

## FIRE ON TAKE-OFF

It is 5 o'clock in the morning on the 22 day of July 1944, daybreak.

My name is Karl Labmayer (photo 2). I am Austrian and 4 months shy of my 21st birthday. A pilot of the German Luftwaffe I have just completed my training : first on gliders, after biplanes and then the Junkers 88 bomber. Today I prepare to take off in a Heinkel 177 « Greif », the flagship bomber of the Luftwaffe. I am quite proud to pilot such a beautiful aircraft: weighing up to 30 tons with a fuselage more than twenty meters, she has a wingspan of thirty. Armement consists of two cannons, six machine-guns and a bombload just over six tons. Our six aircrew onboard have formed a tight bound through several months of flying (Photo 3 : aircrew during training in Germany) : Siegfried Mattausch (photo 4), Heinz Lehmann, Siegfried Tritschler, Manfred Rehm (photo 5), we are all still young close to 21 years old. The chief meteorologist Walter Kuspert (photo 6) who has joined us is the oldest at 33 ; I have grown close to them these past months...

We are part of a weather reconnaissance unit, « Wekusta 2 ». Our mission consists of 10 hour flights above the Atlantic Ocean to ascertain the weather conditions and report them to Luftwaffe Command for preparation of future air operations.

My first operational mission on board the Heinkel 177 was four days ago, July 18. I can clearly remember each detail of this flight. Awaking at 2H30, we take benefit of a hearty breakfast before taking off into the early dawn. Brief moments allowed us to witness the beauty of the sky during our long flight above the Ocean. Sighting four RAF fighters off the coast of Ireland, we are forced to hide among the clouds to ensure our survival. In the late afternoon we arrive home, safe and sound, feted as heroes.

On the morning of July 22 we are ordered to return to the seas off Ireland. I line up on the 2 400-meter runway of Mont de Marsan. I increase engine power slowly. I know the vulnerability in the engines of the Heinkel 177 : two DB601 engines coupled together in each engine nacelle. An original yet delicate concept that frequently suffers from excessive heat (and fire) during take-off.

I verify one last time the pre-flight « checklist ». Every crewmember is at his post. I progressively increase power on the engines. Our aircraft shudders, accelerating forward with increasing speed. The tail wheel lifts off the ground : we are airborne. Passing the end of the runway I commence to raise the landing gear when a crewmember yells « Fire ! » One of the engine nacelle is engulfed in flames. We have no choice: we need to return and land as quickly as possible. I trigger a system to rapidly jettison the fuel load to lighten the aircraft. I struggle to maintain altitude but the aircraft is heavy and begins to descend. I reduce power on the left engine in an attempt to balance the aircraft. On the right, I shut off the fuel supply of the engine and feather the prop. I ease back on the controls but there is no response, the plane is doomed, she banks to the right and heads down. We approach the terrain below. Suddenly, the right wing strikes a tree : « it's a forest !! ».

The Heinkel 177 of Karl Labmayer has crashed with all hands, no chance exists for the six men on board. The plane has fallen not far from a farm. The inhabitants have heard the sound of the impact but are so afraid that they dare not exit the house. The resulting fire is intense due to the nearly thirteen tons of aviation gas carried by the plane, but the rain that falls during the morning slowly extinguishes the fire. The crash site is quickly cordoned off by occupation troops who remove the aircraft wreckage during the week. Two soldiers guard the site until the last of the work has finished.

The site is cleaned and the German military will later abandon the base at Mont de Marsan on the 20th of August 1944.

### **A PASSION FOR AVIATION**

75 years later, our team is unified by our passion of aviation and history. We seek to understand what happened on July 22 1944 and reconstruct the drama that occurred. We arrive at the crash site with the landowner who welcomes us warmly. All the authorizations necessary have already been procured, we are able to begin the search.

