

RODEO 65

January 1944

At the beginning of 1944, the allied supremacy in the air in France is slowly growing. Slowly but steadily, the Luftwaffe is dominated by the English and American forces.

On 21 January 1944, sixteen Royal Air Force Hawker Typhoons (1) belonging to Squadrons 193 & 266 take off by groups of 4 aircraft. It is a free fight in Northern Brittany, it is named « Rodeo 65 ».

The Typhoons are led by the squadron Leader Peter Lefevre (2 & 3). This pilot has already an outstanding career. He joined the RAF in 1938, he was shot down and bailed out three times, the first one during the battle of Britain, the second one in Italy, and a third time in Northern Brittany near Brest, where he was hidden by the French "résistance", sequestered through Spain and recuperated by the English Consulate before being repatriated to UK. He fought in Norway, Malta, and he has been awarded the prestigious DFC (« Distinguished Flying Cross »). He has already shot down 9 German aircraft: fighters (BF109, FW190) and bombers (Junkers 88, Heinkel 111) and even a seaplane (Heinkel 115);

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The 16 Typhoons cross the channel at an altitude of 650 meters, just below the cloudy ceiling. When they arrive on the French coast, they meet 6 Typhoons belonging to Squadron 193 flying back to their base.

The 16 aircraft start their journey. They fly North of Dinan, then go southward. At Rennes, they face "average to strong" FLAK (German anti aircraft guns). To avoid the city, the leader takes them to the South of Rennes at 30 meters high but the FLAK is chasing them. When they are 10 kilometers west of Rennes, they go back to the North, in the direction of Lannion.

SURPRISED WHEN THEY WERE ABOUT TO LAND

Marauding at an altitude of 30 meters and looking out for a prey, the Typhoons fly above the countryside of Brittany. Suddenly, a few kilometers from an airport, Peter Lefevre spots two aircraft, flying at 150 meters high, to the Northeast. They are about to land and one has already lowered its landing gear. Peter Lefevre identifies them as Messerschmitt 109s (5).

These aircraft belong to the reco squadron NAGr.13 which is based in Dinard. They have been modified to perform long distance reco, they carry powerful cameras and they are heavier and less maneuverable than standard Bf109s (6).

Peter Lefevre attacks the aircraft on the left and orders to the other section to shoot the Bf109 on the right.

Peter Lefevre gets closer to the Bf109 which has lowered its landing gear. The Bf109 has an approximate speed of 300 Km/h while the Typhoon flies at 500 km/h.

Peter Lefevre begins to shoot when he is at 150 meters from the enemy aircraft, getting as close as 90 meters. He can see several impacts, the Messerschmitt continues towards the airport, with an

angle of 25 degrees, as it was going to land, but it crashes and explodes within the perimeter of the airport.

Peter Lefevre pulls out violently to the left, and his wingman, DC Borland, which follows him, witnesses the German aircraft crash next to the airport runway.

FO. Meyer arrives too fast on the second Messerschmitt, he shoots but sees no impact. Knowing that other aircraft arrive behind him, he pulls out. Lieutenant Cassie (7) attacks in turn with short bursts. The Messerschmitt goes down at an altitude of 20 meters and tries to avoid the Typhoons by turning around a huge building that the English team identify as a church. Jock Inglis (8) attacks in turn, the Messerschmitt lowers its landing gear, flies higher and the pilot drops its canopy, probably to bail out. But there is an explosion, the aircraft goes down to the ground and crashes near a pond.

On their momentum, the Typhoons pass like a whirlwind above the airport, they come under some FLAK bursts but they are not hit.

The two Messerschmitts were performing a ferry flight and were flown by Franz Gregoritsch from Klagenfurt and Fritz Heber from Leipzig (9). The two German pilots are buried at Ploudaniel/Lesneven.

The sixteen English aircraft fly back home without sustaining any damage from the German FLAK.

