

WHEN THE CONDOR FELL

« A historical aircraft »

It is the beginning of 1939, and the near three-year civil war in Spain, which would favor the Nationalists over the Republicans, will soon be over. To that end, starting in 1936, Germany provided airplanes and crews – part of what was called the Condor Legion – to support the Nationalist forces and, ultimately, Spain's leader for many years thereafter, General Franco. Those airplanes, Junkers Ju 52s, Heinkel He 111s, and Messerschmitt Bf 109s, flown in battle for the first time by novice German airman, proved to be a deciding factor.

On the evening of 25 January 1939, near Perpignan, along the French border, a lone Heinkel 111, a twin-engine medium bomber, belonging to the Condor Legion is chased by Republican fighters. This aircraft bears the number 25-12 painted on its fuselage; the pilot is Claus Bötker, and his crew consists of Uffz. Fritz Seiler, Uffz. Armin Möller, and Uffz. Otto Adler.

Trying to escape the fighters, the German plane crosses the French-Spanish border. In an attempt to gain speed, it drops 17 bombs near the village of Formiguères, 14 of which explode close to the village's houses. Luckily, no one on the ground is hurt.

Trapped in the mountains

Thereafter, the airplane takes a northwest route, flies over several French cities: Ax les Thermes, Argelès, etc. However, fatefully, around 2120, it crashes at the end of a valley in the south of Tarbes. Apparently, the plane tried to return to Spain using this valley (1), but it became trapped by the high rugged landscape.

The next morning, rescuers find the wreck (2) and the remains of the crew - the four German aviators have been instantly killed. Their corpses, carried by donkeys, are brought down to the village (3), and the wreck stays where it crashed. A precise inventory of the objects in possession of the aviators is made by the French Gendarmerie (local Police Department) before they are buried in the village cemetery (attached, but in French!).

The event is reported by the various media, and most French newspapers mention it on their front pages: "le temps", "le Figaro", "l'Humanité", and, of course, the local newspaper reports "La Dépêche du midi".

A surprising story

When the German army invades the so-called "free zone" (the South of France) in November 1942, it discovers that the He 111 crew was buried with respect in the village. In return, the Germans decide to release four French prisoners from this area. Thus, during the spring 1943, four men from the village will return home. Today, the German crew is buried in the huge military cemetery of Berneuil en Charente (4), in the West of France. Time goes by and the remains of the Heinkel 111 are forgotten alongside the mountain.

Almost 75 years later...

To make history live again, in possession of all necessary authorizations, we go to the crash site. We search carefully, as we are very aware of the historical importance of these remains.

With bare eyes, we can't see much at first, except a large propeller hub (5). However, after a careful inspection, a few very small parts are found: a connector, a fuse, a fragment of Plexiglas (6), an up-lock assembly with a fine working mechanism (7), the frame of a fuselage window (8), a fragment of Bakelite (which is equivalent to current composite materials) that was used during this period (9), and parts with markings that show that this is, indeed, a German aircraft:

- A trigger on which is written «raste – ziehen » (jam-pull), (10 & 11).
- A plate originally fitted to a piece of equipment (12).

Several gages are also found (their faces are marked for quantity and pressure) that reflect damage caused by the crash (13). Somehow, incredibly, a bezel ring and glass that separated from a gage are found intact and unbroken; the ring is painted yellow, which indicates the gage is from the airplane's fuel system.

A nice airframe part can be identified on the original drawing (15). Another part shows the different colors that were applied one after the other on the aircraft: the standard protection green "RLM 02", the brown, and then the grey of the Nationalist aircraft (16);

Along with a number of complete machine gun ammunition cartridges, we find several empty cartridge cases (17) - this proves that the airplane was attacked and defended itself by shooting at its assailants.

Certainly not a standard part of a He 111, a fragment of a bottle is found (18). My neighbor, a worldwide known oenologist immediately states: "this was a bottle of beer, you can see it by the thickness of the glass. This bottle exploded in a violent shock, the shape of the glass crack shows it." We have most certainly found a piece of a bottle that was on board the plane.

Here is strange molten shape, consisting of aluminum, which melted due to the heat of the fire, around steel clamps which did not melt (19).

A plate reveals the identity of the aircraft

Then, we discover a plate bearing a specific airframe number (20). Thanks to an incredible luck (so far, this happened only once in my numerous searches), we have found a data plate which identifies the type of the aircraft: a Heinkel He 111B, its manufacture date: July 1937, and the manufacturer's serial number: 2214.

This serial number is also written on other parts (21 & 22) and it enables us to trace the service life of this very aircraft. We discover that it is one of the first models of He 111, with the pilot's windscreen and cockpit transparencies placed traditionally above the fuselage. (On latter models of the He 111, Plexiglas formed the entire front of the fuselage where the cockpit was located.) The plate's manufacture date of

July 1937 clearly proves that this aircraft did not participate in the horror of the Guernica bombing (which took place in April 1937).

By searching on the WWW, we find pictures of this He 111 when it was based in Spain, with marks "25-12" (23) on its fuselage. It flew with squadron 4/KG88 and once suffered landing gear retraction problems (24). A detail clearly visible on the pictures of the wreck - the unique insignia painted on the vertical fin - further confirms the identity of the aircraft we have found. Heinkel 111s of the Condor Legion often bore individual personalized markings that were different from one aircraft to the other (picture 25 show one such marking, a witch on He 111 number 25-9). "Our" He 111 had a "lucky" shamrock painted on its tail, which can clearly be recognized in the pictures of the crashed aircraft (26).

The watch of one of the crews

Finally, we discover a very emotional object: a watch mechanism (27). Our friend, André, analyses it and his conclusions are very clear: "This watch was made in the 30s. It was made in Switzerland and this model was one of the most exported one, to different countries to Europe, including Germany." The corners of the dial are bent down, showing that the mechanism has been violently expelled out of the watch case. These clues put together lead us to think that this watch was most probably the watch of one the crew members. Maybe the owner of this watch was one the men standing in front of the aircraft on the picture 23???

These historical remains of this He 111 will be displayed in the museum "Aéroscoopia" that will open in Toulouse in front of the A380 assembly line - all will be welcome there in 2014.

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Dédicace : this article is dedicated to Marcel Fabre who was kind enough to lead me to the site and who unfortunately passed away too early.

Bibliography : Jeanne Ripol « Lavedan et pays Toy, société d'études des sept vallées»

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23 :Schiffer Military History The Legion Condor by Karl Ries / Hans Ring (ISBN 0-88740-339-5)

24: Vladimir Nikiforovs archives;