

# WASSMER 4/21

"WHAT WAS a nice girl like you," I asked, pointing at a map of the Pacific, "doing in a place like this?"

You really have to stop, look and listen when a courageous blonde flies three-quarters of the way around the world to show you an airplane. "What courage," I marveled, "to tackle all those oceans . . ."

"*Tout au contraire*," Mme. Hrisa Pellissier answered, shaking her head vigorously. "An around-the-world trip is only a series of normal cross-countries. This plane you can set down anywhere. The world—like France—is one big landing field, only in some places," she shrugged, "it is not as good as in others."

An unusual woman, and an unusual airplane. Her bird, the Wassmer Super 4/21, built in Issoire, France, is low, long-nosed and graceful. Wassmer is an old name in French aviation, going back to 1905, when its "aircraft foundry" was begun by Benjamin Wassmer. His grandson, M. Jean-Pierre Dumont, is currently president-director general of the plant, some 200 miles from Paris, where both aircraft and gliders are built. Wassmer has an unique claim in France: It is the only air industry not supported by the government.

F-BOYS was the Pellissier Wassmer's designation, and "French Boys" soon became its radio call-sign. The series of "cross-countries" Mme. Pellissier had made before arriving in Denver read like this: Clermont-Ferrand, Athens, Istanbul, Baghdad, Kuwait, Doha, Karachi, Benares, Dacca, Rangoon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Kutchin, Jesselton, Port Princessa, Manila, Okinawa, Tokyo, Kushiro, Shemya, Umnak, Anchorage, Juneau, Vancouver, Seattle, Eugene, Los Angeles.

The purpose behind the junket was three-fold: To advertise Wassmer aircraft, to determine the feasibility of a global air race for perhaps 20 single-engine craft to be sponsored by M. Dumont in 1969, and to assess the problems posed by political red tape—such as Customs and Immigration. Hrisa Pellissier said her only real problems had been with Customs and Immigration at Anchorage, where, she said, she was asked to pay \$1,000. When she said she was "not rich," she was asked: "How much can you pay?" She gave \$100, still not understanding why. She was

amazed, however, at the problem she had obtaining maps in the U.S. In fact, she had to make an extra hop to Eugene because no one in Seattle could find charts for her trip to Los Angeles.

Brown-eyed Hrisa Pellissier, 37, has flown for 21 years, has two children and is the wife of a production engineer with the Citroën auto company. She soloed at 16, then the youngest pilot in France. She has been employed as pilot and chief of sales by Wassmer for many years, and long flights are nothing new to this adventurous exponent of the life *en haut*: Like a feminine St.-Exupéry, she has many times flown from France to Africa, and made two previous "long hauls"—to Rio de Janeiro and to Madagascar.

She exudes charm, common sense and a good Gallic humor. On her around-the-world trip, she carried three passengers at times. With her all the way was 33-year-old motion-picture photographer Bruno Muel, who is producing a TV special of the flight. Not a pilot when the flight began, he was almost a graying veteran after all those "cross-countries" it took to get to Denver. Madame Pellissier made her Denver stop to see the U.S. Wassmer representative and to let me put the Super 4/21 through its paces.

As equipped for the global flight, French Boys costs about \$40,000—approximately a third more than the production airplane. "We don't plan to market the Super 4/21 in the U.S.," she said. "Your Cessna, Piper, Mooney and other firms have us beat in this class." But the Wassmer company is working on two four-place fiberglass models that will sell in America for about \$10,000. In Denver, she met with David W. O'Boyle, U.S. distributor of Wassmer products, who hopes to produce the smaller planes in Denver, as well as marketing Wassmer gliders.

As we walked around her maroon and white plane, I was pleased with its rakish lines. From some angles, it looks like a Cherokee; from others, a Waco Vela or (especially from the rear quarter) a stretched Bellanca. The latter similarity is more than skin deep, because both are basically of wood construction. The Wassmer's wing tips, nose cowl, fairings (including the headliner on the canopy) and a number of other parts are fiberglass. Main wing, fuselage and tail components are wood, covered with fabric





Wooden wings, a woman pilot and 14 hours  
of range—enough to take this rare  
Wassmer all the way around the world.

a pilot report by Ed Mack Miller





and doped. The laminar NACA wing is "clubbed" at the tips like an Aircoupe's, and the tailplane is a slab stabilator.

"But why a wooden airplane?" I asked Dave O'Boyle.

"Wood," he offered, "has many advantages over metal in the air, while metal has all the advantages in the factory." He noted that the Wassmer is stressed for plus 4.4 and minus 2.2 Gs.

The Super 4/21 carries 120 gallons of usable fuel (91-96 oct.), which, at 10.5 gallons an hour (50 percent power), gives about an 11-hour range (1,190 nautical miles). An extra 30-gallon tank was installed in the fuselage of the plane in Tokyo to bring the range up to 14 hours.

The 21 is extremely comfortable and roomy, and the plush Parisian interior (with thick sponge-rubber seats over resilient webbing) feels Mercedes-soft. There is plenty of legroom front and aft. Two in the rear seat makes for luxury, but three could be tight for a flight of any length.

Visibility in front is excellent, in the rear superb; the window line is cut just above navel height, and it's like riding on a carpet. Cockpit layout is good, padding protection the best I've seen yet.

The throttle is a vernier type, and my biggest criticism centered around the fact that both mixture and RPM were identical to the throttle, only painted differently (throttle black, pitch cream, mixture brown). As they were stacked vertically, I had to stop and think—and thinking is what always gets me in trouble. Hrissa said this was being changed on production aircraft.

