



## Gruppo Amici Velivoli Storici Sezione Torino

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### "OPERATION SENTINEL"

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The Turin chapter of the Gruppo Amici Velivoli Storici (Historical Aircraft Friends Group), a non-profit association founded in 1985, is actively engaged in the recovery, preservation and enhancement of Italian aeronautical historical heritage. Since 1993 it has been a member of the Regional Volunteer Register - Cultural Heritage sector.

The remains of the **Stinson L-5 Sentinel I-AEEL**, donated by the Aero Club of Turin in April 1991, made this one of the first military aircraft restored by the GAVS Torino and was immediately taken to their workshop – the "Cantiere Aeronautico No 1" in Leini.

The on-aircraft discovery of the **military serial number 42-99119**, assigned by the U.S. Army Air Force during the Second World War, started an archive research to reconstruct the history of "One-One-Nine" and, among other details, ascertained the participation of this L-5 in the operations resulting from the Allied landing in Normandy in 1944.

In 1992, with the financial support of Aero Products International of Trezzano sul Naviglio, the GAVS Torino launched **Operation Sentinel**, aimed at the non-flying restoration of the aircraft to its original configuration in the colours of the USAAF of the time.

Among the "missing items" were the engine, the propeller, the landing wheels, all the instruments, various structural parts and skin. What remained was corroded and showed fire damage. Despite this somewhat disheartening situation, the search for technical documentation immediately began in order to identify the missing parts and to plan a correct reconstruction programme. At the end of 1991 the Aero Club of Ferrara provided a set of the L-5's very rare technical manuals.

For eleven months, each and every part of "One-One-Nine" was disassembled, documented and restored. During this phase, and consistent with the production sequence, the **construction number 1538** was discovered, stamped on the structure of the aircraft. This number had not been recorded on any of the individual documentation of the aircraft.

At the same time, a **"Missing Parts List"** for the required components was also drawn up (a new type of illustrated manual invented by GAVS Torino for the occasion). This was sent to those museums and private individuals, both in Italy and abroad, who might have been able to provide the necessary parts to complete the restoration. Such recovery also resulted in a fruitful trip to the United States.

The actual reconstruction of the aircraft began at the end of 1992. The restoration took over three years and more than **4,000 hours of work** by the GAVS Torino members. On the occasion of the annual assembly of the GAVS, held in Fiumicino in May 1997, Commander Lattarulo donated a compass - a vital "missing part" to complete the L-5's instrument panel.

**Generous contributions** to Operation Sentinel came from the Italian Air Force, the Aero Clubs of the Aosta Valley, Casale Monferrato, Novi Ligure, Turin, Vercelli and Viterbo, Air Mach, Alenia, Cowtown Aerocrafters, Cromogalvanica, Brent Chemicals, Michelin, Gunetti G. & M. Tessuti, Hideel Laser Division, ILPA - International Liaison Pilot and Aircraft association, the Carlo Grassi Technical Institute of Turin, MAPI - Ideal Stencil Co., Franco Moreggia & Co., Nordavia, Revelli Metallik & Co., Sensenich Propellers, Sezione Sperimentale Volo a Vela / Gonalba, the United States Air Force Museum, USAG and also from a number of private citizens - Italo Battioli, Doug Damiano, Michele Fergnani, Eugenio Lanza di Casalanza, Livio Marchitelli and Earl Root.

With this static restoration of the L-5-VW, serial number 42-99119, at that time certainly the only item present in Europe in a completely original configuration, the intention of GAVS Torino was on one hand to contribute to the technical and historical re-evaluation of this aircraft and on the other to emphasize its valuable contribution to the rebirth, in the post WW2 period, of the Italian Air Force and aviation as a sport in Italy.

### THE STORY OF "ONE-ONE-NINE"

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When a restoration programme of a historic aircraft is initiated, it is necessary to reconstruct its **individual history** with the utmost precision. This is possible through a laborious process of tracking down (to the greatest extent possible) the various documents which form part of the operational life of that aircraft.

