergen! Nobile!

With these words Gunnar Lihr begins the account of his dramatic search and rescue operation of the Italian polar explorer Umberto Nobile, whose airship *Italia* disappeared 25 May 1928 somewhere northeast of Spitsbergen. Lihr's own narrative was printed only as a serial story in the Finnish children's journal *Pieku Matti* in 1934–1935.¹

It should be noted that *Pieku Matti* was published by Lihr's wife, the well-known paediatrician Zaida Eriksson-Lihr, who proudly wrote the introductory words: "Despite numerous requests, only this journal was able to persuade Gunnar Lihr to write down his memories of the dramatic Spitsbergen rescue operation."

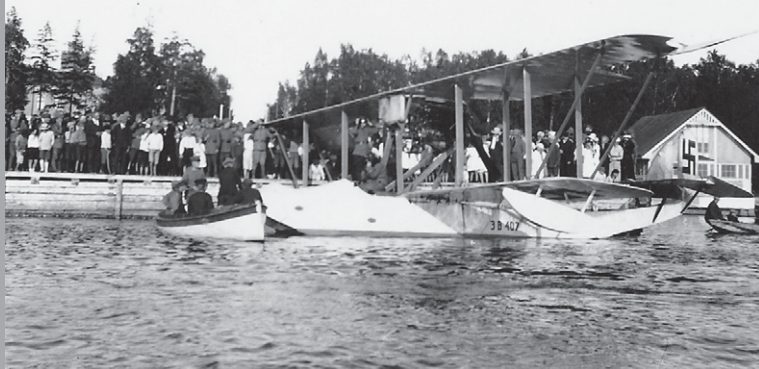
WHO WAS GUNNAR LIHR?

Gunnar Lihr was born 26 July 1897 in Myrskylä (Mörskom), approximately 75 km

northeast of Helsinki, the seventh child of master blacksmith Berndt Lihr. The Lihrs had been blacksmiths for generations, employed at various ironworks in southern Finland. The first Lihr in Finland was one of several Walloon masters invited from Belgium to Finland to set up ironworks in the 17th century.²

The strong handicraft family tradition and his deep technical interest directed Gunnar's choice of profession towards aviation, which in his formative years was the newest technical wonder, and the topic of many exciting books stimulating the boy's interest. In addition, Gunnar had the exceptionally good health and mental qualities required by the demanding profession of aviator. Despite his rather modest formal education (only Myrskylä primary school) he soon fully mastered his chosen profession. In 1920 he volunteered to complete his military service in the newly formed Finnish Air Force, and joined the Flight Battalion (Ilmailupataljoona) in Santahamina, Helsinki. After the one-year mandatory service he was enrolled in the Air Force as non-commissioned officer, and served as the responsible mechanic of a French-made Georges Levy flying boat. Because of recurring technical failings, resulting in fatal accidents, these flying boats were soon nicknamed "flying coffins". The observant young mechanic was nevertheless able to save the life of his crew and also the aircraft by resolute action after an abrupt engine fire whilst airborne. During his service in the Air Force Gunnar Lihr was also accepted for pilot training, thus acquired a unique double education: aircraft pilot as well as flight mechanic.

While still attending the pilot course, Lihr was selected as flight mechanic on the first Finnish flight to the Arctic Ocean, from the 22 to 26 April 1922. The Breguet 14 A 2 reconnaissance aircraft was piloted by Major Aarne Snellman, Commander of



The skilled Gunnar Lihl soon became the responsible mechanic of for the French-made Georges Levy flying boats, or 'flying coffins'. Photo: Bruno Jacobson/ C.F.G.'s collections.

the Flight Battalion. During the intermediate stop in Oulu on the northbound leg Lihl had to dismount the defective engine magneto, which turned out to be irreparable. The spare magneto sent by train to Oulu was unfortunately of a wrong type, but the blacksmith's son skilfully adapted the spare magneto, and Snellman was able to take off to his destination, Petsamo at the Arctic Ocean. Snellman most likely permitted his bright flight mechanic to pilot the aircraft during the long flight legs of the trip.

