

THE LAST LATECOERE

June 1940 - the débacle .

The German army invades France and the French army tries to retreat in an orderly fashion.

The French « Armée de l'air » (Air Force) does its maximum but it is overpassed and history will retain on its subject a formulae that initially applied to the French fighter Dewoitine 520 : « too few, too late».

In the French Navy, the seaplanes Latécoère 298 have done what they could. «During several weeks, the Latécoère 298 were used for missions for which they had not been conceived, and for which their crews had not been trained. They made bombs attacks on land targets badly defined and with no fighters protection. It is even miraculous that in such conditions, the rate of attrition had not been higher » (a) .

Based in Cherbourg, the squadron T2 flies with Laté 298 and is led by the Admiral Jacques Lamiot.

The story of the T2 squadron

Let us listen to Jacques Lamiot telling us the events of June 1940:

« on 18 June, the Germans were arriving at Cherbourg. At 10AM, we took off with our bombs and while we were in flight, Cherbourg ordered us to fly to Brest. We arrived there on the sea base of Lanvéoc Poulmic amidst a huge confusion created by a bombing, thanks god, not too bad, by Heinkel bombers. There, after refueling in the middle of this confusion, we flew to Hourtin that we had problems to find, because of the very dense fog. In this oasis of quietness, we received the order from the headquarters to fly to the Mediterranean sea » (b) .

The target of the squadron is to go to Berre lake, before continuing to Bougie, a city in the east of Algier.

Confusion in Hourtin

What happens in Hourtin/Biscarosse on June 19? it is easy to imagine the situation on this base on this date.

The Latécoère assembly line works at full rate and delivers brand new aircraft.

On site, Aéronavale staff is waiting, sometimes hanging around. The pilot "Second maitre » André Sébire (picture 1) has arrived a few weeks earlier from Sénégal. He flew before on Bréguet Bizerte (picture 2). He was assigned on November 1939 in Dakar as second pilot on the Latécoère 301 « De L'orza ». This seaplane has been ferried back to France and it has arrived with André Sébire in Biscarosse on 28 May 1940.

André Sébire has been inactive on the base since that date and he is hanging around: «Here, I have nothing to do, I am terribly bored and I don't see the moment coming when I shall at last go to places more active, which I trust will come soon » (c)

Close friend to André Sébire (their families know and appreciate each other), the "flying arrimeur" Jules Lemoine (on picture 3 he is on the left) shares the same family pension than his friend pilot. He started his career in the Aéronavale on balloons, he received his certificate on March 28 1925, and he continued flying on aircraft and seaplanes in the French Navy (Aéronavale) ;

« save what you can»

In this huge confusion of June 1940, the brand new aircraft out of the assembly line are handled to flying personnel whose task is to escape with them to the South.

In June 1940, the weather is horrible in the South of France. On the 11th, two Laté 298 are lost during their ferry flight to Berre's lake:

- the serial number 72 ("T3.6", Pilot Le Louarn) crashes near Castres, killing its crew.
- lost in the fog, the serial number 69 follows the Garonne river, but when it reaches Toulouse, it collides with the cable of the river boat shuttle of the "Ponts Jumeaux". The crew is saved but the aircraft shall be scrapped.

The Laté 298 serial number 93 disappears

On 19 June, André Sébire and Jules Lemoine take off from Biscarosse to Berre with the Latécoère 298 serial number 93. This aircraft has just been delivered: it performed its first flight on June 6, it has been accepted by the French Navy on June 13 then allocated to the T2 squadron on June 18.

The propeller supplier, Ratier, having problems to deliver the metallic three blades propellers, this aircraft still has a two blade wooden propeller which is used only for training and ferry flights (picture 4)

André Sébire never flew on this aircraft, but he has no time to perform training : they must fly away promptly.

The aircraft takes off but faces rapidly terrible thunderstorms. The crews of the other aircraft of the squadron later said that André Sébire could be heard on the radio for a while, then the messages stopped (d) : the aircraft has disappeared without leaving any trace;

André Sébire et Jules Lemoine were very courageous to leave with no training, in an aircraft unfinished, in a terrific weather, and this cost them their lives.

It is only on November 21, 1940, that Spanish refugees, looking for wood, will discover by pure chance the wreck.

The exact reasons of the crash are unknown but several hypothesis may be contemplated :

- the Aircraft was pushed onto the mountains by the turbulences (the weather was very bad)
- they made a navigation mistake (can be explained because the visibility was also very bad)

- Fuel starvation (the inhabitants of the farm down the hill stated that they heard during a long time an aircraft fly above them, and the remains of the propeller found show no impact, which would lead us to think that it did not turn when the aircraft crashed).
The wreck is located in such a remote and inaccessible place that it was left there and slowly, became derelict, victim of the time going by and the people coming to take a souvenir.
A wing will be exposed during a while in a holidays camp, near the village, but it was finally sold to a metal scrapper : after the war, metal was expensive and recuperated ! for the same reason, the engine disappeared..
And the Latécoère 298 remains forgotten until....

The discovery of the last of the Latécoères

In November 2012 , after having obtained all the authorizations necessary for that job, we go searching for the remains of the Laté 298, this mythical plane of which not one single sample remains on earth !

Thanks to the testimony of the land owner, and of the inhabitants of the closest village, we do have some indications but the search proves to be difficult. Sometimes, we even walk in the snow and in the mud (picture 5). Three full days in the mountains will be needed before we find, at last !! the first remain of the Latécoère 298 (picture 6) .

