



IRVIN-GQ Ltd (AFPSU)
Blackhorse Road
Letchworth Garden City,
Herts SG6 1HB
UK

Tel: +44 (0) 1462 480 433
Fax: +44 (0) 1462 482 338
www.irvingq.co.uk

CATERPILLAR CLUB

A BRIEF HISTORY:

This unique and exclusive club was formed in 1922 by Leslie L Irvin and its membership is limited to those people, no matter what nationality, race, creed or sex, whose lives have been saved in an emergency by an IRVIN designed or manufactured parachute. The name 'CATERPILLAR' was chosen by Leslie Irvin himself in conjunction with Lieutenants Harris and Tyndall of the USAAC, who were in fact the first two people to owe their lives to an Irvin parachute. There were two reasons for the choice of the club's name; the silken threads from which parachutes of the time were woven were produced by the caterpillar, and also the caterpillar lets itself down to earth by a silken thread it has spun. These facts also gave the club its slogan 'Life depends on a silken thread'. Each member, on being accepted into the club, is presented with a membership certificate, and also a gold pin in the shape of a caterpillar on the back of which is engraved the name and rank of the member.

In the first year, there were just two members, Harris and Tyndall, mentioned above, but by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the total membership was approximately 4000. The UK roll has now grown to a staggering 32,041 and over 100,000 worldwide. Obviously a large proportion of this total represents Service personnel who have been forced to bale out over enemy territory only to become captured, and the stack of Prisoner of War Cards that arrived every day during the Second World War was between 100 and 150. An individual file for most members is maintained, and some of the contents on the back of these Prisoner of War Cards make interesting reading.

Typical examples are:-

'Dear Sir, will you please enrol me as a Member of the Caterpillar Club. I baled out over Holland on August 15th from a blazing kite and made a wizard landing'.

'God bless you Brother Leslie on behalf of my wife and children, as yet unknown'.

'Dear Leslie, I'd like to thank you for the sweetest moments in all my life, when my parachute opened and I realised I was not going to die. Your 'chutes are so good I am going to name my son (when I have one) Irvin as it was due to one in particular that I am alive enough to woo, marry and get me a son'.

Many now famous names appear on the Membership List such as Tom Campbell Black, Geoffrey De Havilland, John Cunningham of Comet fame, Wing Commander Douglas Bader and Jimmy Doolittle, who saved his life by an Irvin parachute three times. The list goes on and on, and obviously it is not possible to mention all the names in this short space. However, below are just a few extracts from various books written on Caterpillar Club Members' escapes.

Colonel Charles Lindberg of transatlantic flight fame saved his life four times in two years with Irvin parachutes. The first occasion was in March 1925 when as a pilot in the USAAC Reserve he was involved in a mid-air collision. He jumped again three months later when the aircraft he was flying became uncontrollable in a spin. In September 1926 he ran out of fuel in fog during a St Louis-Chicago mail flight, and abandoned his aircraft, seven weeks later in the same run he was caught in a snow storm at night and baled out for the fourth time.

(Ref: 'Into the Silk' - Ian Mackersey)

John Cunningham famous as a successful night fighter pilot and Chief Test Pilot of the De Havilland Aircraft Company, qualified for membership of the Caterpillar Club before the 1939-1945 war. On April 11th 1939, Cunningham accompanied the late Geoffrey De Havilland during spinning trials of a Moth Minor. The Moth did not respond to recovery action and both men baled out over Wheathampstead, Herts.

(Ref: 'Into the Silk' - Ian Mackersey)

Ernest Udet, famous ace of the 1914-1918 war with 62 victories and who pioneered the 'Stuka' concept, became a member of the Caterpillar Club in 1934. Udet who was also famous for his exhibitions of stunt flying between the wars, acquired two Curtiss Hawk biplanes during a tour of the USA in 1933. Immediately on his return to Germany he used the Hawks to develop his vertical dive bombing concept. In July 1934 at Templehof Aerodrome, Berlin, the rear fuselage of the Hawk he was flying failed when pulling out of a dive. Violent flutter set in and, after a short while the tailplane broke off. Udet survived, his parachute opening but a few feet above the ground.

(Ref: 'Luftwaffe War Diaries')

As you can readily imagine, we could fill many pages giving details of their exciting escapes, but we hope that the information given above just illustrates some idea of the concept of the Caterpillar Club and its many, many members who are grateful to Irvin parachutes.

To celebrate 75 years of Irvin a Horse Chestnut tree in Pegasus Avenue, in Pegasus Wood, Temple Newsam, Leeds, UK, has been dedicated to the Caterpillar Club:

TO THE 100,000 MEMBERS WORLDWIDE OF THE IRVIN CATERPILLAR CLUB WHOSE LIVES HAVE BEEN SAVED BY AN IRVIN PARACHUTE OVER THE PAST 75 YEARS. MAY WE CONTINUE TO UNDERTAKE THIS SAME VITAL SERVICE TO ALL OVER THE NEXT 75 YEARS.

It remains a club without a charter, without membership fees, without meetings. Yet it is the most exclusive in aviation, for there is only one way to join. It is a way that appeals to few

With All Good Wishes
Judy Adams



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With Compliments