After passing the military pilot's examination in the spring of 1923, Lihl served as a military flight instructor for the Finnish

Air Force. In June 1924 he was recruited by the Finnish commercial airline Aero Oy and became the first Finnish commercial pilot in the company.³ Thanks to Lihl's double pilot and mechanic education, he was unusually well prepared to handle both technical problems and unserviceable weather conditions, all typical disturbances of early commercial aviation that hampered traffic regularity.

Because of engine malfunctions he made several forced landings at sea or on the ice of the Gulf of Finland on flights from Helsinki to Stockholm or Tallinn, during which he quickly located and repaired



Intermediate stop with a Breguet 14 A 2 at Rovaniemi 26 April 1924 on the return leg from Petsamo. Photo: C.F.G.'s collections.

the fault in the engine or device, and then took off for the route destination. Information about Lühr's successful forced landings was quickly spread amongst Aero's customers by word of mouth, and gradually also via enthusiastic articles in the Scandinavian press. The smart-looking and reliable flight captain soon became a symbol of flight safety during Aero's pre-war expansion period.

Lühr's activity as a commercial pilot started in June 1924 with an introductory course at the Junkers factory in Dessau, Germany, after which he was able to cooperate with Aero's German flight mechanics without difficulty. The pilot and flight mechanic were sitting side by side in the aircraft's open cockpit, and had to communicate with each other seamlessly. Although the main owner and president of the Junkers company, Professor Hugo Junkers, generally required that new pilots should pass a six month course before being allowed to pilot one of 'his' aircraft, Lühr was accepted as a Junkers pilot after only a week in Dessau. He was soon also trusted by Aero to accept and ferry-fly new airliners from the Junkers factory in Germany to Finland. Lühr accumulated a rich experience of the problems and challenges of regular wintertime airline traffic. As heated hangars were seldom available, the blacksmith's son skilfully designed and constructed an engine heater, which facilitated engine start-up in sub-zero temperatures significantly.

THE NOBILE RESCUE OPERATION TO SPITSBERGEN SUMMER 1928

The greatest event of Lühr's career was no doubt the rescue operation of Umberto Nobile northeast of Spitsbergen in the summer of 1928. The renowned Italian Polar researcher and airship designer had undertaken a much discussed research voyage together with the Norwegian national

hero Roald Amundsen in the airship *Norge* in 1927. After this trip, Nobile and Amundsen fell out. Nobile decided to show who was number one in arctic research, and finally eliminate all of the white spots on the globe. Nobile planned every detail of his trip, recruited an international team of scientists (including the Czech physicist František Behounek and the Swedish meteorologist Finn Malmgren, who had already participated in Nobile and Amundsen's joint airship flight in 1927) to join the crew of his airship *Italia* (like *Norge* also designed by Nobile). The PR-minded Nobile actively kept the international press informed about his plans and preparations. Even the Pope solemnly presented Nobile with an oak cross to be erected upon the planned landing of *Italia* at the North Pole. But regardless, Nobile did not enjoy unanimous support in his own country. His main opponent was the Italian Air Force General and Deputy Minister Italo Balbo, who saw the airship enthusiasm backed by Nobile as endangering the development of conventional or "heavier-than-air" long-distance aviation. Nevertheless Nobile's research trip became a well-publicised media story from the start.

On the third research trip from Longyearbyen in Spitsbergen *Italia* was unable to land as planned at the North Pole. The Pope's cross was dropped from the cockpit, and *Italia* struggled to make its way back to base in an icy snowstorm. It never arrived. Search expeditions were immediately organised after the last radio message was received 25 May 1928, but to no effect. Only on 3 June 1928 a radio amateur in Archangelsk, Russia, was able to hear faint SOS-signals, after which interest in organising rescue operations spread internationally. In Finland as well, young and active Air Force officers were keen to send a rescue team to Spitsbergen, but the Finnish Air Force had no suitable aircraft. However,



Gunnar Lihr and Uuno Backman are already in the cockpit of Junkers F.13 Turku, and Lt. Olavi Sarko climbs into the cabin before take-off from Helsinki to Spitsbergen in the early morning of 16 June 1928. Photo: Soile Petersen/ C.F.G.'s collections.

