

## TRAGIC NIGHTFLIGHT

Pau, 26 August 1938. 8PM. Thirteen Potez 540s take off for a navigation training flight.

In 1938, the Potez 540 is already an old-fashioned aircraft. With a wooden structure and fabric covered wings, its maximum speed is below 300 km/h but the recon groups are still equipped with them.

These 13 aircraft must perform a night flight on the itinerary Pau – Bordeaux - Toulouse, and check the railroad activity.

At 8PM, the weather forecast is good but quickly deteriorates.

The messages that are sent to the aircraft show it:

- 8PM : the weather is good
- 9PM : ¼ clouds
- 11h30: 6/10 cloud, ceiling at 1000 meters
- 11h36 : low fog , ceiling 600 meters
- 11h40 : getting worse
- 00h02 : ceiling 400 meters.

The Potez try to fly back to Pau but they face difficulties. The crews have different fates.

Commandant Louchard flies with no visibility at an altitude of 200/250 meters, he goes so low under the fog that he manages to see the light of the road to Bordeaux, in a hole in the fog. This enables him to land at 1h15.

Commandant Cornillon observes, at an altitude of 800 meters, long bands of fog, parallel to the small river next to the runway. An open space between two bands allows him to see the lights of the runway and he lands at 0h30.

Commandant Héraud flies over the airfield at 23h07. In a clearing in the fog, he can see the lights at the South East of the runway and the light tower but the runway is covered with fog, he prefers to go to Toulouse where he lands without any problem;

Sadly, two of these Potez will meet a terrible fate.

The pilot of the Potez number 136 is Commandant Bes. He has a glorious military career: he is badly wounded in 1926 by a bullet in his chest, during the revolt of the Druzes in French colonies in the middle east, as an observer student, in the 39e régiment d'aviation. His pilot takes him back, he survives and will be almost two years in convalescence before he successfully passes his pilot exams in may 1929.

Sad detail: amongst his crew, the (Chief Warrant Officer) adjudant-chef Blanc has already been in an aircraft lost during a night flight from which he bailed out safely.

In the dark, Commandant Bes flies over the runway, then the village of Mazerolles. He slowly flies around the village, engines at low speed, probably trying to land, but at 23h52 (the time indicated on a watch worn by one of the crew found after the crash), he goes down in a wooded area near Momas. The right wing clips a tree, then the fuselage slams into an oak tree and finishes in an

excavation full of water. The aircraft burns, leaving no chance for her crew. The remains of the Potez are found scattered over 70 meters.

The Potez Number 52 tries to land at 3 AM. Its pilot, Commandant Boisson also had a brilliant military career. He lowers the landing gear, pulls up the antenna, and heads to the runway, with engines running slowly but he touches some trees and the aircraft crashes in a small river, the Luy de Béarn, the fuselage ending upside down in the river, near the village of Montardon. Here too, the complete crew is killed (Sergents Rella, Reulet & Vasseur).

How to explain these two crashes? The Gendarmerie report produced after the crashes concludes « both accidents are due to deteriorating weather conditions »

Indeed, in 1938, the means of navigation for flying in the fog are not performing well. It is not surprising that both crews trying to come back at any cost to their base miss the approach and end up in a tragedy.

The two accidents are very much publicized by the media. The Préfet, the « chef de Cabinet » and the « commissaire spécial » arrive on site to inspect the wrecks; a ceremony takes place in the church of Saint Martin de Pau with the bishop of Bayonne who exalts the spirit of dedication of the victims.

The aircraft wrecks are taken away and forgotten...

### **Two forgotten aircraft and their crews live again**

80 years later, the association Aérocherche decides to look for the remains of these two aircraft. The compulsory administrative paperwork is done before any search and all official authorizations are obtained (owner of the land, city hall, archeological services)

Local testimonies are gathered in particular the one of Commandant Adias, 97 years old, allowing to better rebuild the puzzle and understand what happened on the fateful day of 26 August 1938.

When the two Potez 540 crash, Colonel Adias is 18 years old, he is a young military soldier in Armée de l'air. He explains to us that he knew well one of the crew who was in the hangar next to his. After the crash, he was in charge of guarding the wreck of one the Potez, and he spent the night standing watch, with a "single barrel shotgun with a bayonet". He shows us the exact place where the aircraft crashed, and explains that the fuselage was upside down, one wing hanging up in one of the trees. All this can be clearly seen in the photographs.

Colonel Adias had afterwards an incredible career in the French Armée de l'Air, logging more than 36,000 flight hours on 126 different types of aircraft, and he holds the world record of the number of flight combats performed: 1241.

On site, the search begins and remains are found.

### **Moving remains**

The parts found 80 years later are special. Indeed, the French l'Armée de l'Air has the bad habit to scrap all obsolescent aircraft. So many beautiful aircraft have disappeared for ever: Potez 63, Bloch 152, Léo45, Armagnac, Languedoc, etc ... The Potez 540 is one example and not even one single aircraft still remains today. So, the parts we found that day are the only remaining of Potez 540 in France.

On the number N52 crash site, we find many pipes (10).

This little rule with graduation comes from a drifting measure equipment DUBOIS-IMPAR which allowed to calculate the drift of the aircraft, through the small lateral window of the navigator. The piece found is the small part bottom left of the drawing. .

These elements come from equipment found on the instrument panel, probably the pilot's clock.

Here, a lock from the windshield same type to be found on the French « 2CV » Citroën car

An aeronautical nut and a small piston; burnt scories shows that a fire occurred;

On the crash site of the other aircraft, this very small portion of skin of the aircraft (Potez N°162) exhibits the kaki paint still shiny, of the 1938 standard camouflage.

Other parts are found: ammunition cartridges, a part is interesting because a piece of wood is still attached to it, showing the importance of wood in the aircraft construction of the 30's.

Here is a fuse, several small equipment components and other miscellaneous parts.

We discover on some parts a beautiful engineering and manufacturing process, but it is not easy to find their usage on aircraft .

Some « skin », the thin aluminium that covered the airframe.

All these parts will be protected and stored; some of them will be exhibited in the city hall of Momas, remembering the fateful destiny of eight crew members trying desperately to land on the night of August 1938.

The discovery of these parts together with the interview of Colonel Adias gives an exceptional tune to this day. These aircraft parts take us back to a great moment in time, the period that Colonel Adias lived in the '30s, and that he shares with great emotion.

Aérocherche

**[Gilles.collaveri@hotmail.fr](mailto:Gilles.collaveri@hotmail.fr)**

### **Other artefacts**

It is interesting to discover some parts not related to the aircraft, but showing the history of the land where the aircraft crashed;

At Momas the aircraft crashed near a river mill today disappeared: here is the lock of the door. Then a so-called « soap » this coin is so worn that we cannot recognize, it is probably a “denier tournoi” coin from the XVI century, proving that this site has been occupied for centuries.