

On the Trail of a Myth...

An Investigation into Chuck Yeager's Crash in France, March 1944

by Gilles Collaveri

Prior to breaking the sound barrier, Chuck Yeager became famous during World War II. This article describes an investigation into his crash after an epic aerial fight, in March 1944.

A Memorable Mission in France...

It is March 5, 1944. On board his P-51B baptized "Glamorous Glen," Charles « Chuck » Yeager is on his ninth combat mission. The day before, he was flying over Berlin where he scored his first kill: a Messerschmitt 109 (read : Chuck Yeager, An autobiography). Today, he is escorting a wave of 219 B24 bombers targeting the airfields in the South West of France: Bergerac, Cognac, Bordeaux etc. But also on this day, between Bordeaux and Toulouse, the Focke Wulf 190s of Jagdgruppe West (Luftwaffe advanced training unit) based in Cazaux are on watch to intercept US aircraft. During this attack, Chuck Yeager's P-51 is damaged and its control cables are cut. Chuck jettisons his canopy and bails out while 6000 meters above France. He gets rid of his oxygen mask and a dinghy, and descends back-first in a free fall. When he reaches 2500 meters, feeling that he is going to faint, he opens his parachute. When he is at 600 meters, the Fw 190 that shot him down dives on him, but another Mustang arrives just in time and shoots down the Fw 190. It is Chuck Yeager's wingman, Captain William « O'Be » O'Brien, from 363ème Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, that intercepted the German pilot. The latter man, Irmfried Klotz, bails out, but his parachute does not open and he dies when he impacts the ground.

The fated German pilot's Fw 190 crashes in a nearby field and burns. Chuck Yeager lands in a clearing, his parachute caught in a tree. He hides his Mae West and walks away. Fortunately, he is taken in and sheltered by the French Maquis who help him escape through Spain.

At the beginning of summer 1944, he starts again flying again. He finishes the war with 11,5 claims, including, notably, a Messerschmitt 262 jet fighter. Chuck Yeager will come back to visit his crash site several times.

Looking for "Glamorous Glen..."

Our investigation starts in the area of the crash site. Our door-to-door inquiries deliver interesting information that allows us to rebuild the story Chuck Yeager and his P-51 "Glamorous Glen."

Falling free after its pilot bails out, the P-51B crashed in a wine yard and fragments were thrown all around. Witnesses share with us funny stories. The parachute was used to cut out shirts, a clever way to use its silk; this kind of "recycling" of materials was common during the war. The leather flight suit was used by a lumberjack many years after the war. Unfortunately, he died since and the flight suit was discarded as trash.

Shortly after the crash, a blade and a machine gun were brought back by a youth of the village, but they were too heavy, so he decided to hide them in a well. The location of this well is still known, but, unfortunately, the area has been used for housing development and the well has since been filled in.

The mayor of the next village tells us his memories. He was 5 when the crash occurred. He observed the fight and thereafter, the parachute. He also observed a shining object that was falling slowly, like a dead leaf. His father went to gather it and found it in a field: it was the side window panel of the Mustang that Yeager had dropped to jump out of "Glamorous Glen." He kept it, using it after the war as a window in a tobacco dryer. Afterwards, it was taken back and stored in the barn of the farm. He agreed to lend it to our association, to exhibit it in the Toulouse museum (Aeroscopia).

Again, the door-to-door investigation leads us to another interesting find: two of the Mustang's Browning machine guns were kept by a private person! He agrees to lend them to us to exhibit at the Toulouse museum, together with the side window described above.

The crash site...

We gather information that allows us to pinpoint the exact crash site. An aerial picture taken in 1950 confirms the site; six years after the event, the ground still showed scars from the crash.

The owners of the land where the crash occurred open their doors to us with an incredible kindness and they welcome us onto their property. We learn that an earlier dig for Mustang parts took place in 1995 (read "project management") and also that "the General" paid a couple of visits to them. Each time that Chuck Yeager visited them, they had a lovely moment with him and they reveal that the General is as interested in hunting, corn, and hunting guns as in the crash of "Glamorous Glen!" (In

October 2008, Chuck also paid a visit to Airbus in Toulouse, and he flew with the A380 above the area where he bailed out 64 years earlier.)

Search on site...

An authorization to search in the ground is sent to the French Archeology Directorate in Bordeaux. When the official green lights have been obtained, the search on site can start. We find many fragments of "Glamorous Glen:" they are small and very damaged (the biggest ones were exhumed in 1995).

