



Switzerland, April 1966 - The Mil Mi-6 Hook CCCP-06174 photographed in Belp/Berne while it transports a heavy tank (W. Studer - HAB)

The Mil Mi-6 Hook in Switzerland

In his book *"Blick zurück - Mein Leben als Flieger im letzten Jahrhundert"* (A look back – My life as pilot in the last century) author Walter Tschumi, former chief pilot of Heliswiss wrote in detail the circumstances in which the Mil Mi-6 arrived in Switzerland.

In the '60s, an attaché of the Russian consulate named Golischkin repeatedly visited the offices of Heliswiss in Bern in order to advertise the employment of Russian helicopters.

In March 1966 Golischkin informed Heliswiss that a helicopter Mil Mi-6 would be transferred in the south of France to be used on behalf of civil defence (Protection civile) as a fire-fighter. At the same time the Russian attaché handed out some brochures that contained some technical information on the helicopter. It was quite evident that the Russian helicopter was too large for the needs of Heliswiss.

However, the board of directors accepted the insistent proposal of Golischkin to test the Mil Mi-6. Therefore Heliswiss prepared a program that included the transport of one of the two new cabins of the Schilthorn cable car (weight 5,000/11,800 kg/lb.), the transport and the positioning of 40 concrete masts in Herisau weighing each 7,000/15,430 kg/lb. and last but not least the transportation and installation of a truss weighing 5,000/11,020 kg/lb. for a new building of the Federal Office of Metrology located in Wabern near Bern.

Heliswiss spent several days to obtain countless permissions from civil and military authorities. It should not be in fact forgotten that those were the years of the so-called Cold War.

By the end, all bureaucratic problems were solved and the Mil Mi-6 obtained the green light and was officially authorised to enter into Swiss territory.

However, the Swiss Army obliged the Russian helicopter crew to follow precise routes in order

to avoid installation protected by "military secrecy".

The Russian helicopter arrived in Bern-Belp from Nice (France) in the early afternoon of April 18, 1966. At the controls of the aircraft registered CCCP-06174 there were pilots Vasily Koloschenko and Yuri Alexandrovich Garnaev, another famous test pilot as well as "great hero of the Soviet Union". With them there were also an engineer, a radiotelephonist, a navigator, a load master, a group of 16 flight assistants, an interpreter, Heliswiss chief-pilot Walter Demuth and finally a member of the Communist party who was always anxious because he probably carried on his shoulders the responsibility of the entire helicopter program.



Belp/BE, April 1966 - Many visitors came to the airport to see from close the giant Russian helicopter (W. Studer - HAB)



Belp/BE, April 1966 - The Mil Mi-6 Hook CCCP-06174 in service with Aeroflot on the tarmac (R. Renggli)

The following day Tschumi flew with the Russian pilots to construction sites for a reconnaissance flight.

Tschumi had the impression that the Russian crew was far from being enthusiastic with its hard tasks but obviously it could not publicly express its discontent.

In the following days men and loads were prepared carefully. Given the enormous downwash created by the rotor (someone described it like an hurricane) it was necessary to secure the construction sites area.

Finally on April 21 everything was ready. The helicopter took off from Belp and flew to the Lauterbrunnen valley. After the short trip it landed in the small rural village of Stechelberg where the cable car cabin of the Schilthorn was ready to be airlifted.

The transport of the cabin weighing 5,000/11,022 kg/lb. was executed without great difficulty.

However while the helicopter was hovering with the heavy cabin suspended to the barycentric hook, the roofs of some barns were partially unroofed. Fortunately no one was injured! In a matter of minutes the load was transported to its destination.

The representative of the Communist Party was greatly relieved but didn't want to go further. *"You have seen how it works, you don't need other demonstrations, it is not necessary, is it?"* he insistently repeated, hoping that someone would listen. However, the crew of the Mi-6 proud of the result continued its challenging program.





Stechelberg/BE, April 1966 - The Mil Mi-6 CCCP-06174 photographed before the transportation of one of the two new Schilthorn's cable car cabins (W. Studer - HAB)



April 1966 - The Mil Mi-6 CCCP-06174 in action in the Swiss Alps (W. Studer - HAB)

After that first aerial transportation one thing was already clear: Heliswiss would have never been able to start the activity with a helicopter of such dimensions. The Russian helicopter was simply too large for the need of Heliswiss customers. Moreover, the helicopter company based in Belp was confronted with many difficulties (lack of financial resources was on the top of the list).

On April 23 Tschumi had the opportunity to fly as "co-pilot" with Koloshenko who had invited him for the flight to Herisau (Canton Appenzell Ausserrhoden). Tschumi was surprised by the huge space in the cabin. *"The impression was to be on board of a large bus"* he wrote in his book.

The helicopter landed in a field and slowly began to sink under its enormous weight. To try to remedy the problem at first were laid in metal grids used in military airports, but even these were too weak. The problem was finally solved with the laying of massive wooden beams.

This was another inconvenient connected with the use of this helicopter.

Apparently the Russian pilots installed the concrete pylons without major problems, although it took a bit longer than expected.





Herisau/AE, April 1966 - The Mil Mi-6 CCCP-06174 set in place a concrete pylon (archive P. Aegerter)

On April 24, the helicopter transported a truss weighing 5,000/11,022 kg/lb. destined to a new building belonging to the Swiss Federal Institute of Metrology situated in Wabern near Bern. The helicopter hovered for 20 minutes above the building, but even this delicate work was completed without major problems, although men working on the roof were described by Tschumi as sailors in the middle of a hurricane.





Bern-Wabern/BE, April 1966 - The Mil Mi-6 CCCP-06174 transports the truss for the new roof (W. Studer - HAB)



The next day the Mil-6 was presented to the Swiss Army. During the presentation, it took-off with an internal payload of 11 tons.

At the end of the test flights the Russians offered the chance to buy the helicopter with a series of spare parts for 7 million Swiss francs.

For the reasons already mentioned Heliswiss kindly refused the offer.

The "Helvetic tour" of the Mil Mi-6 CCCP-06174 ended with a dinner and it seems that the people who were present that evening still remember it! The Russians (but I imagine the Swiss too) celebrated the completion of their challenging job by opening various bottles of vodka.

The Mil Mi-6 left Switzerland two days later after completion of the last customs formalities at the airport of Altenrhein.

A tragic epilogue

The following year, the Mil Mi-6 CCCP-06174 which was in the meantime modified to be employed as a "flying fireman", arrived in France to be employed during the summer season as a firefighter with the Civil Defence.

On 6 August 1967, during a firefighting operation, the helicopter hit the wires of a power line in Ensues-La Redonne, near Marseille and crashed.

In the tragic incident (someone affirm that a sabotage was the cause of the incident) all the nine occupants including pilot Garnaev lost their lives.

The end of the career of the Mil Mi-6

On July 10, 2002 a tragic accident occurred in the Taymyr Peninsula (north of Central Siberia). In that accident which involved aircraft registered RA-21074 on behalf of a geological expedition 21 people lost their lives (5 crew man and 16 passengers).

Consequently the Interstate aviation Committee (IAC), institution that manages and oversees the activities of civil aviation in the Commonwealth of Independent States, consisting of 10 of the 15 republics of the former Soviet Union, decided to revoke the type certificate of the Mil Mi-6 series.

