

The Box in the Barn



By David Trojan, davidtrojan@earthlink.net

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The box of unrecognizable fragments sat in the barn for decades. The box contained pieces of broken, twisted and burned metal fragments. The metal fragments in the box were first discovered back in the early 1970s on the property of a 100 year old family homestead in northern Michigan. Over the decades more objects were added to the box and occasionally one of the items was taken out of the box and reburied, only to be dug up again and returned to the box. What were the mysterious objects in the box and more importantly, what is the story behind the objects? This investigation would lead me across the globe, all the way to France in search of answers.



The box in the barn

I was contacted by a local Michigan news reporter who put me in touch with the family who owned the homestead. The family had read about my work on other aviation archaeology projects in the area and wanted to talk to me about what they had discovered. They wanted to answer long lingering questions about what happened so long ago on the homestead. Family lore told of a military plane that had crashed on the homestead during WWII and that a French pilot was killed in the crash. They wanted to know what type of aircraft crashed on the homestead and more importantly, they wanted to know the name of the pilot.

Rediscovery

The plane crash incident on the homestead and its exact location were nearly forgotten until one day in the early 1970s when fill dirt was needed for building a new road across a swampy part of the property. A mound of dirt was dug into and out came some metal objects. The family remembered the story of the plane crash and made the connection that this is where the plane must have crashed. During the ensuing years, the family collected more artifacts at the site and stored them in a box in the barn. The crash site became part of a family tradition. They would allow their kids and grandkids to dig at the site to discover the metal treasure that was buried there. For their youngest grandkids, they sometimes took objects out of the box and reburied them to ensure that the grandkids would be able to find a piece of the treasure. As the years went by, the family increasingly wanted to know more about the aircraft accident and especially more information about the pilot.

Identifying the crash site

The challenge with this investigation was trying to identify which aircraft had crashed at the location. When I visited the homestead, I closely examined each and every object in the box. I could tell right away that they were parts from a WWII aircraft due to the type of metal and construction. The collection contained mangled and burned fragments of fuselage skin and other aircraft debris.



Examining the contents of the box



Aircraft parts and fragments that were in the box



Piece of aircraft that contained part number

Only one mangled piece contained a part number, 89 27300. Using this one piece, I was able to identify the type of aircraft. The first two numbers on the part were 89 indicating a Republic P-47D Thunderbolt fighter aircraft. The P-47 was designed around the powerful Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp engine. The P-47 was one of the main United States Army Air Corps fighters of World War II. More than 15,600 Thunderbolts were manufactured between 1941 and 1945 and they served in every theatre of the war performing a variety of missions from bomber escort to close air support. Beginning in July 1944, the P-47 Thunderbolt was also used extensively to train Free French Air Force pilots at the nearby Oscoda Army Air Field (AAF). Now the question was which P-47D had crashed on the property? At least thirty French piloted P-47 aircraft accidents were reported at Oscoda AAF during the time period and resulted in at least four pilots killed.

I could tell that most of the parts were from the engine, because I could identify engine case fragments and a large piece of an 18-cylinder, Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp engine magneto. Each insulator point was labeled with a number from left to right: 1, 12, 5, 16, 9, 2, more numbers were broken off from part.



Engine magneto



Middle fragment from the number "5"

Later research and examination of one of the artifacts revealed another interesting discovery. A fragment of the number "5" was identified painted in yellow on the surface of a part. It was most likely part of the aircraft's serial number from the vertical tail. The number 5 is used twice in P-47D aircraft serial number 42-75495. This was confirmation that I was getting close to identifying the correct aircraft crash site.

Investigating the crash site

After examining the artifacts in the box, I headed out to the crash site. It was very difficult to match up the original accident report photos with the present day because so many trees had grown up in the area and because the original photos were taken during winter and it was summer when I took my photos. However, the trees in the background of the first photo did match fairly well. The trees are much larger now, but their position is approximately correct in the comparison with an evergreen tree on the left and another tree on the right. I searched the area with a metal detector and discovered more aircraft pieces to add to the box.