### **A SPLENDID ENVIROMENT**

Welcomed by a forest of magnificent pines (photo 7). Remnants of the aircraft in situ (photo 8). Numerous fragments of the Heinkel 177 see the light of day once again (photo 9). Pieces of molten metal (Photo 10) confirms a conflagration took place. We try to identify and give voice to vestiges exhumed. Cockpit gauge face (photo 11) from an indicator. Assorted plaques that were at one time affixed to various equipment (photo 12) : a « Zündumformer », a converter mounted on a weapon system, a component for the antenna of the FuG 10 radio, and a component of the Fug200 equipment of the flight engineer.

Instructions on a section of structure (photo 13) : «Verbrauchsmessungs Anlage zeigt ungenaue Werte, da Induktivgeber nicht geeicht» which translates « the consumption is indicative because the sensor has not been calibrated ».

Some tubing is discovered of varying dimensions and purpose (fuel, hydraulic etc...). (photo 14)

Metallic fragments discovered in great numbers (photo 15) are « skin », the thin layer of aluminium installed on the aircraft airframe. On some of these, the camouflage paint is still visible (photo 16).

The Heinkel 177 carried a significant quantity electrical equipment, we discovered from multiple components: cables, plugs, connectors, light bulb bases etc... (photo 17)

### **DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH**

For certain pieces, a deeper investigation is required. We dive into original source documentation and we rely on the knowledge of experts with whom we interact on specialized websites.

Several small pieces are identifiable only after a thorough examination (photo 18) : equipment from the cockpit instrument panel including the diaphragm for the airspeed indicator (2 & 3), Plexiglas (4), support clamp for an aircrew oxygen supply hose (5), seat harness and buckle (6 & 7) ;

On this piece, a part number inscribed (FL32259-2) allows us to determine that we have found a lamp which was utilized by a member of the crew (photo 19 and illustration 20/left page) .

This rotating dial (photo 21) indicated and set the barometric pressure on the altimeter. It was adjusted to the local pressure of the ground from which the plane was taking off and allowed with a « altitude standard» to guarantee a safe vertical separation from other planes.

This object's weight is considerable (photo 22) : it's lead, it resided in a vessel of acid, we have here an element of a battery.

This dial face (photo 23) is marked by a part number « FL22413 » which permits us to identify with precision: it was a back up instrument, an auxiliary equipment in case the failure of an electric or pneumatic indicator (photo 24).

This cylinder (photo 25) with a German inscription (« the first time : pull inward, the second time, push outward ») : the signal rocket installed in the aircraft's inflatable survival life raft (illustration 26).

This splendid cluster of dials (photo 27) contain ammeters (photo 28). These were on the flight engineer's control board (illustration 29).

Finally, the most striking discovery is certainly the gunsight of one of the aircraft's MG151 guns (photos 30 and 31).

Thus, we come to understand the use of these pieces discovered in the dirt, and they take on their full meaning, thanks to this rediscovered utility. Seen 75 year later, this function is very moving.

## **UNIQUE PIECES**

The pieces discovered are of a very precious historical interest because the Heinkel 177 is a part of the species of plane that have totally disappeared. Indeed, although more than one thousand were built, no complete Heinkel 177 survives today. Probably annoying witnesses of an era that needed to be forgotten, all the « Greif » were destroyed at the end of the war. Only a few parts remain today: a landing gear in England, a radio console in Washington, and some remains here and there around the world.

## **SPOT LIGHT ON HISTORY**

These pieces will ultimately be exhibited and highlighted in an aeronautical museum, with a scale model of the plane, to allow the general public to discover and visualize a forgotten aircraft but also an unlucky crew whose average age barely exceeded 20 years.

Because this is the vocation of our association and the goal of our approach : beyond the aircraft, it is the human drama that we seek to highlight.

We talk about the aviators who were lost during the Second World War, whatever their nationality, their origin. They were often young men in the prime of their lives, fallen into tragic circumstances, fulfilling their duty, and we commit them in memory, through exhibitions, conferences or articles like the one you have just read.

Gilles Collaveri

Gilles.collaveri@hotmail.fr

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