

“The forgotten bomber”

It is September 2012. I stroll near the former French air force base of Francazal, looking for clues from the past, and hoping to find parts from long forgotten aircraft. While there, I meet an elderly gentleman who tells me that an aircraft crashed in this area before the war. He goes on, "I kept this part in the garage. You can take it if you want". Just like that, I am holding a Q.S.C. 27. compass in my hands! It is a « Vion » brand (manufactured by AERA), in perfect working order 70 years after the crash. This splendid instrument was used by pilots; navigators used a « Morel » compass. The old man tells me more, "It was a Bloch, it burnt". Then, he shows me the place where the aircraft crashed, a field that is near Toulouse's suburbs. Now, with the location of the accident pinpointed, a proper search for the aircraft can begin.

First, we proceed according to all applicable rules and regulations. A request for an authorization to search on the crash site is sent to the archeology directorate in Toulouse. The landowner gives us a "green light". Now, we can start our serious work for the sake of history!

Remains of the aircraft are rapidly unearthed. A collar with markings (4) confirms the aircraft type « 210 » (for Bloch 210) and date of manufacture « 3/38 ». Various components are uncovered: a fuse that is nearly intact, a round plate with the number « 210 », and a collar that was attached to a flexible hose (8). There is a control mark, a letter « M », on the collar, most probably for "Messier", a landing gear manufacturer. Many structural parts appear along with pieces of skin. They are burnt and (from the crash or, later, being struck by a farmer's plough) bent. Sometimes, parts totally unrelated to an aircraft are found, such as this religious medal.

The puzzle, slowly, gets completed

With these few parts, a puzzle that reveals the plane's fate begins to take shape. We dive into the archives to try to find which Bloch 210 crashed near Toulouse Francazal before the war. This type of airplane was, sadly, well known for a high number of accidents; the press even nicknamed it the « flying coffin ». Mishaps were often linked to engine problems due to low quality oil, insufficient engine ventilation because of the shape of the cowling, and critical parts that frequently failed. In addition, at the time, it was the only trainer aircraft in France with retractable landing gear, and many accidents happened when trainees forgot to retract/lower the gear. This aircraft also featured variable pitch propellers, which caused problems for novice pilots.

The archives of the French Air Force are difficult to access. So, we turned to our contacts with knowledge of aviation history on the worldwide web for help. While it took time, this ultimately proved worthwhile. We are given a list of Bloch 210 crashes, but none of these show the characteristics (e.g., fire, geographical position) of "our" aircraft. The mystery remains unsolved for almost three years until the day when our friend Pierre Dumollard finds the answer, which he sent in the following message.

«In « Ouest Eclair » dated 12 April 1938, I found this report: « A MILITARY AIRCRAFT CRASHED AND BURNS – Its crew of five is badly burnt. Toulouse, 12 April. This afternoon, around 17 h. 45, a Bloch military aircraft was making a training flight in the west of Toulouse. It was flying between 1.800 and 2.000 meters, when the pilot decided to return to base. Shortly before landing, because of a wind gust, the aircraft clipped an electrical wire above the hangars at the base. The aircraft lost control, went straight to the ground, crashed, and burst into fire. The crew of five, a pilot, a radio operator, and three crewmen, tried vainly to get out of the fuselage. Lucky for them, several soldiers in the vicinity rushed to the burning aircraft and pulled all five free, thus saving their lives.».
(Note: the date of the crash [12/4/38] shows that the aircraft was brand new when it crashed [manufacture date 3/38].)

But we still miss one piece...

In spite of what we learned, the exact identity of this aircraft is still unknown to this day. Although we undertook extensive research, we were unable to confirm the aircraft's serial number. If any reader can bring us this missing part of the puzzle, we shall be grateful for that.

Knowing the day of the crash, we turn to the archives of the local newspaper « la Dépêche du midi », which provides us with the complete story! (Although the names of many of the plane's crew members are misspelled.) The geographical position described in the article matches perfectly with the place where we found remains, thus we now know that we see « our » aircraft burning in this picture.

The pilot was not unknown

We then realize that the pilot of this Bloch, Captain Meiffren, was famous for his feats during the war. He also left a 25 page document ((Service Historique de la Défense) in the French Archives that analyzed the reasons for the 1940 defeat of the French «learning from the war». It is a fascinating report (in French!) that you can discover on this link: <http://www.petit-fichier.fr/2014/10/29/note-meiffren/>>

Thus, a short, simple testimony by an elderly man who handed over a relic compass was the starting point of an investigative adventure that led us to uncover the remains of an otherwise forgotten airplane, learn its fate and the identity of the crew, and, importantly, add another chapter to the history of brave men and their aircraft.

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The Bloch 210 pilot : Captain Meiffren

René Charles Meiffren, was born on June 23 1901. He obtained his pilot's license on 22/06/1922. He became a Lieutenant in October 1936. In 1938, he was the Captain of Groupe de Bombardement 1/23, which is equipped, first, with the Bloch 200, followed by the Bloch 210. During the maneuvers of the French Air Force in the African French colonies in 1937, in order to demonstrate the endurance of the crews and their machines, he is leading a section of three Bloch 200. They fly several thousand kilometers above Tindouf, Saint Louis du Sénégal, Bidon V, etc.

In November 1939, with the start of WW2, he gets training in Connantre (near Reims) in the 31st Escadre, which dropped leaflets over Germany. He is awarded the French decoration «croix de chevalier dans l'ordre national de la légion d'Honneur » on 30 December 1939. On 18 May 1940, he is assigned at Pont-sur-Yonne, and he performs night-flights to drop bombs on Germany from Bloch 210 aircraft. This is a chaotic period, with disorganization, and several losses: on May 23, a returning aircraft lands too long and collides with a Léo45. The result is five wounded, two aircraft destroyed. On 24 May, at Chaumont, a Bloch taking off collides with an Amiot 143. The result is three killed, two wounded, and two aircraft destroyed.

During the night between 13 to 14 June 1940, he takes off from Orange with two other aircraft to attack a fuel depot in Italy. The weather is very bad (ceiling between 200 and 300 meters): one aircraft vanishes, probably lost in the sea, another one has an engine fire and its crew parachutes. Captain Meiffren is the only one who succeeds - he crosses the Alps and makes three bombing runs on the target although the anti-aircraft defense is strong. Fortunately, he returns safely from this hazardous mission.

On 19 June, the group 1/23 receives the order to go to Blida in Algeria. Because of the poor weather, the aircraft go to Montpellier, Perpignan etc. Again, Captain Meiffren is the only one to safely reach the assigned destination! He immediately comes back to France, arriving at Blida on June 22 with three LeO451 and two more crews. The aircraft will land there in the next days. The group 1/23 then goes to Marrakech in Morocco and bombs Gibraltar as retaliation for Mers-el-Kébir.

On November 1940, Captain Meiffren receives an order to go to Thiès (Sénégal) via Tindouf and Atar. Two squadrons of four Léo 45 each, escorted by Dewoitine 338's, take off, but weather conditions – again! – interfere with the flight. All of the aircraft are rerouted except for Captain Meiffren's, which finds its way through the Atlas mountains and lands safely at Tindouf; Captain Meiffren definitely had an excellent navigator! In 1943, at Marrakech, he is the Captain of the "2ème escadrille".

After surviving many hazards of war, Meiffren, now a Commandant, dies suddenly on a street in Toulouse, on 7 November 1947. He was only 46 years old.

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