At Spitsbergen no hangars were available. The crew had to keep watch day and night to ensure that Turku would not be crushed by drifting ice. Photo: C.F.G.'s collections.



it was well known that Gunnar Lühr, chief pilot of Aero, had a few weeks earlier ferry-flown the new Junkers F.13 (named *Turku*, registration code *K-SALG*) from Dessau to Finland, the longest non-stop flight by a Finnish pilot until then.

After quick negotiations between the military authorities and Aero, including consultation with Italian diplomats, it was decided that Finland would send in a rescue operation, consisting of Gunnar Lühr as pilot, Lt. Olavi Sarko from the Finnish Air Force as navigator and commanding officer, and Uno Backman also from Aero as flight mechanic.⁴ *Turku*, leased to the Finnish government by Aero, took off from Helsinki 16 June 1928, two days after the telegram sent to Lühr in Stockholm.

Although the Finnish rescue operation was very badly organised and dispatched with such hurry, Lühr was able to complete his task without any incidents. These could easily have been fatal, considering the extremely difficult conditions. The night of 12 to 13 July Lühr and Sarko (Backman was left on ground for this final search flight) were finally able to rescue the Italian alpine Captain Gennaro Sora, who had been searching for the missing airship for several weeks with his dogsled on the endless Arctic ice.⁵

After this successful rescue operation Gunnar Lühr received several decorations and honours in Finland, Italy and Sweden. He also received the rare Golden Junkers pin as recognition of the successful rescue operation and for his long, immaculate personal flight service. In 1933 Lühr was one of the few Finnish aviators who were invited to meet Charles Lindbergh during his intermediate stop in Helsinki, and the following year he was one of the first two Finnish aviators who were awarded the honorary title of flight captain (*lentokapteeni*) by the President of Finland.

AVIATOR AND SPECIALIST PHYSICIAN

Gunnar Lühr found his great love on the Åland Islands – the energetic doctor, Zaida Eriksson, daughter of a merchant captain. Already at school Zaida's motto was "To have the will is to have the skill". She was one of the first female doctors in Finland, and she presented her dissertation on children's diseases in Germany in 1925.⁶

Despite Zaida's excellent academic certificates she repeatedly encountered resistance, even discrimination from male colleagues. Gunnar Lühr, "only" a non-commissioned officer, and a Swedish-speaker, also met with similar prejudice during his career. He was able to handle this due to his professional skill. Despite their completely different formal training, Gunnar and Zaida were well matched and formed couple.

Zaida and Gunnar were married 27 October 1934, and moved into a house which Gunnar himself had constructed in Lauttasaari, in Helsinki.⁷ About a year later, 15 September 1935, their son, Olof Gunnarson was born. In Zaida's journal, *Pieku Matti*, she wrote jokingly about family events, at the same time giving expert advice about childcare and parenting.

Gunnar Lühr was highly appreciated both as a skilful aviator and also as a warm-hearted man. How much he was appreciated within the company was demonstrated by Gunnar Ståhle, president of Aero Oy, asking his chief pilot Gunnar Lühr to be godfather to his son Göran (born 1933; in the 1980s and 1990s he was a popular guide in the Finnish Aviation Museum in Vantaa). Reciprocally Gunnar Ståhle became godfather to Olof Gunnarson Lühr.

