

A Pilot's Life Through his Photo Album

A photo album, recently given to us by the daughter of the French pilot, Pierre Mazières, enables us to follow his life.

Entry into aviation

Pierre Mazières was born on 30 January 1918 at La Londe-lès-Maures (83). From the time he was young, he was an aviation enthusiast, making drawings of aircraft for books. In 1936 he entered the French Armée de l'air (French Air Force), beginning his training at the Airmen School at Istres. He studied there for 20 months, graduating on 30 July 1937.

Between 1936 and 1937, he flew Potez 25 and Morane Saulnier 230 airplanes and experienced the typical life of a young student pilot. He received parachute training in the « jump tower», shared the same food as others at school, and witnessed spectacular accidents. He also observed rare aircraft such as the Loire 46, Hanriot 436, Romano 82, Bloch 152, and Bréguet 27. Among his friends is Bruno de Faletans who will fly a Yak 7 and die in the « Normandie-Niémen » group in Russia in 1944 with his mechanics. At the end of 1939, Pierre Mazières flies the American NAA-57, then the Potez 63.11. After being engaged for three years, he marries in January 1940. When the German army invades France, Pierre Mazières makes several dangerous reconnaissance flights. He is wounded during one of these flights and he receives two citations.

The war

On 4 June 1940, he performs a dangerous reconnaissance flight with fellow airman de Pange who will also fly later with the Normandie Niemen group in Russia. He is wounded during this flight, and he made a retranscription of it in his notebook. Let us read it:

“4 June 1940

Around 11AM, while I was sleeping under the shadow of a Potez wing, I hear a car arriving.

Lieutenant Bousquet gets off this car, shakes me, then, two other crew members arrive, the sous-Lieutenant de Pange is the observer, and the sergeant Le Corre is the gunner. We look at the maps on the tail of the aircraft, and Bousquet explains us the aim of the flight: check if the bridge of Mantes is destroyed. Reco flight in paralel to the Seine river, and searching for German troops. The mechanics prepare the aircraft, I get ready, I smoke a last cigarette, I am very nervous. All those who made such flight know this feeling, before you start the flight, which lasts until you seat in the aircraft.

I have a thought for the village of Jouy, for my parents. That's enough for the feelings, now, let's go.

I board the Potez.

I am handed a handgun, I have sworn to never be a prisoner, and I have decided to stick to my words.

Now, I feel better. I test the engines and the propellers. The crew is on board. I taxi the aircraft, I wave the mechanics on the ground for the last time, they give me a “shit” sign as a lucky sign, I take off, fly over the airfield, and fly north, in the direction of Mantes. I have my four machine guns ready, The weather is clear, the spring sun shines. We have a weather to get 12 Messerschmitts fall on your back.

Here is the Seine, then Mantes: the bridge is intact. I fly Northward. Here a village that was bombed, there is plenty of smoke above it.

I fly in zigzag, to avoid German troops that could shoot at us. Altitude is 100 mètres, 2300 RPM, on the engines, which means that we fly between 260 and 280 Km/hr I look at the sky with a circular look, at the ground, at my instruments, and especially at the oil temperature. Because the air is warm today, and I really don't want to overheat my engines.

Suddenly, after a hill, on a small road, I see one armored car, two light cars and four or five trucks.

«Be careful, I don't know what it is! » yells the observer to me. I dive on them.

Men jump out of the trucks. « Turn, turn !! yells again the observer, they are German.» I turn sharply to the left look behind, full power. De Pange shows me on the map where we are. I look at my engine. I keep an eye on the temperature, still normal. Ah, this good old “Gnôme & Rhône” engine! I start again to zigzags. Same altitude, same engine power.

I fly over a hillside, and in the valley, I see two cars and a few trucks. The guys from the truck run on the ground «The Germans! The Germans!», yells de Pange in the in the telcom system.

I turn sharply and de Pange asks me: «Do your machine guns work?» I answer him: «I think so, let us try them, we will know then.» «Let's go!».

