

The “Ville de Toulouse” Does Not Answer Anymore

A tragic evening...

It is 23 March 1938. A Dewoitine 338 (D.338) airliner, registered F-AQBB and christened “Ville de Toulouse” (City of Toulouse), is flying in poor weather above the Pyrénées Mountains. The D.338 is a modern airplane (first flight 1936) and “Ville de Toulouse,” one of only 30 D.338s built, is nearly new, having completed its maiden flight on 20 October 1937. In service with Air France on that day in March, it is flying from Dakar to Toulouse, having already made stops at Casablanca, Oran and Barcelona. On board are 3 crew members (pilot Henri Guy, radio-navigator André Leymarios and mechanic Etienne Duthuron) and 5 passengers.

As the D.338's flight to Toulouse continues into the evening the weather is windy with mist and snow. Radio contact is established with Perpignan, but the quality of the communication is bad. The D.338 flies on and regularly gives its position. However, Toulouse would not be reached that night.

At around 8:07 p.m. the inhabitants of a small village in the Oriental Pyrénées Mountains hear an engine noise, followed by an explosion. Tragically, “Ville de Toulouse” collided with a cliff on Mont Canigou at 2100 meters. The aircraft explodes and burns out, instantly killing all onboard. Villagers gave their accounts: “heard clearly the shock against the mountain, followed by the noise of the aircraft rolling down the slope of the peak on which it crashed. Flames were observed 2 to 3 minutes after the crash, in a break in the clouds, which allowed the witnesses to locate precisely the crash site and find the wreck in the middle of the night.”

A rescue team leaves immediately for the crash site. The next morning, at dawn, they inspect the location near the top of the mountain and discover that the fated airplane missed clearing the peak by only 10 meters! The newspaper “L'indépendant” dated 27 March described what the rescue team discovered: “further to the fuel tank explosion, the whole front of the rock is black. Huge sections of aluminum sheets are embedded in chinks and a large portion of the aircraft of the lies at the bottom of the cliff.”

In the days following the accident, the bodies and the mail (7 mail bags are intact and 3 have been ripped open) are taken down the mountain in the snow with difficulties. It is later learned that the pilot Henri Guy had replaced a colleague at the last minute because he wanted to return quickly to Toulouse to visit his spouse who was sick and, ironically, one of the passengers was going to the funeral of his father. On 28 March a moving ceremony was held in memory of the fallen crew in Toulouse. In the presence of the Chief Executive Officer of Air France, each of the men was awarded a posthumous citation.

77 years later...

We seek to rediscover the “Ville de Toulouse.” Before our research operation can be launched, however, considerable administrative work is necessary. All relevant authorizations must be obtained. In this case, the owner of the land on which the crash site is located, which is the city hall, promptly gives a green light to our plans. Then, the Directorate of Archeology in Montpellier is contacted and is provided with a very complete file explaining the target of the operation, means to be used, and our intent for the sake of history. All necessary details are entered.

When “D-Day” arrives, a local guide takes us to the site. We walk more than 3 hours in very hilly surroundings - the mountains are sharp there. This trip operation is physically very challenging and we all suffer from the tough walk. But we are rewarded for our physical efforts when we reach the place of the fallen airliner.

At the crash site...

A lot of D.338 remnants remain there, many in a pristine state. They quickly remind us the fate of the “Ville de Toulouse.” Airframe structure is still lying on the rocks. Equipment components are spotted and several parts still have identification plate on them with the names of the suppliers, such as Bronzavia and Labinal .

Some parts of the aircraft are terribly torn, showing the violence of the impact, like this door unit. There is a neck which guided the flight control

cables to avoid them rubbing on the interior of the wing. A part of the instrument panel, marked with the beautiful calligraphy that is typical of the style of the 30's. The markings found on some parts offer plenty of interesting information (see note here under). Also, we find a couple of remains of personal objects which are very moving, a remembrance of the persons who died there, a comb fragment and some bottle shards.

A work of memory

Our work aims at reviving forgotten flying machines and their crews. This is always done with the utmost respect, whether for the crash site, the aircraft or those who were onboard. With this spirit, we make contact with the son of the radio-navigator and the grand-daughter of the pilot. Passed the first moment of surprise, they are grateful for the task we have started in memory of their ancestors. Several documents and some pictures of the crew members are exchanged between us, thus contributing to the revival of a glorious airliner and its crew and passengers that would tragically perish in the mountains.

The D.338 remains that were discovered in the Pyrenees Mountains are preserved in this spirit of memory and honor. Their rarity gives them a real historical value, because so few D.338s were built. The parts that were recovered will be exhibited in the Aeroscopia Museum in Toulouse, where a splendid model of the D.338 is already displayed. All will be next to an 1987 envelope "first day" for a stamp dedicated to the D.338. Several passions are gathered together in the same display: aircraft, aviators, aviation history and, in this particular case, philately, too.

NOTE 2

Markings...

The markings and the stamps observed on the parts we discovered provide plenty of information about the part itself, thus revealing the background of the aircraft it was fitted on. The forums where many aviation enthusiasts share information are a very useful tool to decrypt such markings and stamps.

For example, (photo SAF) the logo “SAF” on this airframe part means “Société Aéronautique Française” (French Aerospace Company). The SAF, which was the owner of Dewoitine aircraft, was created on 14 March 1927 and liquidated in April 1937 during the nationalizations that lead to the creation of the “SNCAM” (Société Nationale des Constructions Aéronautiques du Midi/National Society of Aeronautical Constructions of the Midi). It is unlikely that “SAF” stamps were used after March 1937 by the SNCAM. The logo “BV” (upside down on the picture) means “Bureau Véritas,” which is the French quality control office.

This door has on its left side a locking mechanism with the brand “Chobert”: it is a lock for a maintenance door (French Patent 798629). This round door was put in place with a slight rotation to engage the rivets, the unit was locked. Fixed to the skin, it was a very strong connection that would not move.

It is interesting to see that the company “Chobert” was initially producing weapons and bicycles in the city of Saint-Etienne. It diversified in the 1920’s, entering the aircraft industry with a system of fasteners and shrouds that were used on biplanes. It also developed the first pneumatic rivet gun (an advertisement at that time praised “1200 rivets per hour”), which was used in the aircraft industry as of 1936, to include in England during the WWII. In France, the "Chobert devices" were widely used on Morane Saulnier aircraft, including the famous MS 406. Chobert rivets still exist today.

NOTE 2

The administrative file...

For each aircraft, for which a search is conducted, a detailed report is sent to the archeological department of the French Culture and art Directorate (“DRAC”). It describes in detail the historical background, the parts found and their analysis, maps, and if necessary, exhibits, such pictures, press extracts, biographies of the crews, accident report, etc...

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