

I WAS LISTED AS DEAD...

Emil Boček (*1923)

During a daring flight over a Europe engulfed in the struggle against the Nazis, RAF pilot Emil Boček was forced to make an emergency landing. It was at the end of the war and he was returning from an operation. "Over Germany I discovered there was a problem with my engine. So they navigated me toward Brussels. I saw an airfield below, with both German planes and ours. I went in to land. And as I was flying down over the airfield I looked to be sure, to see who was there. And I saw it was Englishmen, so I landed calmly. But as I was cruising to the tower my tyre burst. They didn't have any others, they had to import them from England... so I waited and only then did I return to England. I reported to the commander and he berated me, saying I was listed as dead. They had forgotten to report my landing! I told him that it wasn't my fault..."

This is how Emil Boček, a fighter pilot with the 310th Czechoslovak Fighter Squadron, described one of the many situations he experienced during the dramatic war in Europe between 1939 and 1945. He went through another even more dramatic moment on a different flight. He was also above Germany when a light suddenly signalled that his plane's fuel wasn't reaching the engine. "Once during a flight I saw the red light flashing. The fuel wasn't working! I was wondering whether to turn back. I decided to return. Some fifth sense told me to climb. Then the engine really started to fail and I thought I'd have to jump... At that moment I was above the sea. Naturally I had a parachute, but entering the Channel in November isn't that appealing... But then at the final moment the engine started up and in the end I landed at the airport without a problem. The plane went to a hangar for an inspection immediately. But they found nothing. Everything was evidently in order. But it wasn't. Later it turned out one of the filters was full... Not a pleasant experience!"

Emil Boček notched up 26 operation flights. He left the air service in 1946.

Emil Boček was born in 1923 in the Brno district of Tuřany. From a poor family, he took an apprenticeship as a machine fitter in 1938. In that year the Munich Agreement was signed and Czechoslovakia lost its borderlands. A year later Nazi troops invaded Brno. "I came to Brno's main train station and troop carriers and tanks were driving through the city centre. My friend and I decided then that we would leave. My friend's father had been a legionnaire and he had made it clear to him that history was repeating itself and that

everything would depend on us young people. That we had to fight as they did. And we decided to do the same thing.”

However, at that time Emil Boček was still a minor. What’s more, his brother told him it was too soon, that he ought to wait. He disagreed. He wanted to leave with his friend immediately and that is what he did. Nobody but his brother, not even his mother, knew of his plans. He packed, saying he was going skiing in the Jeseník Mountains. But instead he went by train from Brno’s Ivanovice to the city’s main station and then to Hodonín by bus. “There were SS men sitting in the front but they didn’t pay us any mind. We reached the border and from there they took us into Slovakia. We went through Bratislava in the direction of Petržalka. There were a lot of soldiers there! So we said, Not here. That would we would go to Trnava... They asked us where we were going with the skis and we said to Trnava! There’s no snow there, they said. We said friends had come back and there was snow. We got on a train and then again some people noticed us. They said we had got get off at Sered’. We slept in a haystack. It was terribly cold. We headed for Galanta. We needed to get to Budapest...”

It was a perilous, complicated journey. Boček and his friend ended up in jail in Galanta, where they remained for seven days. They did actually reach Budapest, even got as far as Szeged, but again they ended up in behind bars. “They put me in with the young men. It was terrible. A complete nightmare. One cold-water tap and one toilet. Eighty people and one toilet! I haven’t a clue how we managed...”

Then the Hungarians brought them to the border and sent them back into Slovakia. So they had to cross the frontier into Hungary again. In the end Boček and his friend did actually succeed in crossing Hungary, where they reached the border with Yugoslavia and crossed it undetected. Locals showed them the way, pointing out a hole in a kind of fence. They got to Subotica, from where they were escorted to the capital Belgrade. There he was reminded of the terrible reality of the German occupation of his homeland. “In Belgrade we used to pass the German embassy. When I saw the swastika it sent shivers up my spine,” he says.

From Yugoslavia Boček travelled by train to Greece and then on to Beirut. Then by boat to Alexandria in Egypt and finally on to Marseilles, to a Foreign Legion barracks. In the meantime, war had broken out and Germany had attacked France. Like other Czechoslovaks, he ended up in a camp at Agde in the south of France. But the war was going badly. The French were fleeing and there was enormous chaos. “Terrible. We had a rifle from 1863 and five rounds,” he says. Amid great confusion they returned to Agde, from where he managed to board a ship bound for England. He would fight on. He couldn’t speak the language but began learning. When they came to the camp looking for a

mechanic for the air force, he volunteered. He repaired planes in a hangar but then thought he would like to attend flying school. He passed the tests and was sent for training to Canada. It wasn't an easy journey, involving a ship journey followed by a train across the whole of Canada to Calgary. He completed his pilot training in January 1944 as the 14th of 52 graduates. All of them were very young. Nevertheless, at 20 Emil Boček was one of the youngest. Given that they were already on the other side of the Atlantic, they also enjoyed a holiday. "I proposed that we take a holiday in New York. I organised it all and off we went. We went to a Czech pub. And they prepared a great feast of pork for us! And a collection. They almost tore us all apart. But soon the boat arrived and we had to return to England."

There Boček served with the 310th Czechoslovak Fighter Squadron, to which he was assigned in October 1944. A week later it was time for his maiden operational flight. His squadron were based at the North Weald airfield. In total, Boček undertook 26 operational flights. "We flew until the end of the war. We often accompanied bombers. And near the end of the war we bombed the island of Helgoland."

Following the war Emil Boček returned to Tuřany. At first his mother didn't recognise him when he spoke to her from the doorway. But a while later, when he had made clear who he was, he received a huge welcome.

On 1 March 1946 he returned to civilian life. Immediately he started up a car parts business.

However, after 1948 he came under pressure to become part of the Mototechno enterprise. After sustained coercion he finally gave in. He later worked as a lathe operator at a research institute belonging to the Academy of Sciences. Following that he worked at the company Drukov.

In 2010 President Václav Klaus presented Emil Boček with the Order of the White Lion for extraordinary service in the defence and security of the state and excellence in combat. In 2016 he again climbed into and flew a two-seater Spitfire. He was 93 years old. "I would like to thank you. For many years I dreamt of flying a Spitfire once again," he said.

Text by Luděk Navara