I warn Le Corre «Mind, we attack them!» I go lower, I turn, and I arrive with engines at low pace, to make less noise. I am in the valley. Here is the village. Ah, the trucks! I go on them again; I am now flying 50 meters high.

The show can start. I trigger the guns. The four gun's noise surprises me. It makes an incredible noise in the cockpit!

«On the left, we are shot at!» says de Pange.

And from a field, I see white smoke coming to me. I can hear Le Corre's machine gun which bursts behind me. On who is he shooting?

Suddenly I hear Le Corre say «I am wounded.» I hear « boom » in the fuselage, and I can feel a sharp pain in my left backside.

«The bastards!» A strong anguish seizes me for a short moment. I turn sharply to the left. I follow the hill which is higher than me and goes down. Two men are climbing this hill. These bastards are for me. I trigger the guns and shoot only ten meters away from them. I fly very low above the hill, pull the handles with force. De Pange writes on his map the position of the Wehrmacht. I ask Le Corre «Are you alright? Are you hurt?» He answers me: «I am OK.»

I reduce the left engine throttle and fly pushing the yaw pedal maximum to the right. I take the direction of the Headquarters which requested the reco-flight. I touch my backside, with my hand: no blood. It is not a bad wound. We arrive near the headquarters, after five minutes looking for it. At last, here is the castle. We fly very low to drop the message, which is hang up to a weight, it falls in front of the entrance. We fly low again to be sure they have received it, they wave from the ground that they got it. Great. We now head onto the airfield.

I ask Le Corre «Are you OK?» No answer. I ask again, still no answer. In the rear visor, I can see he removes his helmet and unlocks his safety belt. That is good, he is not fainted nor dead. I have a look at the oil temperature. Ah, this is what I expected: the left engine begins to warm up. I reduce power on this engine to avoid landing in the countryside.

Here is the Seine river. An aircraft on the right. Shit! It is a Heinkel, I dive and fly low level.

He passes by and goes home. Maybe he did not see me, or maybe he ignored me, or hesitated before attacking.

Ah! Here is the road, the village! The headquarters with the boss. I fly just above the roofs, near the chimneys, waving with the wings. The friends have understood that I come back home. I make the approach to the airfield. I reduce the pitch, open the flaps.

The earth gets closer at 160 km/hr. Here is the ground. I pull gently on the stick. I wish I don't have a flat tyre.

A deep sound, here it is, I now drive in the young green grass of the meadow. I brake. I position the aircraft. The mechanics arrive running. I switch off the engines. The propellers stay quiet. The din stops. I can only hear the noise of the wind in the trees.

I open the plexiglass cockpit door and I yell «Hurry up, Le Corre is wounded!».Everybody arrives running all around. They take him out of the aircraft He has a bullet in the hip. Inside the fuselage there is a big red spot of blood.

A car drives de Pange and I into the field. I take care of the aircraft, of the parachutes. I touch my backside, no blood. Although the pain is strong. I walk away, slowly. I can feel – I live again. I am happy, the air is so good. Suddenly, I laugh nervously : «Ah: the bastards. I got them!»

In the car, we all laugh. I arrive at the headquarters. At the officers' mess, I am served a good aperitif. The Captain congratulates me : «You did a great job!»

There were eleven bullets in the aircraft. Luckily, the one that touched me had first struck the seat frame before my backside. There were holes everywhere in the aircraft. This was the proof that we had been shot from the valley.

I had been lucky. My wound was not bad; the piece of steel went out by itself two days later.

Pierre Mazières makes his last war flight on 14 June 1940, on the North of the Loire River, with a Potez 63-11. Here is his report :

«The last flight I did was on 14 June 1940. The crew was the following: Lieutenant Lassègues, observer, Sergent Grosjean, gunner, and myself, as a pilot.

We were at La Colombe, a small village at the North of the Loire River. Noon, I am having lunch and eating Roquefort cheese when the Captain arrives and says: « Mazières and Grosjean, hurry up, you have to go, right away!»

