

REVIVING A MYTHICAL FIGHTER

Fall 1942...

The famous German squadron JG 2 « 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 fighter. But JG 2 must face the English attacks: the Royal Air Force aircraft that were attacked in England by the Luftwaffe in 1940 are now the aggressors in 1941. They 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 - the Luftwaffe interferes and fights back. It is probably during this dogfight that the Unteroffizier August Stiefelwagen from JG 2 must perform an emergency landing near Bernay, in the Eure department. Stiefelwagen's is wounded and his aircraft destroyed, but he comes back and flies again with the JG 2 a few days after this incident.

End of 1942...

JG 2 is moving slowly southwards towards Northern Africa to reinforce the German troops of the “Afrika Korps”. The second group of JG 2, to which August Stiefelwagen 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 in poor weather, that Unteroffizier Stiefelwagen collides with the mountains fifty kilometers north of Carcassonne in the southwest of France.

The crash...

Here is a description of the accident, related by Paul Bacou, the former mayor of the village nearest to the location of August Stiefelwagen's crash:

« on 13 Décembre 1942, it was a Sunday, a German aircraft heavily loaded with ammunition 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.

The « free zone » had been invaded one month ago by the German army. Since that time, the sky above our mountains was continuously overflowed by German transport aircraft supplying men and material to the south of the country.

From her farm the « métairie basse », Sylvie Huc 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 Stiefelwagen has collided with the ground at high speed and been instantly killed. The remains of the aircraft, its engine torn free lying twenty meters from the airframe, are burning, fueled by spilled gasoline. Ammunition is scattered around the wreck. (A few years later, when a bush fire starts in that area, the local inhabitants will hear the cartridges explode).

The burnt body of the pilot is laid next to the Fw 190 wreckage. It is covered with a sheet, with a stone at each angle to secure it. The German army promptly arrives to recover the fallen airman. A lady who lives nearby finds the pilot's leather case which contains documents. She keeps it for a while, but her husband, fearing retaliation, prefers to hand it back to the German Army (*).

Notwithstanding our efforts, we have not been able to locate any descendant of the Stiefelhagen family, but if our readers can help us in that task, we shall be delighted and honored 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 southwest 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.

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

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