

REVIVING A MYTHICAL FIGHTER

Falls 1942

The famous German squadron JG2 « Richthofen » named after the famous ace of WWI, the “red baron”, is based in the North of France. It is equipped with the brand new outstanding Focke-Wulf 190 fighters. But the JG2 must face the English attacks: the Royal Air Force aircraft which were attacked in England by the Luftwaffe in 1940 and 1941 are now the aggressors and they come and harass the Luftwaffe aircraft on their own airfields, in France.

On 15 October 1942, for example, eight « Boston » bombers escorted by spitfires bomb Le Havre harbor, and the Luftwaffe interferes and fights back. It is probably during this dogfight that the Unteroffizier August Stiefelbogen from JG 2 must perform an emergency landing near Bernay, in the Eure department. His aircraft is destroyed, and Stiefelbogen is wounded but he comes back and flies again with the JG2 a few days after that incident.

End of 1942...

The JG2 is slowly moving southwards towards Northern Africa to reinforce the German troops of the “Afrika Korps”.

The second group of the JG2, to which August Stiefelbogen belongs, follows the route: Tours-Marseille-Naples (where the Vésuvio volcano is then active)-Reggio di Calabria (the end of the Italian “boot”) and finally, Comiso, in Sicilia.

It is during one of these ferry flights, on 13 December 1942, that Unteroffizier August Stiefelbogen collides with the mountains, in the bad weather, fifty kilometers North of Carcassonne in the South West of France.

The crash

Here is a description of the accident, related by Paul Bacou, the former mayor of the nearest village of August Stiefelbogen crash place (extract of his book «memory duty» written in 1998):

« on 13 décembre 1942, it was a Sunday, a German aircraft heavily loaded with ammunitions crashed not far away from the so called “pass of the man” , near the Vergnelongue farm.

The pilot, the only crew in the aircraft, had not seen a hedge of beeches in the fog. The aircraft collided into the hill and exploded. The cartridges were thrown all around.

Let us remind that the « free zone » had been invaded one month ago – by the German army- , and since that time, the sky above our mountains was continuously flown over by German transport aircraft that were supplying men and material to the south of the country.

Sylvie Huc, from his farm, the « métairie basse », had seen the aircraft fly over her and she succeeded in locating the crash place. With bravery, she went on site, willing to provide help to the occupants of the aircraft, but she discovered the body of the pilot who had been instantly killed, and thereafter she informed the police ».

August Stiefelbogen has collided with the ground at high speed and he has been instantly killed.

The aircraft is burning, the engine of the aircraft has been torn away, and is twenty meters away from the FW190 airframe, the fuel is in fire and the ammunitions are spread all around the wreck (a few years later, when a bush fire will locally start, the local inhabitants will hear the cartridges explode).

The burnt body of the pilot is extracted and laid next to the FW190 wreck. It is covered with a sheet, with a stone at each angle to maintain it, and the German army promptly arrives to recover it.

A lady who lives around finds the pilot’s leather case which contains documents. She keeps it for a while, but her husband, for fear of retaliations prefers to hand it back to the German Army (*).

At the end of December, the parents of August Stiefelbogen receive an official letter from the Luftwaffe informing them of the death of their son :

« I have the duty to bring sad news to your attention;

An accident happened to your son in the south of France, probably on the 12 of December, during a ferry flight between the North of France and Italy, and unfortunately he was killed.

During the short period when your son belonged to the squadron, we learnt to appreciate him.

We lose a good comrade, an outstanding man and a pilot who was always available, and in which the highest hopes were placed.

We will always remember him in the squadron.

We had unfortunately lost a few days earlier an Oberfeldwebel in similar circumstances.

(Note : here the signatory makes allusion to Oberfeldwebel Alfred Kretzschmar who crashed during a ferry flight as well on 10 december 1942, near Millau, also with a FW190) ;

PS : We will send you back promptly the personal belongings of your son to your home address”.

More than half a century later

The village has kept the memory of this accident and after having obtained all the official authorizations, we take contact with the grandson of Sylvie Huc: Aimé. He takes us to onto the area where the FW190 A3 serial number 210 crashed 73years earlier. A beautiful landscape welcome us, but it takes two hours to locate precisely the crash site of the FW190.

Many small parts are unearthed: they are often torn and burnt, showing that the aircraft collided violently and burnt fiercely.

The fragments of a mythical plane

Our investigation in the ground enable us to discover many parts, and some of them are very self-explanatory:

Melted metal (scories) show that the fire was fierce,

A part with a marking in German Language « Pressluft 31,... atu » = air pressure, confirms that we have found a German aircraft,

A part with yellow paint: maybe the famous color which was painted on the engine cowling and the wingtips of the JG2 Richthofen aircraft ?

A small chain which was fitted on a magnéto (FL21118),

Some small parts here after (1) a melted plexiglass fragment from the hood, (2) electric isolators made of china, somehow connected with the radio installation, (3) small glass parts from equipment fitted in the cockpit, (4) an electrical transformer, (5) a portion of skin, torn and bent by the shock (6) empty shell from the 20mm caliber canon (on the left) and from the caliber 13mm machines guns on the right, (7) buckles from straps and links from a chain (8) miscellaneous equipment components (9) a seal in pristine status (11) a rotating part probably from the engine;

Finally, we find what looks like a tap but prove to be a grease pump (a tooling) which was used to lubricate the mechanisms. It sounds quite logical that crews take such a tool with them for a ferry flight, to be able to grease parts during stopovers.

Flashback on the pilot's life

Deep investigations in Germany have shed some light on August Stiefelhagen and his family.

August Stiefelhagen was living in N°104 “Heiderstrasse” in Arsbeck, a little city close to the Dutch border, today named Wegberg.

His family was living in this house, close to the Sainte Aldegonde church.

In the 30's, there used to be at the first floor a shop selling paint and wallpaper, and the Stiefelhagen family was at the second floor. The kids were under the roof, having bedrooms in the attic.

August's father, Christian, was between 1940 and 1943 a policeman (« Gendarmeriemeister »), and August's sister, Louise, worked for the German intelligence; A report was made about her and is kept at the French Historical Defense service (Service historique de la Défense) in Vincennes castle, near Paris :

« Synthesis of the Abwehr "IIIF" of Lille on avril 10, 1946 (Cptn. Collet, Lille 10.04.1946).

"STIEFELHAGEN Louise, Secretary of Hegener. She was from Arsbeck at the Dutch border. Worked for a so-called Landrat at Erkelenz. She arrived at Lille on 4 November 1940. She followed Hegener at Arras and stayed there after his departure. She knew the secret agents better than Hegener.

Description: quite tall, strong woman, 26 year old, do not speak French, has escaped"

Notwithstanding our efforts, we have not been able to locate any descendant of the Stiefelwagen family but if our readers can help us in that task, we shall be delighted and we shall be glad to show them the parts of this aircraft which was flown more than 70 years ago by a member of their family.

Out of oblivion

These small metallic parts found alongside a hill in the South West of France triggered a fascinating investigation on a young German pilot who was totally forgotten.

A famous sentence states that a « soldier dies twice: the first one when he is killed, the second one when he is forgotten ».

By taking out of oblivion this young German soldier, we have contributed to the duty of memory and we trust that we somehow made him live again a second time.

(*) : Description based on Paul Théron's testimony, recorded in 2016. Paul was 18 year old in 1942.