I leave the cheese, my appetite has been instantly cut by such a brutal news. I drink a glass of red wine and go to get ready. I take the Potez that I flew on 9 June. The engine has been fixed but the holes in the wings and in the fuselage are not patched, the mechanics have painted a small swastika around each of them.

Lassègues arrives and he explains to me the purpose of the trip. Looking for the German army in two directions: on the Northwest axis and to the North, into Dreux. Then, we will come back to the airfield, there is no message to drop. I write on a piece of paper the different headings to follow.

The engines run, I tune the propellers, run up is perfect! A last waving to say “bye”. I Get my machine guns ready. In case we meet the Germans. I would love to shoot them.

I start and I pull the throttle, the aircraft starts rolling, and progressively goes faster. I take off, switch the pitch, put the gear up, I fly low over the airfield and take the direction of Châteaudun, which is crowded with refugees.

The ceiling is at 800 meters and a light haze hides the ground. We go down to 100 meters to observe. Here the road we have to follow. I fly over it, zigzagging.

Lassègues cannot recognize where we are « I think we are lost.». We turn back.

Here is Châteaudun again, we fly around the city and we go above the road, the right one, this time. The road is quiet, except for a few refugees that hide in the haystacks when they hear the noise of the aircraft. We arrive at the end of the first area to observe: there is nothing to mention. I turn back, and go to the other area. I watch the sky, the ground, the engines. I fly lower. RPM is 2300, which is the standard flight power. There is nothing on the road.

Here is Dreux, we have another 4 or 5 km to fly and we will go back. If only I could shoot at something. I have a revenge to take. Ah! The sky gets clearer! A big blue hole is over Dreux. I look up and I see in front and above me nine Dornier aircraft that are slowly coming to us. They probably go to bomb there. I don't say anything and watch the sky. The Dorniers are not dangerous but are they or not accompanied by the fighters? This is the question. But what happens? The Dornier on the right leaves the group and heads to me, zigzagging, and he nose dives towards me.

He wants to attack me! But this guy is crazy !! I am more maneuverable and better armed than he is. Let us open our eyes.

This is frankly bad: in the blue hole, I could see shadows approach, and they fly in all directions. Messerschmitts! Ah, the bastards, I knew they would come! I can count a dozen of them, they fly to me.

Oh! But the attack is taking shape! If I took advantage of the low visibility to shoot one of them? Be careful! They get ready to attack all together! thanks, but they are outnumbering me. Twelve against one. Seventy two guns against eight. The fight is too unbalanced. I was not given the order to attack. They get closer to us. Too bad. I yell to Grosjean: «look at the Dornier! » I turn sharp, nose dive, and barrel roll. I pull up and I rush to the South. Lassègues turns his head in all directions to watch them. I fly one meter above the ground. RPM 2300, more would be dangerous. Grosjean tells me: «The bad guys have seen us.» The bad guys are the Messerschmitts. I tell him "Keep an eye on them and let me know if they come too close.»

I pull the throttle at the maximum and I turn, very low level.

360 km/hr, if we were not in wartime, I would get punished and confined to barracks.

I dive behind the hills, I hide behind the line of trees, this low visibility is helping me.

Sometime, Grosjean tells me «They lost us.» So much the better. Out of sight, out of mind But where are we? Ah! Here is the road to Chateaudun.

Here is the airfield. Landing manoeuvres. I fly by the trees. But I am too fast. After levelling, I realize it, I pull up, go around, I fly very close to the trees, I pull the stick, a loud noise, I touched the ground, I taxi, I brake and slow down the engines, and here are the friends;

«We have been lucky again, today.» I switch off everything. The Captain is here and we discuss. It was my last war flight.»

Then, the squadron GAO 456 goes progressively southwards: on 15 June, it is in the Cher, on the 17th it is at Limoges, on the 21st the aircraft land in Pau; the group is disbanded on 14 July 1940.

For Pierre Mazières, a long period of standstill starts. He works a short time in the property of the aircraft maker Potez, but he does not fly anymore.

He has two children in 1943 and 1944: a boy and a girl.

