

CONDOR IN DISTRESS

The weather is beautiful in the south of France early on this 7th day of June 1943. A Focke Wulf Fw200 "Condor" of bomber wing 40 ("Kampfgeschwader 40") takes off from Lecce in South Italy. It is headed towards Germany.

The Condor is a four-engine aircraft with a long range, making it suitable for attacking Allied merchant ships far out to sea and denying their critical cargo from reaching Great Britain.

This Fw200, marked F8+PT, has 6 men on board. Its pilot, Georg Ulrici (picture 2), is from Wiesbaden and 22 years old. Four other crewmen are onboard, plus one worker, Alfred Zitzen, from the Focke Wulf factory. The aircraft, on a ferry flight, carries back souvenirs locally made that are for the crew's friends and families: bottles of wine, tobacco, food, ladies hats and bags etc..

A few hours after takeoff, around 1330, one engine starts to burn. The fire is so strong that the engine mount melts and the engine falls into a small valley, starting a minor bush fire. Now, with asymmetrical power, the aircraft is difficult to control. The crew wants to land as soon as possible, fearing the wing may fold suddenly, but the landscape is very hilly. Georg Ulrici spots a small flat area, the "pech", and he tries to make an approach. One hundred and fifty meters before the threshold of the intended landing area, the aircraft touches three chestnut trees and a portion of the left wing falls off, but the pilot manages to continue his approach. When the stricken plane abruptly touches down, it slides on the ground, leaving parts behind. Then, it strikes a earthen bank, breaks in two, rises in the air a moment and falls to the ground, surrounded with smoke.

While the crash happens, the P. family is walking nearby and witness the mishap. Suzette, 7 year old, is collecting poppies when she hears the noise of an aircraft. She sees a light on the aircraft (probably the fire), then an object falling from the aircraft (the engine). She feels that the aircraft is headed straight at her: panicked, she runs away and hides in the ferns. As a consequence, from then on, Suzette will be frightened whenever she hears an aircraft.

Her sisters, Elise and Henriette, have also seen the crash. In the general panic, they run back home and hide in the family bed. Their parents do not see them run away and will look for them all day long until they find them in the evening!

In the wood next to the crash area, a young French man is hidden to avoid the compulsory work in Germany. The violent event causes him to run away, fearing arrival of the Germans.

RESCUING THE CREW

Where the plane came to rest, groans and moans can be heard from the wreck. The village inhabitants run to the site. The first to reach the wreck, a farmer who was working in a field nearby, can see that three men have been able to get out of the Fw200 and they rest next to a slope, while three crews are still trapped inside. With another farmer who has arrived in the meantime, they take them out of the broken fuselage and the six men are taken care of under the close chestnut trees. A farmer who was a prisoner in Germany for 5 years during WWI is threatening the crew, but the village mayor calms him down. The six men who were aboard the Condor are all hurt, but alive. They are taken to the closest farm, where mattresses, bed sheets and towels are brought for them and they are cared for by the village doctor. A German ambulance arrives at 4PM and takes the three most seriously wounded to the Toulouse hospital. The pilot was very skilled to manage a rapid landing in such tricky conditions. However, some of the men suffered very serious injuries: Alfred Zitzen will die the next day from his wounds and Franz Zigon will remain in the hospital till end of July.

The left landing gear has been torn off the wing and lies 50 meters from the aircraft.

The French Gendarmerie arrives swiftly and secures two machine guns, two automatics guns, one flare gun and some maps. When the "Feldgendarmerie" arrives at 6PM, the guns are remitted to them and two German soldiers keep guard of the wreck.

A few days after the crash, German recovery teams arrive. They will stay several weeks, requisitioning local houses for lodging and tools and carts to dismantle and remove the wreckage. Later on, four prisoners from the village will be freed by the Germans to thank the village for caring for the crew. Such reciprocal kindness was not uncommon during the war.

Georg Ulrici will keep on flying after this crash, only to be shot down and killed at Kaisersesch on 23 December 1944 with his Focke Wulf 190A8 W.Nr. 737367 (FW190 profile). His body was not found until February 1945.

LOOKING FOR THE CONDORS REMAINS

The Condor is a mythical aircraft that was produced in small quantities (only 262 were built, whereas more than 33,000 Messerschmitt 109 were produced!). For this reason, finding the remains of such an aircraft is fascinating.

After having located the Pech and with all necessary authorizations (landowner, French administration etc..) obtained, we go to the field where the Condor crashed more than 70 years ago.

At the site, it is interesting to see how vivid the event remains in the memories of the people living in the area. We are given by Jeannot a beautiful airframe portion (picture 3), probably an aileron component, and the search on site starts, guided by the advice of our new friend.

First, a beautiful fuel pump is found in the bank (picture 5). Then, a fuselage frame, still painted (picture 6). Many pieces of the plane's metal skin are found in the ground that show German airplane camouflage colors typical of the period ("RLM" 02, 65 & 66) (picture 7). Surprisingly, in spite of many years in the frequently plowed soil, the condition of the paint is good, as can be seen (pictures 8 9 10) by comparison to a German WWII color chart.

Plates are found (picture 11) and their markings tell us their origin: the first (top left) reveals the production date of the aircraft ("Baujahr" = year of construction) May 1941, the next one, marked "323", confirms the engine type (Bramo 323 R2). Eberspächer is a company in Germany, in the city of Esslingen, that still exists today and produces engine exhausts. The final plate was fitted to a blade pitch indicator ("steigungsanzeiger") (picture 12), maybe the one on the engine that triggered the crash?

Many shards of glass are found (picture 13) , thus confirming what we were told by the village people - the aircraft was carrying beverage bottles. The bottles date back to the 1940's. The thickness and shape of the glass showed the bottles' age; at that time, bottles weighed more than one kilogram; today, such bottles weigh only 600 grams.

Many airframe skin fragments, Plexiglas, and equipment components are found, showing how rough the landing was.

On the picture 14 , you can see :

Top left: electrical covers and plugs; top right: crushed equipment and metal bezels from panel indicators; bottom left of the bottom picture: the button from the fuel pump (marked "AP/SUM" for "Anlasse Pump" built by SUM (Sum Vergaser – Gesellschaft Carl Wirsum & Co.KG Berlin) that was operated manually by the pilot or the flight engineer to start the engines (picture 15) ; a locker from a maintenance door, a flight controls element, and airframe parts; and bottom: a rubber seal.

A contact has been made with the team restoring a Fw200 in Germany and these parts are offered to them: maybe one day will some of these parts have a new life?

The story of “our” Fw200, the W.Nr. 0052

The Focke Wulf 200 C3/U1 serial number (“W.Nr.”) 0052 was initially marked DE+OG when it came out of the factory, it then flew with the Kampfgeschwader 40 with the marks F8+PT. It had a D30 turret equipped with a MG15 gun and four engines: Bramo 323 R-2 with a power of 1200 CV.

Built in 1941 (cf the plate found on site: May 1941), it was initially used for torpedo trials. It was then transferred to the ninth squadron of KG40 (“9/KG40”) based in Bordeaux Mérignac. Between October 1942 and the beginning of 1943, it flew in the Mediterranean area providing supplies to the Afrika Korps, initially between Crete and Tobrouk, then between Lecce (in the south of Italy) and Tunisia.

On 7 January 1943, at Lecce, this aircraft had a technical problem and consequently suffered a hard landing: it was 25% damaged.

Repaired on site, it flew back to France and it crashed in the Aveyron region during its ferry flight, as described here above.

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