With regard to the GAVS Torino Stinson L-5, the search for these documents really began only after the unexpected discovery of the original data plate that showed the serial number 42-99119 assigned to the aircraft by the USAAF.

A request to the Air Force Research Agency of Maxwell Air Force Base (Alabama) resulted in a copy of the **"Individual Aircraft Record Card"** which reported the salient data on the activity of "our" Sentinel during its service with the U.S. Army Air Force.

"One-One-Nine" was built by the Stinson Division of Vultee Aircraft of Wayne, Michigan, and delivered to the USAAF on March 4, 1944 at Detroit Airport. The plane was then taken to Newark, New Jersey, where it arrived on March 12. On April 6, packed in a crate, the Stinson left New York Harbour in a convoy bound for Britain. Fortunately, it arrived at its destination where it was reassembled and temporarily assigned to the 8th Air Force stationed in the UK.

On 31 July 1944 "One-One-Nine" was transferred to the new 9th Air Force, which included all the air units deployed in France in the aftermath of the D-Day landings in Normandy. The succession of these dates makes it very likely that "One-One-Nine" would participate in the early stages of the Normandy campaign.

Our Stinson, after having accompanied the subsequent Allied advance into the heart of Germany, served from 17 June 1946 to 18 November 1948 in support of various occupation units of the U.S. Army. On December 20, 1948, after totalling 917 flight hours, it was taken over by the 7290th Air Base Group at the Air Depot in Oberpfaffenhofen, Bavaria where it remained parked. On January 20, 1949, "One-One-Nine" was assigned to the Italian Air Force. The only data currently available regarding the activity of our L-5 with the Italian Air Force is the assignment of its military identification serial (Matricola Militare) **MM52882**.

On March 14, 1955, the Italian National Air Register issued Civil Registration Certificate No 3826, with which "One-One-Nine" received the national identification I-AEEL. Like all other Air Force Stinsons, I-AEEL also began its new career with a series of Aero Clubs. On April 18, it was assigned to the Aero Club Apuano of Massa Cinquale where it was used for pilot training. Eight years later, on May 21, 1963, the Stinson moved to the Aero Club of Lucca where the plane flew until 1970. During this time, in February 1965, the former "One-One-Nine" was entrusted for a few days to the technicians of the 46th Aerobrigade of Pisa for transformation into a glider tow aircraft. From 25 July 1970 to 28 May 1971, our Stinson performed the dual function of trainer and glider tug at the Aero Club of Trieste, after which it returned to the Aero Club of Lucca.

After 3,884 hours and 57 minutes of honourable service, the L-5 was the victim of a taxi accident, without serious consequences for the pilot. This terminated its long and chequered flight activity. This was on July 29, 1980 and thirty-six years (less two days) had passed since its arrival in Europe. But its story was not over yet!

In 1982, the damaged plane arrived at the Aero Club Torino where it was progressively cannibalised for parts useful to keep the other L-5's of the Aero Club operational. At the beginning of 1991, what remained of I-AEEL was offered to the GAVS Torino, who immediately provided for its transfer to Leini inside their "Cantiere Aeronautico No 1".

## THE EXHIBITION "D-DAY - THE SENTINEL OF THE SKY"

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ORGANIZED BY GAVS TORINO ON OCCASION OF THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE LANDING IN NORMANDY, IN TURIN'S MUSEO NAZIONALE DELL'AUTOMOBILE, JUNE 6 - JULY 3, 1994

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As a fitting conclusion to "Operation Sentinel", the GAVS Torino organized an exhibition - "D-DAY - La Sentinella del Cielo" - to publicise the first public display of the Stinson L-5 Sentinel which had just been restored by the association. The thematic exhibition, the only Italian event on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Normandy Landings, was held at the prestigious premises of the National Automobile Museum of Turin, from 6 June to 3 July 1994. Obviously the L-5, fresh from restoration and exposed in a suggestive reconstruction of its operating environment, was the undisputed "highlight" of the exhibition.

