

## Night encounter between a Mosquito VI & Arado96 B-3

### An investigation about an Arado 96 shot down by a Mosquito in the French Pyrénées

It is well known that a German aircraft crashed in the Bénéjacq forest during World War II. There are many rumors about this mysterious aircraft and the circumstances of its loss. Was it a prototype? Was it shot down by the French Maquis or by an Allied fighter? A full investigation has to be conducted, everything needs to be checked: we have to determine the date and circumstances of the crash, the type of aircraft, and the identity of the pilot.

In Bénéjacq, at the city hall, the local councillor welcomes me with warmth and takes time to discuss this with me. He confirms that an inhabitant of the village, who recently passed away, Mr. Barraque, had for several years as a young person, patiently collected parts of this aircraft found lying in the forest. He devoted much time to retrieving these parts--the tragic event had profoundly affected him.

The parts collected by Mr. Barraque have been kept and protected in a municipal shed. His wife, Mrs. Barraque has also kept certain objects found by her husband, that moved him emotionally, such as a watch wrist and seat harness buckles.

So, we go to that shed and, indeed, many airframe parts, components, and pieces of equipment are discovered in a plastic barrel. Will these items help in identifying "our" aircraft?

Immediately, I recognize an aluminum part: it looks very much like a piece of a propellor spinner from an Arado Ar 96, a standard German training aircraft.

The tentative aircraft identification made possible by the spinner is soon confirmed by a "96" on another part then by a part number "FL20512-2" on a pressure indicator and finally by a plate from the pilot's stick. We are definitely tracking an Arado 96.

Then, the testimonies of residents fortunately put us on the right track.

First, there is an article published in a local newspaper a few years ago in which Mr. Barraque explained that he had heard an aircraft crash on a day near the occasion of the Tarbes Morane Saulnier bombing (which took place on 10 March 1944).

Another testimony comes in parallel to Mr. Barraque's. Mr. Fouert Pourret confirms the month and the year of the crash: March 1944. He also provides an important piece of information that narrows the days of the week that the crash took place. It was either a Tuesday or a Friday, because he remembers vividly that it happened on a day that the municipal band rehearsed, definitely one of those two days. This is a key piece of information for the investigation.

By putting together all of the pieces of the puzzle we have gathered, we reach the following conclusion: we are dealing with an Ar 96 that crashed in March 1944, either on a Tuesday or a Friday.

With that known, we turn to a dedicated aviation history forum (12 O'clock High!) to try and learn more--an answer arrives right away. Only one Ar 96 had crashed in the South West of France in March 1944: it happened on 6 March, which was a Tuesday. It was now clear that we had identified "our" aircraft!

The unfortunate aircraft was carrying the identification number « 22 » painted in white (the Arado we found at pic du Ger see previous article was the white "23"). Its pilot was Hans Wesser, and he is buried at the military cemetery of Berneuil in Charente. The aircraft crashed (per the Luftwaffe report that may be read at the end of this article) after "being shot". Was it fired on by another aircraft, from the ground or by something else? What happened that night that led to the loss of aircraft and pilot?

The "magic" of the Internet then produces more information. I discover that a Mosquito flown by an American pilot shot down a German aircraft on 6 March 1944, 25 kilometers South West of Pau. That pilot was James Forrest "Lou" Luma, an ace (he scored five confirmed victories) who was awarded both the English and the American Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). And he now lives in the United States.

Wasting no time, I contact him by mail, and he answers me very nicely. He sends a photo of himself with his navigator in front of their Mosquito (on the picture, he has a pipe and his navigator F. Finlayson is on the extreme right of the picture). He explains "Aircraft recognition on a moonless night is extremely difficult. It is the navigator's task. The pilot is too busy positioning their aircraft into the position where a kill can be made. If he is really lucky, the navigator will gain a little information at the time of the explosion. Gun camera negatives are completely useless for aircraft identification purposes at night. The camera runs when the firing mechanism is activated";

#### LOOKING FOR HANS WESSER

Back at the crash site near Pau, buried in the earth, some personal items are found. Two German coins dated 1924, and a « talisman » medal with a skier on one side, and a giant with a beard on the other side, with the markings « Riesenbirge – Rübzahl » and «schneekopf 1605 m.». The meaning of this medal is explained to me by a German friend: «the owner of this medal was most certainly a mountain climber because the « riesenbirge » (the « giant mountains ») are a chain between Praha and Bratislava. The highest point is the schneekopf (« snow head») whose height is 1605 Meters and it is the border between Poland and the Czech Republic. The giant named « Rübzahl » on this medal is a local mythical spirit symbolizing the nature, wild and genuineness of the area. His age, his old clothes his beard and his baton are typical of the inhabitants of this area where the myth took shape centuries ago .

Did Hans Wesser live near the Schneekopf? Thus, another investigation begins: finding Hans' family roots. I send letters to 20 persons in Germany bearing the name "Wesser" asking if they might be from his family. A few weeks later I receive an email from a person with the same last name, although not related to Hans, who was kind enough to conduct a full investigation. Hans Wesser appears in the municipal register of the city of Eisenberg; if you place Eisenberg on the map, you can see that the distance from the « Schneekopf » is no more than a hundred

kilometers. It is very likely that Hans skied in those mountains.

The respondent's email continues: Hans had a brother, born in 1922, who died in 1923 and a sister, Ruth, born on 19 November 1927, who died on 12 July 1982. Neither Ruth or Hans Wesser had any children--today, Hans Wesser has no descendants.

Although no members of Hans' family are alive today, the remains of his aircraft will now have a second life. They have been donated by the Benejacq city hall to a skilled enthusiast who will rebuild the aircraft. So, in a certain manner, we can hope one day to see the Ar 96 of Hans Wesser born again.

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Painting (« first sting »): thanks to Roy Grinnell (do not hesitate to visit his website HYPERLINK "http://www.roygrinnell.com" \o "http://www.roygrinnell.com/" [www.roygrinnell.com](http://www.roygrinnell.com) ) Roy has published in France at Bamboo the book: "Roy Grinnell, l'artiste des as » ;

### **The American and German reports**

#### Lou Luma report :

6 March 1944, 8PM03, RAF Ford (USAAF Station 362), Sussex, England: two Americans, Lieutenant J. Luma (pilot) and C. Finlayson (navigator) from the 418th Squadron, take off in their Mosquito for a combat patrol to Toulouse, then Mont de Marsan. Unable to reach their initial target (Toulouse), the crew decides to fly to Pau before returning home. Their decision that night will seal the fate of an Arado 96 and its young pilot, and the original mission report is here attached.

#### Luftwaffe report:

1944-03-06, 2./JG 101, Ar 96B-3, 964379, 22 weiße, Pontacq, 7 km westlich Ossun und 24 km südöstlich Pau, Absturz bei Nachtflug infolge Bordwaffenbeschuß. Bruch 100 %.

Flugschüler Ofhr Wesser, Hans, tot

Grab: Berneuil/Frankreich, Block 4, Reihe 28, Grab 1497

#### Translation:

6 March 1944, 2nd squadron of JG101, Arado96B3, serial number 964379, with the number "22" white, crashed at Pontacq, 7km West of Lourdes and 24 km South of Pau, crashed after a on boardweapon shooting, 100% destroyed, student pilot Hans Wesser, killed.

Buried in Berneuil en Charente, square 4, line 28, grave N° 1497.

Note : The painting in this article was made by the famous artist Roy Grinnell, and it depicts Lou flying his personal Mosquito "Miss Moonbeam McSwine", while scoring his first kill against a Messerschmitt Me 410 heavy fighter.