

## THE CATERPILLAR CLUB STORY

Thousands of airmen, and a few airwomen, number among the most highly treasured souvenirs of their service a tiny Caterpillar Badge. It is their passport to one of the most famous flying clubs in the world - The International Caterpillar Club, all of whose members have saved their lives by parachute.



Dramatic Bail Out from a Lightning Jet

One evening in the early 1920s, Mr. Leslie Irvin, inventor of the modern parachute, sat talking over a drink at McCook Field, (near the site of Wright-Patterson AFB) with two American pilots - the first two airmen ever to save their lives with parachutes of his design. "You know, Leslie", remarked one of the pilots, "we ought to start a club for guys like us. As time goes by more and more fliers all over the world will owe their lives to your 'chutes, it should be quite a thing in years to come .....".

Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Club boasts of tens of thousands of Caterpillar Club members of all nations who have escaped death by jumping with an IRVIN parachute. Files of the American and Canadian members are kept at the Irvin Aerospace plant in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, and a count taken back in 1977 showed a membership of 11,332 men and 12 women. Each one has been given a gold Caterpillar Badge and Membership to the International Caterpillar Club, honouring the pledge, which Leslie Irvin gave to those first two fliers who saved their lives with his parachutes many years ago. (The Caterpillar is symbolic of the silk worm, which lets it descend gently to earth from heights by spinning a silk thread upon which to hang. Parachutes in the early days were made from pure silk.)

By 1939, Caterpillar Club Membership had risen to 4,000 and included fliers from China to Peru and nearly 50 countries in between. Among the famous personalities wearing the treasured badges were America's General Doolittle - who bailed out three times and once telegraphed Leslie Irvin: "Airplane failed. Chute worked." - Germany's ace flier Ernst Udet, Britain's Lord Douglas Hamilton, and a score of test pilots including Alec Henshaw, Geoffery de Havilland and John Cunningham.



Sergeant Henn Bailing out from his Hurricane, 1940

At the outbreak of the Second World War a shortage of gold - and reasons of economy - made it necessary to substitute the gold Caterpillar Badge for a gilt one, but no person who applied, and could substantiate his claim to own one, was disappointed. Into the trays of the filing cabinets went the names of some of the greatest air aces of the war - "Cobber" Kain, Sir Douglas Bader, "Bluey" Truscott, "Pathfinder" Don Bennett and hundreds of others. With them, too, each in its own individual and carefully indexed folder went stories of escape, some so amazing that to read them makes the adventures of James Bond seem like child's play. Some of the fliers were blown bodily out of their aircraft during combat; some floated safely to earth with their parachute canopy ripped by enemy bullets; some jumped at 30,000 feet; others at 200 feet - or less.

More than 13,000 R.A.F. officers and airmen wrote from prisoner-of-war camps to apply for their badges after parachuting from crippled bombers and fighters over enemy territory. Two brothers in Bomber Command bailed out over Germany within twelve months of each other to qualify for membership and one sergeant-pilot wrote on a P.O.W. postcard to thank Leslie Irvin for an easy let down "on behalf of my future - as yet unknown - wife and children." Among

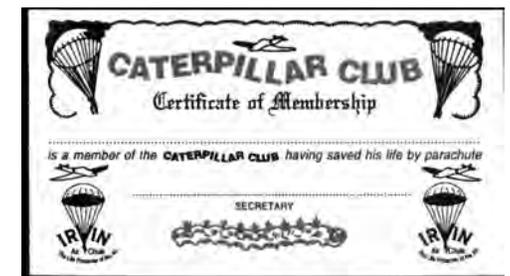
these thousands of R.A.F. men only one airwoman received the coveted Caterpillar badge during the war - Corporal F.H. Poser, who jumped from 600 feet while serving with a meteorological unit in the Middle East. Since then several other women have become fully qualified members of the Club.



A Bail Out from a Stricken Lancaster

The official membership of the Caterpillar Club is only a fraction of the total number who are eligible. It does not include, for example, the thousands of Americans who parachuted safely in the Pacific War, nor, of course, the Luftwaffe airmen, most of who carried an Irvin - designed parachute, made at a factory bought out by the NAZIS in 1936. Altogether it is estimated that at least 100,000 persons - as many as would fill Wembley Stadium or the Rose Bowl - have saved their lives by IRVIN parachutes.

Up to the time of his death on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1966, Leslie Irvin was Honorary Secretary of the Caterpillar Club ever since its inception, but despite the fact that he made more than 300 parachutes jumps he did not become eligible for membership - he never had to jump to save his life.



Membership Card