In 1943, he enters the French résistance and becomes a communication agent. When the south west of France gets free during the summer 1944, he goes to meet of his former chief, the Commandant Saget who is setting up a group with German Junkers Ju88 bombers found in Toulouse. In fact, the plants in Saint Martin du Touch near Toulouse (where the Dewoitine 520 were built) were doing maintenance and repairs on the Ju88s. When the German Luftwaffe left Toulouse, many Ju88s with spare parts were left and re-used by the French to continue the fight.

The French Armée de l'Air (Air Force) will therefore fight against the German army with repainted D.520 («groupe Doret») and Ju88 («groupe Dor») aircraft. Pierre Mazières goes with Groupe Dor.

On 13 November 1944 Pierre Mazières has flown only four hours since June 1940, 4 years ago. Never mind, he wants to fight. He is one of these pilots who want to fight anyhow. He is given a Ju88 with French roundels.

With a full crew, (Marius Oberty, André Galland, and Lucien Nicol), he is ready to take off from Blagnac with the Junkers Ju88 n°6, when the accident occurs.

Here is the full story, from the book of Pierre Dumollard «Junkers88 et 188 français»:

«On Monday 13 November, three aircraft had planned to go to Cognac Châteaubernard: the Aircraft n°2 of commandant Dor for a reconnaissance flight, the n°5 of commandant Saget for a liaison with headquarters of colonel Adeline, and the n°6 of Captain Oberty to receive instructions and continue to Royan.

The three aircraft start around 10h 40: n°2 and n°5 are going to the takeoff strip when n°6 has to switch off its left engine: a fastener on one of the cowlings is badly fixed and provokes vibrations.

After fixing it, the aircraft starts again and meets the two other aircraft . They take off with a Western heading, one after the other, respectively n° 2, 5 and 6.

The Commandant Dor, which has already turned left 180° is joined by the following aircraft, when he suddenly sees n°6 turning 90°to the other aircraft, it flies 50 meters lower. He cannot see it anymore while he is taking the

direction of Cognac, when he suddenly notices he high column of black smoke at Colomiers. Immediately thinking of an accident, he flies to it and he can see that the aircraft is burning on the ground. Dor and Saget come back immediately.

The first rescue team gather to the crash site, but with no hope. It is 11h 00. The bodies of the four crew members, Capt Oberty, Adjudants Galland and Nicol, and sergent-chef Mazières, are found between noon and 1 PM.

It appears that the aircraft had turned left left, touched the ground with the left wing tip, as the propellers marks could show, the aircraft smashed into the well of a property, partially destroyed a barn, and scattered in the small park.

The group suffered its first victims during a war flight”

In its notebook, Pierre Mazières had written:

«I hope that one of these days, I will be able to fly again, until I disappear in an accident, that is the only death I wish, because, dying in its bed, is a shame.»

During his funerals at Colomiers, his wife asks that a part from his aircraft is put inside his coffin.

And with an official decision dated 22 February 1945, Pierre Mazières has a decoration, the French «Médaille militaire», awarded posthumously.

65 years after these events an exhibition in memory of the Ju88 n°6, the aircraft of Pierre Mazières

So as to show the parts found in 2010, an exhibition dedicated to the Ju88 n°6 was set up at Aeroscopia museum at Toulouse Blagnac.

In the « archéologie aéronautique » section, you can see a model of the JU88 n°6 painted with Groupe Dor markings, and the remains of this aircraft that were found in 2010. The story of Pierre Mazières and his crew is related there and you can also see his helmet and the flight goggles that his daughter, Claudine gave us.

One of the relics that were found is very moving and symbolic: the watch of the dashboard, that stopped at the moment of the crash, on 13 November 1944, for this courageous crew.

A pilot, but also an artist

Pierre Mazières was not only a courageous pilot: he was also a gifted illustrator who gave himself to his passion, aviation. His drawings reveal the aeronautic life of the 1930's, with Bloch 160, Potez 63, Bréguet 693, Latécoère 301, etc. These drawings have been scanned and are visible on an Ipad at Aeroscopia museum, with also the pictures of his photo album.

Gilles Collaveri

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