Fragments of the plane are still on the ground and we collect them respectfully and analyse them in order to understand what happened to this machine.

The first thing we notice is the excellent conservation status of the paint: (picture 7). The blue typical of the French Aéronavale in 1940 is in front of us, pristine. These pictures will allow the modelists to reproduce **THE** exact color on their models. Other colors appear but mainly on pipes (picture 8), these colors are in fact a codification and they have the following meaning:

Air.....blue
 Water.....green
 Oil.....brown
 Hydraulic.....blue/yellow/blue
 Fuel.....yellow
 Extinguisher.....red
 Exhaust.....black
 Oxygen.....white
 Air/fuel.....blue with yellow stripes
 Air/oil.....blue with brown stripes

We find many airframe parts (picture 9) and we realize how huge this seaplane was : more than 15 meters wingspan, and 12 meters length.

Several interesting plates deserve our attention ;

The most important one (picture 10) which enabled us to identify formally the aircraft type. You can read on the left of the date « 3 6 40 », vertically: « LAT298 » abbreviation for « Latécoère 298 ».

This one (vertically 11) was on a pump located down the Hispano12Y engine, (Picture 10 bis)

These ones were fitted on transmission equipment's (Pictures 12 & 12 bis),

Here is one (Picture 13) giving the instruction to attach the parachute strap before take off (Automatic opening strap),

Then, a couple of interesting parts:

A handle (Picture 14) : maybe the handle to release the torpedo?

The extinguisher (Picture 15), positioned on the dashboard on picture 15 bis

Several components from the equipment located the cockpit area (picture 16)

Hydraulic components (valves..) (picture 17)

The refueling cap which was positioned on the top of the wing (picture 18 and 18 bis)

A barometric capsule (Picture 19) from the altimeter ? still on its support

An engine filter (Picture 20), in a perfect status

A plate with irregular numbers and surprising scale (picture 21) which proves to be the one fitted on the Ratier propeller regulator (picture 21 bis),

A chromated engine mount (Picture 22) which looks almost new,

A portion of the windshield airframe (picture 23)

The antenna (Picture 24) that was fitted at the end of the left wing to enable the antenna cable to go from the wing to the vertical fin;

A propeller fragment (Picture 25) : behind the copper leading edge, there is wood (see remark hereabove above wooden propellers)

An interesting structural part, showing a specificity of the Laté 298 (Picture 26): a portion of the floats was used as tank for the fuel. In order to insure that no leak happens, rubber band was pinched between the airframe and the skin of the float: you can see the rubber band on this picture:

The positioning of the parts on the map is in line with the testimony of a witness: Joseph was a teenager when the aircraft crashed. They all went (the whole class with the teacher) to see the wreck. He

remembers vividly: «the aircraft was coming from the South East and the trees had their top clipped by the aircraft when it touched them, in a direction South East / North West”. The place where the different parts were found confirms the aircraft route and therefore Joseph’s declaration; The aircraft was not flying the route he was supposed to, so this shows a problem.

But the most moving parts we found are the ones that take us to the human beings:

- A buckle of one of the crews seat belt : before and after cleaning and electrolyze (picture 27 & 27 bis),
- During the search, a little round object attracted our attention (picture 28): it is a button, from the uniform of one of the crew. It has an anchor and wings, because they belonged to the Navy.
- Finally, the insignia carried by the pilot himself (Picture 29). On the back of this insignia, a number « 2114» (29 bis) confirms formally the identity of the pilot: André Sébire.

About the Latécoère brand, let us remind that, unfortunately, no complete Latécoère aircraft of any type still exists in France (*).

This remark enhances the high historical interest of the parts we have found. One of the most beautiful parts of this Latécoère 298 will be given to Marie Vincente Latécoère, Vice-président of the Pierre-Georges Latécoère fondation, whose objective is to preserve and enhance the memory of Pierre Georges Latécoère (picture 30).

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- (a) Lucien Morareau , le Latécoère 298 chez « Avions »
- (b) Icare, la bataille de France – N°61- Volume VI –Printemps 1972- L’aéronavale
- (c) courrier d’André Sébire à son épouse en date du 2 Juin 1940
- (d) témoignage rapporté par Léopoldine Jobart, fille d’André Sébire,

(*) The only complete Latécoère aircraft still existing today is a Laté 25 at the Moron museum in Argentina ;

Title image: I thank very much Benjamin Freudenthal to allow me to use his beautiful painting, and I strongly advise you have a look at his wonderful site : <http://www.flyandrive.com/>

The experts will forgive me that I used an image showing an aircraft with the « Vichy period » decoration (red and yellow stripes) which was applied after November 1941, and therefore historically arguable for our N°93, but it was the most beautiful Laté 298 color image I found.

Bibliographie : Le Latécoère 298 par Lucien Morareau et Michel Ledet chez « Avions »

Picture crédit : (the Latécoère with the wooden prop) Monsieur Lucien Morareau

Thanks to : Mr. Aubert, Mr. Alain Bertrand, Mr. Joseph Daux, Madame Léopoldine Jobart born Sébire, Mr. André Lafon, MM. Lemoine, Mr. Lucien Morareau, François Delassalle, who is at the origin of this beautiful finding, Thierry Fournier, Laurent Missaien, Steve Polyak, Mr Poplinot, Aeroforums and all the Aéroforumeurs, so experts and so numerous that I cannot name them all, they will recognize themselves.