The variety of material on display was guaranteed by the precious and freely-given collaboration of numerous companies, associations and private individuals. In addition to the aircraft, it was possible to admire a series of vehicles and military uniforms of the period made available by the members of the Military Vehicle Collectors Club of Turin, scale models and miniature dioramas made by the Centro Modellistico Torinese (Turin Modeling Centre), a number of paintings from the Circolo Culturale Confinè, a vintage philatelic exhibition curated by CAFINUT of Turin and a study on the fortifications of the Atlantic Wall developed by the Association for the Studies of Military History and Architecture of Turin.

Also accompanying the exhibition were collections of flags, posters of the most famous war films, books and magazines of military history and related objects. In addition to this, the public could watch a series of documentaries on the Second World War made available by RCS Films & TV. A vast photographic presentation illustrated the preparatory phases and the Landing in Normandy. The graphic design of the exhibition was effected free of charge by Aeromedia. For the opening ceremony of the exhibition, the Teatro del Frizzo theatre company staged an unprecedented performance of "physical theatre" with naïve masks.

Decisive was the collaboration of After the Battle Prints, Bundesarkiv Koblenz, CISED Abate Arredamento, Michele Franco graphics, Gruppo Modellistico Michelin, Gruppo Ugo Mursia SpA, La Eliograf, Lloyd Adriatico, Michelin Italiana SpA, Microtecnica SpA, Poste Italiane, RCS Films & TV, RCS Libri & Grandi Opere, Revelli Metallik, SAC Servizi Ausiliari Cinematografici SpA, Tecno Trans and Zippo Manufacturing Co.

During the days of the exhibition, Commander Italo Battoli (GAVS member), with another L-5, made a special postal flight between the airports of Turin/Caselle and Caen/Carpique, transporting the celebratory postcards produced by GAVS Torino to Normandy.

In later years, the revived "One-One-Nine" was exhibited in a number of other minor events. However, the complexity of the assembly, the risk of damage and the transportation costs of the precious heirloom prompted the association to suspend this type of action.

In the 27 years of its activity, and always on a voluntary basis, the Turin chapter of the Gruppo Amici Velivoli Storici has carried out various other restoration and reconstruction operations on memorabilia and aircraft of extraordinary historical interest. These include, among other things, the **SPAD VII fighter of the Baracca Museum** of Lugo di Romagna, the **Ansaldo A1 Balilla** used by Antonio Locatelli belonging to the Museum of the Risorgimento of Bergamo, exhibited at the Museum of Carpentry of Almenno San Bartolomeo, and the **FIAT G.55 Centauro fighter** on display at the Historical Museum of the Italian Air Force. In March 2012, at the Vittoriale degli Italiani of Gardone Riviera, the members of GAVS Torino carried out a third cycle of restoration and preservation of the **SVA 10 biplane used by Gabriele d'Annunzio** for the legendary "Flight over Vienna".

Currently the GAVS Torino is privately carrying out other static restoration programmes on aircraft of great historical value such as the **FL.3 trainer** of the Piedmontese aviation pioneer Francis Lombardi, a rare twin-engine **Piaggio P.136 amphibian** and an **experimental autogyro** developed in the 60's by some members of the Aero Club Torino with the collaboration of the local Polytechnic University. A future restoration project will take place on the record-breaking **CVT-2 Veltro glider** designed by the Morelli brothers and dating back to 1954, recently entrusted to the care of the association. Having various vintage aircraft, engines and components, in addition to a significant technical documentation, the GAVS Torino aims to establish an aeronautical museum, with an adjoining library, in the Subalpine Capital of Turin.

(Prepared by Luciano Bertolo - GAVS Torino on occasion of the "First L-5 Meeting" at Alzate Brianza airport on June 24, 2012)