

« CRASH AT SUNSET »

Toulouse, 7 March 1944

The German Air Force, the "Luftwaffe", is training its young crews in the south of France. Although that region is far from the fighting area, the Royal Air Force began incursions into the area two months ago: three Junkers Ju88 from bomber wing KG76, one of the units operating there, have been shot down or damaged by Mosquitos coming from Sardinia.

During that time, as Chris Goss explains regarding another unit: «the mood of the squadron ZG1's crews (*) is quite low, and each time a kill is obtained, emerging combat aviators are lost, thus lowering the mood more and more. How long will the men of the ZG1 remain alive? Nobody knows, but the future is getting bleaker every day».

This evening, a Junkers Ju88 C-6 (manufacturer serial number 750814) belonging to ZG1 on a night training flight is arriving from Bordeaux.

This Ju88 C-6 is a version specifically equipped for night fighting: the Plexiglas nose of the aircraft when a bomber has been replaced by three cannons and three machine guns, and a FUG « Lichtenstein » radar has been added, enabling the crew to spot and engage English bombers at night.

The crew of this Ju88 C-6 is composed of three young Germans: Heinz Döhler, Friedrich/Fritz Gargulak and Ernst Bongers.

Shortly before landing, the aircraft is flying above the hilly South East of Toulouse as it gets ready for its arrival at Francazal airport.

Suddenly, for an unknown reason, the aircraft crashes in a field a few kilometers before the runway threshold. The Ju88 explodes and, tragically, all three members of the crew are killed.

Over the next few days, the German army removes what remains of the aircraft.

In the memories of the locals, many vividly remember this event and recall it over the years.

(*) : ZG1 = « Zerstörergeschwader » 1, Destroyer Wing N°1, This unit specialized in fighting at night.

On site search

Therefore, our quest starts with those testimonies, plus recorded transmissions from the local «bush telegraph ». Several people living nearby confirm that a German aircraft crashed in this area during the war.

(see the end of this article, in French) :

<http://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2009/01/13/522413-colomiers-francois-monfraix-j-ai-vu-leurs-corps-disloques.html>

They show us the exact place where the aircraft fell.

After the long and boring paperwork has been duly completed (i.e., getting the green light from the landowner and obtaining all the necessary authorizations), the search itself can start.

The parts we find provide a lot of information

We can see many parts and we can even collect them by hand on the ground, they are so numerous! (picture 1)

Unfortunately, they are in very bad condition for two reasons: (i) the aircraft crashed violently and exploded (ii) the field has been (and is still) regularly ploughed, and this contributes to damage the parts in the ground.

However, some fragments are very interesting to us.

The most interesting parts

A laborious work of cleaning and sorting has to be done. After we have put aside the less interesting parts, we can look at the « best » ones (picture 2):

This one (picture 3) with the number “88” confirms the aircraft type (Ju88).

There are some Plexiglass fragments from the canopy (picture 4), a connector showing its part number (picture 5), a small part made with china (ceramic) material, certainly an electrical isolator (picture 6), a part painted in red has kept its original shiny finish (picture 7).

A small equipment component shows an electrical mapping (picture 8), many cartridges appear (picture 9), with two different calibers confirming the presence on board of 20 mm caliber guns (MG FF/M) and 7,92 mm caliber machine guns (MG17 or MG81).

Some portions of the aircraft's skin still carry the paint scheme of 1944 (picture 10 and 11): blue on the undersurfaces and dark grey on the upper surfaces. Thanks to visible markings, some parts can be precisely identified: for instance, a hook (picture 12) with its own part number (picture 13); its function was to secure the engine cowlings (see drawing 14).

Finally, a buckle that was part of the harness of one the crewman (picture 15).

The historical search.

From our local investigation (i.e., going from door to door, we knock, asking the elderly people if they have memories) we meet an elderly gentleman who used to write every important event on his small notebook during the war.

In his notebook, we can see that a Ju88 was shot down two months earlier, on 6 January 1944: « J (for Jeudi= Thursday) 6 : un avion abattu (boche) à 19H30 = a German Aircraft shot down at 19H30»

And looking further, we also discover that «our» Ju88 is mentioned on 7 March 1944: « M (for Mardi= tuesday) 7 : a «Nazi » (aircraft) crashed at fxxourville, burnt at 20H30 – DCA (=FLAK) at 23H30”.

Now, sure of the date of the crash, we inquire on a dedicated WWII aviation history website (« 12 O'clock High ») looking for the names of the crew and the aircraft's identity . We quickly obtain an extract of the German Archives confirming the aircraft type and the names of the crewmen that perished:

« 1944-03-07, 3./ZG 1, Ju 88C-6, 750814, 6 km südlich Toulouse, Absturz. Bruch 100 %.

F Fw Döhler, Heinz, tot

B Uffz Gargulak, Friedrich, tot

Bf Uffz Bongers, Ernst, tot »

With incredible sheer luck, we obtain the English« ULTRA » report that was the translation of the German messages encrypted with the famous « ENIGMA » machine, which the English intelligence service succeeded to decode (on this subject, we advise you to watch the excellent movie: « The Imitation Game »). This extract concerns the remains of the Ju88 we found and confirms our information - here is the text of that ULTRA message:

«From ZG1 Technical Officer 8/3,
Off strength Third / ZG1, JU88 C-6, works N° 750814,
Crashed 100% on night training »

Finally, the Internet surprises us one more time - we can obtain the death card of one of the crews, aged 22!

So, with only a weak starting point (a local testimony), we managed to find relic parts, make them « speak », identify the aircraft, reconstruct an event that took place more than 70 years ago, and discover the face of one of the crew of the unlucky aircraft, which together give new life to three otherwise forgotten fallen WWII airmen.

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