

## **But who remembers Claire Roman?**

In the world of aviation in the 1930s, Claire Roman was as well known as Hélène Boucher and Maryse Hilsz. Unfortunately, in the years since, she has largely been overlooked if not forgotten, even by historians. However, the recent remarkable discovery of the remains of the aircraft in which she died presents an opportunity to tell the story of this great pilot and recall her achievements.

Last July the search for the plane, a Caudron Goeland, in which Claire Roman perished was successful. This historic discovery allows us to show unique parts from a type of vintage airplane of which there are no surviving examples, and we can also evoke the memory of this exceptional aviatrix whose life was cut short in the crash those parts represent.

### **LOOKING FOR THE WRECK IN THE PYRENEES MOUNTAINS**

The historical study before the wreck was located was long and complicated. Among the questions to be answered: where exactly did the Caudron fall and would we even be able to reach the site, let alone find any remains of the doomed plane?

The process to obtain the necessary administrative approvals to investigate the site was long and tedious, also. But “green lights” from the « Préfecture », the owner of the land, of the French Forest Administration were all eventually obtained;

On site, the mountain is beautiful but sharp. We understand why the Caudron, in which Claire Roman was a passenger, crashed into this peak. The clouds surround us, visibility is close to zero. Fortunately, we know where to go. Promptly, aircraft parts are unearthed. They are really unique and have a genuine historical value, since no Caudron Goéland airplanes exist today.

We discover airframe, equipments such the altimeter, the landing light, the door handle ...

Painted fragments of fabric tell us the life of the Caudron, which was registered “F-OAMR.” It first flew with « Air Bleu » (whose aircraft were painted all blue). Then it was repainted (as per the French Vichy administration rules) with the vivid yellow that scale model makers know well. These small recovered fragments with blue and yellow colors show this distinctive pattern.

A plate confirms the aircraft type : « C445 » for Caudron 445 and the year of built appears: March 1939. « VR » is the stamp of the control authority: Bureau Véritas.

We are somehow facing a big jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of which we try to assemble to read the full story...

### **4 AUGUST 1941**

Claire Roman has boarded a Caudron Goéland leaving Vichy. She is going to visit her mother in Pau, who is ill. There are three persons on the airplane that fateful day: the pilot, Max Rives, the radio-navigator, Jean-Marie Joly, and Claire Roman, their lone passenger. During the flight, the weather deteriorates quickly - the plane is caught in a thunderstorm while among the French Pyrenees mountains. Consequently, the pilot cannot see a wooded mountain in front of him and the doomed Caudron crashes, killing all onboard.

The inhabitants of the next village have heard the noise, but when they arrive at the crash site, there is nothing they can do. The bulk wreckage is evacuated and the memory of this accident slowly disappeared until this day of July 2016.

## **WHO WAS CLAIRE ROMAN ?**

Claire Roman was born in Mulhouse in a rather wealthy family. As a young woman, she often travels with her father and studies in Paris and London. Later, she marries a hero of WWI, Serge Roman, but he tragically commits suicide in 1932, the result of horrors from serving as a wartime soldier. Shocked by this loss, she decides to devote her time and energy to helping others. She starts working for the Red Cross in Morocco in Meknes. While there, she sees aircraft for the first time in her life. Thus intrigued, she becomes increasingly interested in aviation, taking up flying with the help of her supervising nurse.

Back in Paris in 1933, her passion for flight is confirmed and she enters the « aéroclub Roland Garros » in Orly, then the “Aéroclub Caudron”, in Guyancourt. In May 1934, she participates to the Paris Deauville race. Later that year she goes to England, as she wants to discover other types of aircraft. There, she flies the Avro Avian, Avro Cadet and de Havilland Puss Moth. She even flies (as a passenger) in an autogiro.

Beginning 1935, she starts aerobatics, then she participates to the first « Hélène Boucher » cup, with a Maillet aircraft. She arrives second, a remarkable result when you know that the power of her engine is less than half that of the winner's, Maryse Hilsz.

She performs the « Prototypes Tour de France »; she practice instrument flying; she runs the “12 hours of Angers”, the Belgium tour. Claire Roman never stops-she runs each and every competition! In parallel, she also improves her knowledge and abilities in every field of aviation. She obtains her transportation pilot and navigator license, and she also follows radio and mechanics courses. Her exceptional know how gets confirmed when she runs in 1937 the raid Paris-Pondichery with her friend Alix Lucas-Naudin, flying a Salmson D2 Phrygane. Remarkably, at the end of 1937, she sets the speed and altitude records for women. In addition to all this frantic flying activity, she somehow still finds time for the Red cross, too!

## **THE WAR !**

1939, the war is here and there is no room for woman in the French *l'Armée de l'Air*. Claire Roman is an exception, however, she becomes the first woman pilot of the *l'Armée de l'Air*. Her task is to ferry general aviation aircraft requisitioned by the *l'Armée de l'Air*. She takes off with an aircraft and comes back on a train in a flight suit with her parachute under her arm. Then, when the German army invades France, she flies aircraft to safe locations to keep them from falling into German hands. For this job, she has to fly low to avoid the German fighters.

In June 1940, coming from Landes de Bussac, she lands in Rennes, but the Germans are already there and she does not know it. She is immediately made prisoner but her knowledge of the German language makes her conversation with the German soldiers easier. The next day she takes an advantage of that to escape. She buys a bicycle, cycles 80 km, and arrives exhausted at La Baule Escoublac airport where the French mechanics are working on the aircraft, unaware of the German progression.

She warns them, then spots a N.A. 57, which she had never flown before. She has a quick look at the controls and instruments, then takes off to Bussac. Commandant Leleu, her superior is stunned to see her get off an aircraft three days after her disappearance! He thought she was made prisoner and lost, or worse killed! For this feat, she is awarded a citation in the order of the armies for a *Croix de Guerre*.

## **FORCED INACTION**

When the armistice is signed, the French aircraft ordered to stay on the ground and she cannot fly anymore. She tries as much as she can to relieve the prisoners pains by going from one camp to the other, bringing them some comfort with the assistance of the Red Cross.

In August 1941, she learns that her mother is ill in Pau and she decides to visit her. She boards in Vichy the le Goéland n°3/6/7267 and takes off to her final destiny.

### **AN EXHIBITION IN AEROSCOPIA**

This exceptional discovery deserved a full exhibition and this has been done in the French museum in Toulouse Blagnac France.

Until end of August, you can see in the « archéologie aéronautique » area several moving fragments of Claire Roman's aircraft : a window, the altimeter, a soupape.

In this display, you can also see a beautiful model of Goéland at 1/72ème scale reproducing exactly the aircraft in which Claire Roman died: paint, registration, everything is faithfully reproduced.

We hope you will enjoy the exhibition as much as the article remembering the story of that exceptional lady.

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