

## Heinkel 111 Wnr 5599 crash on 13 décembre 1941

« 13 décembre 1941, The squadron 2/Kü.FI.Gr.106 is based in the North West of France, near the coast . This squadron has a difficult and ungrateful task: surveying, checking and attacking maritime targets in the channel and in the Bay of Biscay.

It is 18H15 and dark . The Heinkel 111-H2 serial number 5559 is about to land. It has four men on board; the pilot, the Feldwebel Friedrich Bonsack, 36 years old, the co-pilot, the Unteroffizier Gerhard Gawlik, 26 years old, the gunner, the Gefreiter Otto Wittig, 22 years old, and the crew man the Gefreiter Heinz Schröter, 22 years old.

They are soon to land, the aircraft loaded with locally purchased goods; chocolate, ham, sausage, etc, probably provisions for Christmas.

The aircraft is in approach, but the weather is poor, as is often the case in this region in December. The wind is particularly strong this evening.

As the aircraft sinks closer to the runway, a gust of wind surprises the pilot. He tries to correct the situation, but the aircraft does not have enough speed, not reaching the 210 km/h necessary to maintain flight .

The pilot loses control as the Heinkel 111 stalls and crashes, instantly killing the crew.

The tail of the Heinkel 111 remains intact but the whole front of the aircraft has been crushed, leaving absolutely no chance for survival .

In the following days, the wreck is removed but the story remains carved in the local memory »

This story is fiction but based on a series of local testimonies collected long afterwards and of artefacts found on the crash site.

Here now follows the full investigation that led to the above story.

As a starting point, we used an extract from the German archives:

« 13 December 1941: He111 Wnr 5559 destroyed at 80% at 4,5 km North East of airport crew (4 men) killed ».

The crash site is described with such precision that we feel we may collect testimonies in the area. After half an hour of driving, we are in the countryside, amongst the fields where the crash probably occurred. We stop when we meet somebody; Yvon is extremely helpful. Yes, he did hear about the crash from his parents but he cannot provide more precise information. He proposes to find his cousin and, following Yvon, we proceed to search various local houses.

We successively find him, plus an elder person, 90 year old « little Guy », another neighbor. Afterwards, we then visit the mother of his cousin's wife, and finally a local farmer. We have

probably met all the inhabitants of this area! During these two hours, we collect testimonies and write down the memories kindly recounted by those whom we met.

It then became clear from these witnesses that indeed a German bomber crashed in a field known locally as “Egas”. It was recalled that this aircraft had been seemingly returning “home”, that Christmas had been approaching, on board had been chocolate, sausages and other luxury goods, and that sadly the entire crew were was killed in this crash.

Two days later, we visit the potential site of the crash to begin looking for parts. Thanks to Yvon’s help, we know where to begin . But the field is wide! Ever helpful, Yvon brings us some coffee to make our work pleasanter .

Two hours later, we are disappointed. We have found only agricultural pieces, and large bolts from the nearby railway. Exhausted and somewhat demoralized, we pack-up to go home when a farmer suddenly arrives and asks « you are looking for the crashed Bomber ? Follow me, I will show you the place ».

He is the owner of the field. He takes us to a small area and tells us « when we ploughed here in the 80’s, we found Plexiglas shards and aluminum parts. The old lady living in the house nearby, facing this field (she has since passed away ) told us that it came from a German bomber that crashed during the war”. The mists of time suddenly start to lift or puzzle suddenly starts to fit together!

Quickly, artefacts are found. Only a few but they clearly originate from an aircraft. Some skin, Plexiglas shards (the entire nose was made of this), and a broken rod. And a bit later, a plate, on which although barely legible we can read German words. Thus the nationality of the aircraft is clearly confirmed. We have found “our” Heinkel 111.

Suddenly, a big echo sounds from our detector. We unearth a big metal chunk, weighing some 15kg. It is a blade base. We recognize it as part of a Heinkel 111 as we had found a similar piece on a previous search of this aircraft type. The base of the blade is made in steel and was still in good shape but the aluminum blade itself had disintegrated. This material turns into dust when a fierce fire occurs.

The localization of the parts is surprising: there are few and found in a relatively small area. Whereas when an aircraft crashes at full speed, we find many parts over a wide area because of the massive energy involved.

We find here then a « low energy » crash. It really makes sense when we assess that we are only at 4,5 km from the end of the runway. The aircraft crashed shortly before landing when it was low and slow. Thus, this was a « low energy » crash.

This theory is also confirmed by the degree of destruction of the aircraft mentioned in the archives; 80 % and not 100% as would be the case if an aircraft crashed at high velocity from altitude, such as was the case of another Henkel 111 near Albi that we had investigated.

It is therefore highly probable that the tail and the wings tips were still complete. Unfortunately, for the crew as we mentioned, the nose of the He111 was made of almost entirely of Plexiglas which was fragile and offered no protection.

A strong gust of wind shortly before landing seems the most plausible cause of the accident. To provide a more complete investigation, I checked if some allied fighter may have claimed

a bomber in the area on the same date. I placed a question on a forum and the answer is clear “no, there was no claim that day in that area”. Such is the great benefit of the Internet!

So, in light of all these elements, the story of this crash has slowly taken shape and the “fiction” that began at the beginning of this article can actually be read as an accurate reconstruction of the last moments of Heinkel 111-H2 serial number 5559 .

This investigation allowed us to better understand this small, yet poignant event of WW2, sadly replicated many hundreds of times throughout the War. We share it with you online with our objective: remembering these forgotten aircraft and reviving the memories of their crews through telling their stories.

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