We find some Bakelite (the composite material of that period), aluminum skin, the head of a fuel pump (produced by Thompson Products), a part with its «part number » marked on it. Some parts still have the "olive drab" paint on them, the famous camouflage of the US aircraft. All of the parts are cleaned, are treated if necessary to protect them from corrosion. As important, none of the parts will ever be sold or commercialized - they are relics of WW2 aviation heritage and will always be kept as such.

The one that shot down Chuck Yeager...

The Fw 190 that shot down Chuck Yeager was then shot down by Chuck's wingman, crashing in a field near "Glamorous Glen's" crash site. The pilot bailed out but his parachute failed to open and he was killed. His body was found under a pine tree. In his pockets, objects from the everyday life were found: a spoon and a bill of a pharmacy of Chateauroux. A farmer having seen the crash when he was young tells us what he saw: "The aircraft crashed and burnt fiercely for three days. A wing was almost intact and was used to reinforce the bank of a creek." We go there and indeed, a Fw 190 wing is stuck in mud, caught by the roots that have been growing for 70 years. After lengthy, difficult work in the muddy water, with thanks to the material assistance of the owners of the property, we free it and reveal the wing of the Fw190 that shot down Chuck Yeager. There is no doubt as we recognize the flap position indicator that is so specific to the Fw 190.

Showing and enhancing the parts we found...

The ultimate purpose of our work is to share its results with aircraft history lovers. We do that with this article and also with the museum in Toulouse: Aeroscopia. There, you can already see the side window and one Browning machine gun of "Glamorous Glen". But as of 1st October, the parts of "Glamorous Glen" described above and some parts of the Fw 190 wing will be shown in a dedicated display, together with aircraft models. Together, these items will add physical reality to the history of one of the most famous and skilled pilot of history of aviation.

We would like to thank: the owners of the properties where the P-51 and the Fw 190 crashed, all the local people who shared their memories with us, Steve Polyak for his lasting support, and my two friends Bruno Falconnet et Bruno Dahan whose help and assistance were decisive.

Note 1 :

From **Glamorous Glen to **Glamorous Glennis****

The names of Chuck Yeager aircraft sometimes trigger nightmares for models makers.

As a matter of fact, the soldier who painted the name on the P-51B Serial Number 43-6763 made a spelling mistake: instead of ** Glamorous Glen ** - meaning «the beautiful Glennis », from the name of his girlfriend, Glennis Faye Dickhouse – he painted ** Glamorous Glen**. The mistake was corrected with the second Mustang, **Glamorous Glen II**, P-51D S/N 44-13897 that he used when he came back in operation during the summer 1944. The P-51D S/N 44-14888 that he used thereafter was named ** Glamorous Glen III **. In 1947, the X-1 was named *Glamorous Glennis **, likewise the F-15D on which he went through the sound barrier again for the 50th birthday of this event, in 1997.

Aircraft archeology and project management

The owner of the land where the P-51 crashed explained us that a dig occurred in 1995. A scrapper was used and went several meters deep. Many parts were found: tyre, exhaust pipes, one landing gear leg, engine valves, armor plate, the propeller reduction gear, two machine guns.

The « fanatique de l'aviation » mentioned that discovery in December 1995's issue. The initial intention was excellent: create a local museum to attract visitors, but, unfortunately, and probably because of the lack of funds, this never occurred.

Word of mouth let us know that these parts were left in a hangar, relinquished, somehow badly managed and finally scrapped. Today, nothing remains of these findings but the gun shown in the Toulouse museum.

This example shows that aircraft archeology is a full time project, complex and wide. It must be managed and planned from "A" to "Z" and it shows many different sides: historic, logistic, and financial. The story of the Dornier 24 is a good demonstration in this respect. Pulled out of a lake almost complete in the 80's in France, it finally had to be scrapped because no plan had been made for its restoration and its storage. Only the nose with its turret still remain today and is preserved by the seaplane museum in Biscarosse (read Fana N° 144 dated November 1981).

On the positive side, some breathtaking projects retain our attention as examples to follow: the P-47 « Dottie Mae » pulled out of an Austrian lake 2005 flies again today and the Hurricane P2902 (G-ROBT) dug out of the sand of a beach in Northern France in the 80's could be seen in Duxford in flight this year (Read the Fana N°573 dated August 2017). Thanks to these two machines, we can keep on dreaming and hoping enjoying new discoveries.

After all, we will soon see in France a Dewoitine 551 in flight, that would have been totally unbelievable a few years ago.