I also had my problems with French labels on the instruments until I got a little dual from Mme. Pellissier: oil pressure was *huile*, manifold pressure was *pression absolue*, but RPM, fuel flow and cylinder-head temp instruments were in English. The gear switch was a standard Beech-type little wheel, which made the accompanying placard—*train*, with arrows *rentré* and *sorti*—easy to figure.

In any event, as Col. Bill Benedict, the famed desert war scrounger who swiped at least a half dozen ME-109s from German airfields, used to say: "Just figure out how you're going to get rotation, fuel and ignition, and the rest is easy."

Hrissa gave me a complete cockpit checkout (and I'll have to admit that, although Mme. Pellissier's English was good, there was enough of a language "thicket" so that, as they say down South, I didn't understand all I knew about everything). She showed me the full tank setup (two mains, two alternates), explained the hydraulics and how to crank the gear in an emergency.

Starting was no different from any other fuel-injection engine (F-BOYS had a 250-hp Lycoming, and a 235 is also available, providing about 10 mph less speed) and taxiing, with steering through the rudder pedals, was normal. With the canopy closed, the plane was extremely quiet, and handled as gently as one of those Citroëns her husband builds. Braking is symmetric, with the use of a handle in the lower center of the instrument panel, Tri-Pacer style. Cleared for takeoff, I found the nosewheel steering a little sensitive. At almost 55, I could see Hrissa's hand giving me the "unstuck" sign. We got off in about 1,200 feet.

The Super 4/21 handles lightly, and the only unusual thing is that long, long nose out in front. We climbed at 70 knots (80 mph), and I couldn't puzzle out our rate of climb until O'Boyle, in the back, noted that it was in meters per second. It figured out to be better than 1,000 fpm—excellent considering the weight factor of three people, an extra tank (empty), extra radios and a load of luggage.

Heading south past the old Titan gantries in Denver's foothills toward the Air Force Academy, I shoe-stringed the plane, rolling it until Dave cautioned me that Hrissa needed those gyros in good shape for the rest of the trip (from Denver to St. Louis, Washington, New York, Montreal, St. Pierre Island, the Azores, Spain, London and Paris). The Super 4/21 is redlined at 170 knots (195 mph); max gear and flap speed is 135 (144 mph).

Steep turns had my scan working overtime because of all the little differences in the cockpit, the types of instruments and their positions. Then I flew it as slow as possible—with warning horn at all times—below 60 knots (69 mph), full dirty, doing shallow turns either direction. I did stalls clean and with full drag, and was amazed at how honest the plane is. I had never seen one quite like it. At 8,000, it tried to do all it could to keep from stalling, as though it were trying to wiggle free. Finally it went, clean, at 53 knots (61 mph), but immediately pulled its own nose up, settling down into a slow, surfing movement, never falling off on a wing.

The same response characterized the dirty stall, with the break coming at 47 knots (54 mph). Hrissa took it when it was undulating and threw the primary controls all over the cockpit, but nothing happened—no snaps, spins or Lomcevaks . . . just like riding a gentle wave.

Then she pulled the power off and—hands and feet off—socked it back on. The plane pulled out smoothly, straight ahead. No torque, no nothing. She

pulled the power off, the nose slowly sank, all without touching the controls.

"Ze perfect student plane," she said. I was inclined to agree, because power seemed only to give performance but had little effect on the pitch, roll or yaw references. The lack of torque effect appears to be the result of a happy marriage between wing and tail design, and the offset centerline or "cant" of the engine.

I cleaned it up and set cruise for the Air Force Academy and Colorado Springs, showing Hrissa Pikes Peak and the Black Forest gliderport. At 75 percent power, 8,520 feet, we cruised out at 157 knots (180 mph).

Then we headed north for a full-stop at the new Arapahoe County Airport, a satellite of Stapleton.

You hold 100 knots on downwind, 90 on base and 80 on approach, she said. The approach is so stable that you could make it, as the French say, "*les bras croisés*"—with arms folded.

The airplane squats on very nicely, ground effect cushioning the big wing. The gear is short, but for tail protection there is a four-leaf steel tail skid.

Off Arapahoe, we got onto Denver approach control (a querulous "Say Again . . . French Boys?") for a runway 26 ILS, which worked out nicely. On this landing, impressed as I was by the Wassmer's stability, I asked Hrissa if I could try landing it "hands-off."

"But, of course," she said, and I went on to blow it good by putting my hands in my lap before I had enough nose-up trim in it. We both grabbed as the ground effect that I was planning on wasn't there (is it ever where you look for it?) Anyway, we made a three-point landing: Left wheel . . . right wheel . . . nosewheel.

As we taxied in, I mentally ran the "tote board" on the Super 4/21. I wasn't too sure about that wooden construction, but I sure liked its long legs as far as range was concerned. Entry and exit were graded good—as O'Boyle said, "like climbing into or out of a motorboat." The similarity of throttle, mixture and pitch knobs was on the debit side, but the decor, the roominess, the panel layout and instrument lighting (eyebrow) were good. Ventilation and noise level drew superior marks, as did low-speed handling characteristics. A very nice airplane.

We parked and Hrissa was immediately busy with fueling and flight-planning for the next leg—to St. Louis. After many a bon voyage to a gallant lady, O'Boyle and I saw her off—with further wishes for a really wild jet stream on the tail of a Godsped trip across that big Atlantic river. †