GUNNAR LUHR'S LAST FLIGHT

In the afternoon of 1 December 1937 Gunnar Lühr, with Evald Hartikainen as radio operator, undertook a mail flight

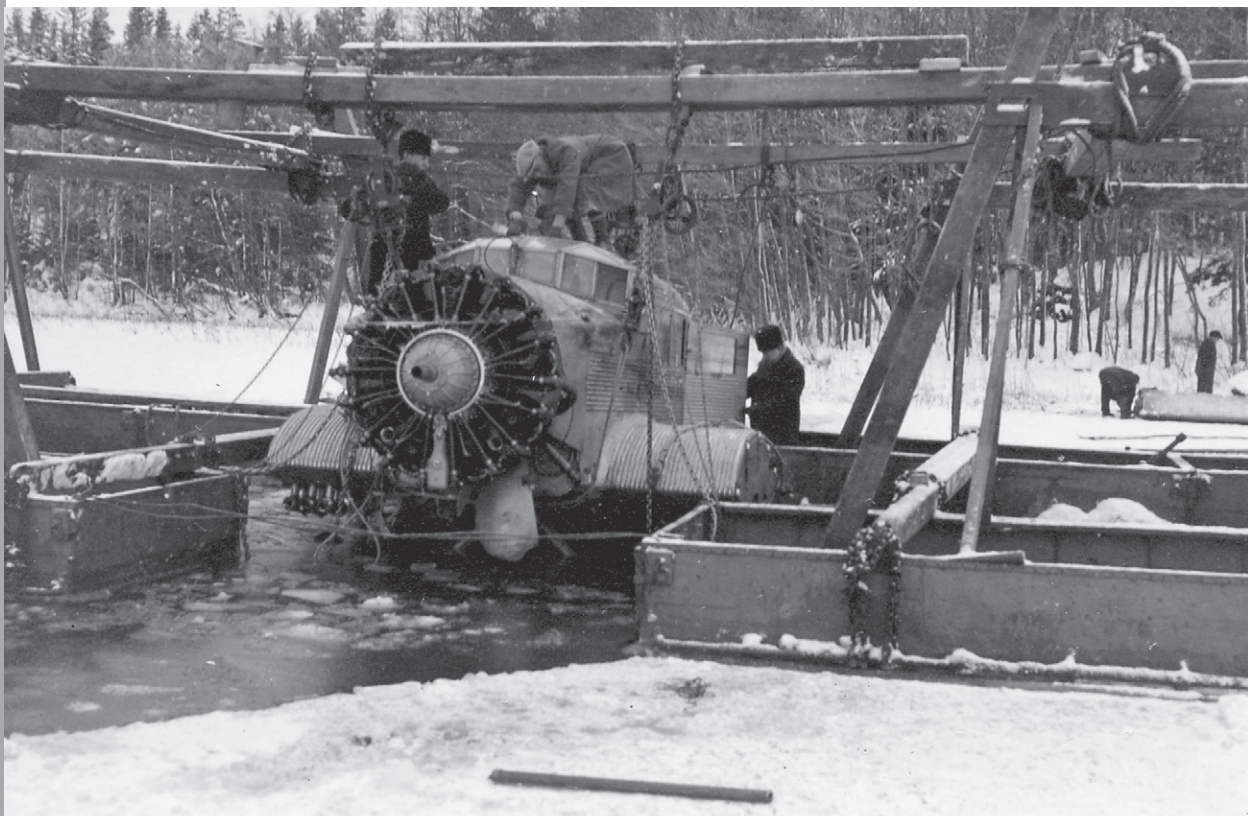
from Helsinki to Stockholm with Junkers W34 *Östergötland* (SE-AEF), on loan from the Swedish ABA-airline company. On the approach to Stockholm the aircraft met a thick snowstorm in an icy, sub-zero temperature. Suddenly the engine malfunctioned because of ice and wet snow accumulated in the carburettor. Lühr made a forced landing in the darkening winter's day – as he had so skilfully done several times before. This time fate did not favour the legendary pilot – the landing spot was not snow-covered land as Lühr presumably may have believed, but instead the thin ice of lake Fjäturen, that could not carry the weight of the aircraft. Before help could arrive the aircraft had sunk to the bottom of the lake and the crew drowned.

