

TOULOUSE 23 JANUARY 1944: THE LUFTWAFFE IN DEEP DIRE

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION IN THE SOUTHWEST OF FRANCE

End 1943, the German army occupies the Southwest of France and has a strong presence there.

During the autumn of 1943, Field Marshal of the Luftwaffe, Hugo Sperrle, inspects the airbase of Toulouse-Francazal. Exiting a corrugated aluminum Junkers 52, the «fat » Marshal inspects the troops (1), shakes hands of the soldiers wearing their parade uniforms, and salutes in particular the staff of Squadron KG76.

This squadron, (« KampfGeschwader » 76 – fighting squadron) is equipped with twin engine bombers Junkers 88 (2). It is an attack squadron, but it is also a training squadron, for the young pilots, before they go on to the front.

Based in the former French Air Force base of Francazal, it often « shows off » for psychological reasons, to impress the local population. For instance, on 9 November 1943, an aerial parade takes place above Toulouse. The Ju88 of the KG76 fly low above the roofs of Toulouse (so called “Pink city” because of the color of the bricks) (3) while the soldiers march in the street with an orchestra.

23 JANVIER 1944: TALLY HO!

On Sunday 23 January 1944, the Luftwaffe is in battle order. The allied have landed the day before in Italy, at Anzio-Nettuno (opération « Shingle » (5)) and all the German aircraft based in the South of France are flying this day.

More than 200 aircraft are flying that very day. The Heinkel 177 of the squadron KG40 take off from Bordeaux, the Junkers 88 of the KG26 from Montpellier, and the Dornier 217 of the KG100 from Toulouse/Blagnac.

CRASH AT TAKE OFF ... AND LANDING

In Toulouse Blagnac, at 13H30, a Dornier 217 bomber with 4 men on board (*) fails to take off and crashes near the repair hangars of the French Armée de l’air (« Ateliers de Réparations de l’Armée de l’Air » =« ARAA »). The bombs it carries explode (6) and the explosion is so violent that some of the stain glass windows of the nearby cloister of the Bénédictines are damaged by the blow.

The crew is wounded but escapes the wreck and survives. The French « Gendarmerie Française” even writes a report about this event, to the attention Feldgendarmerie (7).

Flying above the crash scene, a Junkers 88 of the KG76 (**) can see the accident. The pilot is so impressed by this vision that he fails to land properly in Francazal. His aircraft is classified «10% damaged» by the Luftwaffe. The German report (decrypted by the English: « ULTRA » message) reports the declaration of the pilot of this JU88 and its consequences (8): «to justify his hesitations, the pilot stated that he was very much impressed by the crash of a Dornier 217 at Blagnac he had observed while he was executing his own landing. A disciplinary measure against this pilot and his dismissal from the flying staff are required”. Even during the war, the German strictness applies.

A TRAINING FLIGHT THAT ENDS TRAGICALLY

At the same time, in the Southwest of Toulouse, a young crew is training for bombing on a Junkers 88 as well (**). It is composed of four young men (9).

Suddenly, an engine failure occurs. The aircraft, trailing long black smoke behind one engine, tries to go back to Francazal, but it is not high enough.

Shortly after having flown over the Garonne River, it makes a U turn, probably with the hope to reach a clear area (10) Then, possibly as the aircraft stalled on the side with the inoperable engine, in an asymmetrical and deadly stall?

The aircraft arrives at very low altitude above the riverbank, it avoids a first slope, but it can't avoid the second embankment and collides at full speed.

THE AIRCRAFT FULL OF FUEL EXPLODES AND BURSTS IN FLAME.

The aircraft burst in flame, instantly killing its crew. The aircraft is 90% destroyed (***). Only the wingtips and the tail are recognizable.

A young man from the neighboring village arrives quickly at the crash site, and he manages to steal a machine gun off the aircraft, after cutting a strap that still retained it. He brings it back home but his father, fearing retaliations, orders that he get rid of it.

The German troops are stationed only a few hundred meters from the crash site, in barracks that still exist today. They rush to extinguish the fire, but it is too late, the crew did not have a single chance to survive the violence of the crash.

The remains of the aircraft are removed later. This is not an easy task, as the bridge over the Garonne River is narrow, and a few days later, an ox cart blocks the bridge in front of a German truck loaded with aircraft remains.

FORGETTING ..

Time flies, memories fade away and the witnesses of this event disappear. Until one day when a friend in Brazil sends me an email « Did you see this picture? This JU88 crew was killed in a crash near Toulouse ». And the name of the village is written on the back of the picture. By crosschecking with the German archives, I get the confirmation of a KG76 JU88 crash.

A phone call to the village city hall provides me the contacts of an elderly gentleman, fond of history, who confirms he heard about this crash. He manages to collect memories locally, and he gets us in touch with owner of the land.

A file is provided to the archeological department of the area, including the written greenlight of the landowner, and we can start to search.

THE PECES OF THE PUZZLE COME TOGETHER

The search confirms the scenario above: the parts we found are clearly from an aircraft (aluminum) and they are torn and burnt, confirming a violent crash followed by a fire. Here are the details: (1) buckle of a harness of one of the crew members (2) cartridge from the machine gun (3) electrical connector (cable inside) (4) pipes coming from a static airport (5) circling from an equipment of the dashboard (6) miscellaneous components (7) fragments of the skin of the aircraft (8) circular (9) miscellaneous components.

On this picture, we have an electrical generator (1) a circling from the engine (2) aluminum parts (3) pipes (4)

Finally, much slag is found (15) the fire was definitely terrific!

Local youths were invited to dig with us: we familiarize them to the history, to heritage preservation, and to the respect of the parts we have found. When the father of the owner of the land arrives and informs them what he saw, the kids can't believe their ears: they listen to a witness of history. He saw the aircraft when it crashed! They discover History and are stunned. A few days later, they will share their experience in school by making a presentation about aircraft archeology to the other pupils.

So, starting from a simple email, then unwinding the archives, the testimonies, our investigation could shed some light on a terrible day for the Luftwaffe in Toulouse on 23 January 1944.

It also reminds of a crucial day during WWII: the allied landing in Italy which was a turning point in the war.

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(*) Do217 E-5 Wnr 5406 immatriculé 6N+CC, Capt Frantz Eberthäuser, Feldwebel Eberhard Fessenmeyer, Unteroffizier Johannes Sachy, Obergefreiter Horst Held

(**) Junkers 88 A-14 Wnr 4557 immatriculé F1+GU

(***) Junkers 88 A-4 Wnr 300232 immatriculé F1+OU Equipage: Obgfr Heinz Schuck, Uffz Günther Fischbach, Uffz Karl Kühnl, Obgfr Alfred Specht

(****) archives de la Luftwaffe « absturz bruch 90% » = détruit à 90%

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