Then and now P-47D, 42-75495, crash site photo comparison



Evergreen tree on the left and another tree on the right next to impact point match where artifacts were found, Jeff Benya standing at approx. impact point



Background tree line matched up fairly well



I could not match 2nd report photo because there are now too many trees in the area and the difference between winter and summer photos

Location of the crash site

By using GPS data obtained at the crash site, I was able to triangulate the coordinates and compare them to data in official accident reports. I came up with a close match with P-47D, 42-75495. The official accident report contained two references to the location: 3 miles west Greenbush, 12 miles north Oscoda and 2 miles west of Greenbush, 10 miles north of Oscoda. The actual distance calculated using Google Earth was 3.65 miles west south west Greenbush and 8.57 miles due north Oscoda airfield. I believe this is a very close match and follows along with the standards that were in use during WWII.

CRASH TAKES LIFE OF OSCODA PILOT

A pilot, whose name is withheld until kin are notified, lost his life last Friday when his plane exploded and landed in Roy Lindzy's field, two miles from Mikado village. The fire which followed attracted the attention of many but nothing could be done to save the victim. Apparatus from the Oscoda Army Air Base responded and extinguished the blaze.

Newspaper story

Final confirmation of the identity of the crash site was made by obtaining a copy of the local Alcona County Herald Newspaper. The January 5th, 1945 newspaper reported a crash during the previous week in Roy Lindzy's field, two miles from Mikado Village. The Lindzy's lived at the homestead at the time where the crash debris was found. This article confirmed the date and location of the crash.

According to the official accident report

On 29 December 1944, Sgt. Jacques Jean Martin, French Air Force pilot trainee, assigned to the 134th Base Unit Oscoda AAF, was airborne at 1250 pm in P-47D, serial number 42-75495. He was flying wing position in a two ship formation below 25,000 feet, led by 1st Lt. George B. Andrews. After Sgt. Martin joined the formation, the flight leader climbed in a northwesterly direction in order to obtain a weather check as requested by the control tower. After relating the weather to the control tower, the flight leader did a medium turn to the left followed by a medium turn to the right. The flight leader stated that Sgt. Martin held normal formation to the left, but slipped slightly below and in trail in the turn to the right. At this point he lost sight of his wingman and kept turning in order to get him in sights, but was unable to locate him. A few seconds later he noticed black smoke coming from the ground directly below him. The flight leader descended to about 800 feet to where he could distinguish the wing of an airplane lying to the side of the smoke. He then called the control tower and notified them of the accident. The Control Tower received the message at 1301, only 11 minutes after the flight had begun. The flight leader circled the crash site to direct the ambulance and fire trucks to the scene. Upon arrival of rescue personnel, nothing could be done. The pilot's lifeless body was found hanging in a nearby tree.



Sgt. Jacques Jean Martin, French Air Force pilot trainee killed in P-47D, s/n 42-75495 accident on December 29th, 1944, photo courtesy CFPNA

Jacques Martin was a member of the 5th Detachment of French trainee pilots. He had graduated from advanced single-engine pilot training at Craig Field (Alabama) on August 4th, 1944. He was assigned Centre de Formation du Personnel Navigant en Amérique (CFPNA), or translated "Training Centre of Cabin Crew in America" registration number 633. The CFPNA has much more information available about the French training program in America at this web site: http://patrice.laverdet.pagesperso-orange.fr/html/cfpna_index.htm. Note the CFPNA web site is all in French language.

According to the accident report examination of the wreckage revealed no clues to the cause of the accident. The flight leader later stated that at no time did his wingman give any indication of any trouble. It was the opinion of the accident investigation committee and the instructor leading the flight that Sgt. Martin, due to his inexperience in fighter type aircraft, may have “crossed controls” in an attempt to stay in the turn rather than cross to the other side.

A crossed control stall occurs when aileron pressure is applied in one direction and rudder pressure in opposite direction. These inputs may cause the aircraft nose to pitch down, the inside wing may suddenly drop, and the airplane may continue to roll to an inverted position. A pilot must be able to recognize when this stall is imminent and must take immediate action to prevent a completely stalled condition, especially at low altitudes because there just isn't enough time to recover.

Further contributing to the cause of the accident may have been the turbulence from the propeller wash from the lead plane. It was assumed that hitting the propeller wash caused the pilot to cross controls.



Dave Trojan and Jeff Benya at the crash site with French flag

The family is interested in creating an enduring memorial at the crash site. The French flag was given to the family as a start of the memorial.



Peg and Jerry McDonald on their homestead, the crash site is located behind them. It is thanks to them that pieces of history were saved for future generations



The crash site is located on a 280 acre Michigan Centennial Farm that dates all the way back to 1871 and owned by the same family