A few days later, on 6 feb.1944, Peter Lefevre attacks the mine sweeper M156 in the Aber Wrach' bay (still in Northern Brittany), his Typhoon is hit, he bails out but too low (at 200 feet, i.e. 70 meters high), his parachute does not open and he is killed during this action.

Jock Inglis is killed in turn after D-day, on 12 June 1944, when his Typhoon strikes a high power cable near Potigny in Normandy in the Calvados department.

Deep into the archives

A long documentary work is performed ahead: the compilation of the Luftwaffe archives, the reports of the Royal Air Force (the « ORB »), and particularly the report of the intelligence officer of Squadron 266. Here is a resume of this report:

« S/L Peter Lefevre was leading 16 aircraft on the « Rodeo » itinerary Dinard-Rennes-Gael-St.Brieuc-Lannion. On the last leg, 2 Messerschmitt 109 were spotted, about to land. Lefevre attacked the first one which had lowered its landing gear. The second Me109 tried to escape, flying around a big building, it dropped its canopy, but exploded and crashed near a pond a few kilometers from the airport”.

By crosschecking the local statements with the archives, we see that all converges and this takes us to a small village in Brittany.

Looking for two Messerschmitt, 77 years later

On site, we are welcomed by the mayor of the village and several local personalities. Before our arrival, a collection of testimonies has been done, confirming that an aircraft crashed near a castle.

Arriving there, we discover a wonderful area, with the ruins of a 19th century castle that burnt 80 years ago. These enormous ruins evoke a sumptuous past. Locally, the legend says that the marquise rejected the help of the local farmers who came to extinguish the fire, because she feared that their clogs would scratch the wooden floor. Consequently, the castle burnt..

An Intact Windscreen

In front of the castle, there is a pond and a little river. We are informed that glass parts were found in this pond: by examining them, we immediately realize that this is the windscreen of the BF109 that we hold in our hands !

This windshield was made in two identical parts of glass. One is totally intact, and the other is broken in two. Its role was to protect the pilot from frontal shooting. Its material is reinforced glass : (*SiGla* : *Sicherheitsglas*) with several layers, to prevent a bullet penetrating the cockpit area and to protect the pilot from possible glass shards. The same technique is used today for automobile windshields, with a transparent film between two layers of glass.

This amazing part stayed in the mud of the river for more than 70 years, and by sheer chance, the mud protected it and kept it safely. Chance is also part of our job.

Other parts confirm that we have found the remains of a Messerschmitt 109

On site, we can start searching. We have obtained all the necessary approvals beforehand : from the owner of the land and from the archeological department of Brittany. We immediately find aircraft artifacts, some are just laying on the ground, and some structural parts still have the green camouflage paint. Near the river, other parts appear: the lead parts obviously come from the battery (16), there are pipes portions (17) and Plexiglas parts from the canopy match just like the pieces of a puzzle(18).

Here are the most interesting parts: the engine RPM indicator (19) and the lamp which the pilot used to illuminate his panel by night (20). Thanks to the part numbers written on them they are easy to identify (as an example, the lamp is « FL32253-1 »). You can see on this picture how we re positioned them on the dashboard panel (21). Finally, two parts attract our attention: a sliding door that enables the pilot to climb on board (22), and a frame which surrounded a maintenance door (23). These two parts are painted with a grey paint quite unusual for Bf109, we suppose that it was a paint specific to the reco aircraft.

A visit to the Aéroscopia museum in Toulouse helps us to position them on the aircraft (24) et (25).

It is clear that the Bf109 of Fritz Heber crashed in front of the castle. The discovery of the parts of the aircraft, the local testimonies and the cross check with the archives leave no doubt. What the English pilots identified as a church was probably the castle;

This investigation enhances a stunning marriage between a burnt 19th century castle and a crashed German WWII fighter;

Thanks to the local team support, a forgotten aerial fight has been rebuilt and can be now documented in the archives of the village.

This is the target of our association : revive forgotten stories by finding aircraft parts and crosschecking them with the local testimonies and archives.

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