Gunnar Lühr's tragic last flight brought boundless sorrow not only to his family,

friends and colleagues in Aero, in particular his superior and friend Gunnar Ståhle, but also to vast communities within Finland and abroad. The romantic marriage of the handsome aviator to the well-known doctor only a few years previously had appealed to the public interest. Now a cruel fate made the popular doctor a widow and her small son fatherless.

The short but glamorous aviation career of Gunnar Lühr, and his tragic ultimate fate, were soon overshadowed by Finland's traumatic wars. As Gunnar Lühr's last flight was made with a Swedish-registered aircraft, the fatal accident is missing from some well-known aviation history reference books and lists of accidents. Thus Lühr, once a Finnish aviation legend, has until recently been virtually forgotten. After my biography of Gunnar Lühr was published in

A few days after the fatal accident, *Östergötland* was recovered from the bottom of the lake – all too late. Photo: Sweden's National Archives/ C.F.G's collections.





The smart-looking flight captain Gunnar Lühr – a symbol of the new means of transport.
Photo: Juha Niemi/ C.F.G's collections.

October 2012, the general interest in his exceptional career has been revived, which is proved by the vast participation in the honorary assembly at Lühr's grave at Hietaniemi cemetery in Helsinki, on the 75th anniversary of his last flight 1 December 2012.

Carl-Fredrik Geust, M.Sc., is an Honorary member of the Finnish Aviation Museum Society. This article is a brief summary of his book *Gunnar Lühr – En finländsk flygaregenda – Suomalainen lentäjälegetenda* (Fontana Media, Helsinki 2012, 288 pages).

¹ *Pikku Matti* was published in parallel editions in Finnish and Swedish. Gunnar Lühr's narrative was printed in Nr. 10-12/1934 – 8/1935.

² For a detailed presentation of the Lühr family tree see *Uppsatser VI*, published by Helsingfors Släktforskare 1984.

³ Aero Oy was founded in November 1923, and as many other European airlines was secretly financed

and controlled by the German Junkers aircraft factory, which provided key personnel, including pilots and mechanics to its clandestine subsidiaries. See Lennart Andersson, Günter Endres, Rob Mulder and Günter Ott: *Junkers F13 – The World's First All-Metal Airliner*, EAM Books 2012.

⁴ The choice of Lt. Sarko as Commander of the Finnish rescue operation was apparently due to his knowledge of Italian language and military manners, as he had studied at the Italian Air Force Academy. However he had no experience of Junkers aircraft, and therefore had some problems getting along with Lühr.

⁵ Only six members of *Italia's* crew of 16, all with various injuries, were located by 20 June 1928 on an ice floe northeast of Spitsbergen. Nobile himself was picked up 24 June by Swedish aviator Einar Lundberg (who crash-landed and became trapped during his next rescue flight), while the rest and Lundberg were rescued 12 July by the Soviet ice-breaker *Krasin*. Three men had left the camp on 30 May heading for Spitsbergen on foot; two of them were rescued by *Krasin*, in very bad condition, while the Swede Finn Malmgren had perished. A total of 23 aircraft, 16 ships and some 1400 men from eight countries participated in the large-scale rescue operation, of which two aircraft with nine crew members crashed.

⁶ Zaida Eriksson-Lühr later became the foremost specialist in allergies in Finland, founded the Allergy Clinic in Helsinki (now part of the Helsinki University Hospital), was Chair of the International Allergy Association for many years, and was awarded the title of professor in 1955.

⁷ In order to honour the memory of Gunnar Lühr, the street where he had lived, formerly *Ryssänkuja*, was renamed as *Lentäjänkuja* (Aviator Lane) in 1938. The name was changed to *Lentokapteeninkuja* (Flight Captain Lane) in 1951.

MAIN SOURCES:

Gunnar Lühr's flight diary, family archive and photographs.

Personal communication with some 25 relatives and aviation historians in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Estonia and Russia.

Archives and museums in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Germany, Italy and Russia.

Published sources include some 100 books and articles. A full list of sources is included on pages 284–287 of Carl-Fredrik Geust's book.