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OVER THE FRONT

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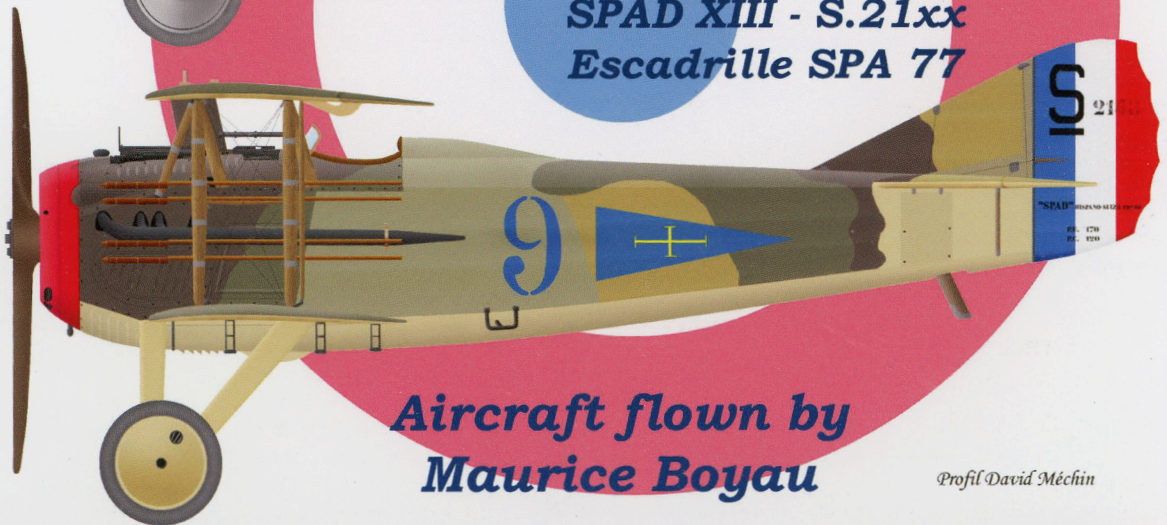
THREE DECADES
OF EXCELLENCE



THE GREAT MAURICE BOYAU • FLUGPLATZ MARIAKERKE
EPISODES OF AIR WAR ON THE EASTERN FRONT
LA SÉ AVION BOCHE DE GUYNEMER OR GUYNEMER'S 8TH
EVASION AND ESCAPE : AMERICAN AVIATORS IN WWI



*Nieuport 17 - Serial Unk
Escadrille N. 77*



*SPAD XIII - S.21xx
Escadrille SPA 77*

*Aircraft flown by
Maurice Boyau*

Profil David Méchin

La 8e Avion Boche de Guynemer **or Guynemer's 8th**

by Charles Gosse



Opening

Still to this day, French children read in their schoolbooks about the famous *Guynemer*, the pilot with 54 victories to his credit who ascended from his airfield the morning of 11 September 1917, and was never heard of again, a Hero of France.

In the two years from his first victory to his last, Georges Guynemer's face took on the grim look of a weary pilot much older than his 22 years. This story is about *another* Guynemer, a younger Guynemer who, in a few days before the spring of 1916, crossed paths with the pilot and observer of a German LVG C.II beating their way back across the front lines, trying to return safely to their airfield.

Guynemer reported that the enemy plane fell into the Bois de Thiescourt less than a thousand meters from the French front line trenches. As was his habit, he landed his plane in a nearby field and worked his way through the trees to the wreckage. A unit of élite infantry cyclists on patrol nearby came to look as well, and their Captain saw to the burial of the pilot. He also collected from the wreckage a copper gravity-fed reserve fuel tank as well as a small piece of the shattered propeller.

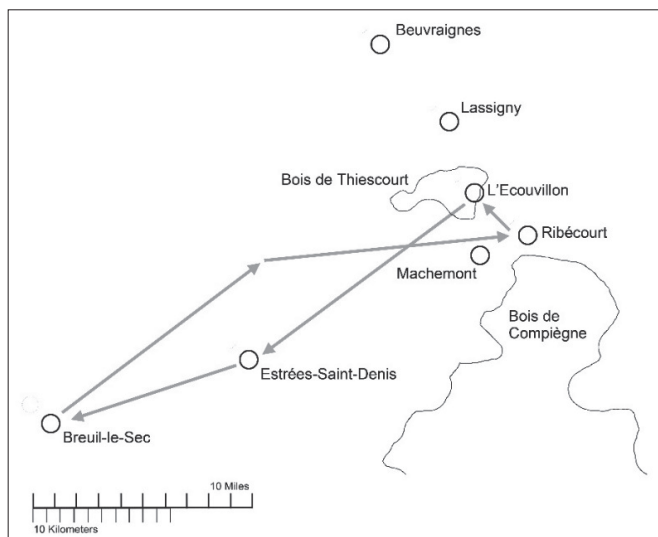
This story is about these four men.

The day

In the last week of February 1916, the German Fifth Army attacked the French at Verdun and held sway in the air, forcing the French command to concentrate airpower in the sector. Immelmann and Boelcke were still alive and the name 'Richthofen' was unknown as he had no victories to his credit and, having to earn his keep, was on his way to *Kampfgeschwader 2* to pilot two-seaters over Verdun. The air war is still young.¹

Early in the morning of Sunday, 12 March 1916, a German two-seater crew of *Feldflieger-Abteilung 61* took off from their airfield at Beuvraignes to photograph the French side of the lines. Someone with a sense of humor must have chosen these two men to work together as they were both named Friedrich – the pilot, 20-year-old *Unteroffizier* [Corporal, abbreviated *Uffz*] Friedrich Ackermann from Zwickau and the observer, 28-year-old *Leutnant der Reserve* [Second-Lieutenant, Reserves] Friedrich Marquardt from Ludwigsbau.² They head south in the direction of the Bois de Compiègne with a very large camera aboard.

▼ **Below:** Guynemer's flight path from his airfield at Breuil-le-Sec to the approximate position (22 km, 13.7 miles) where he notices artillery fire off to his right over the Bois de Compiègne and changes course to where he overtakes the LVG C.II at Ribécourt (15.5 km, 9.6 miles) and on to L'Ecouvillon (5 km, 3.1 miles), where he landed, and then to Estrées-Saint-Denis (21.3 km, 13.2 miles) and finally back at Breuil-le-Sec (14.7 km, 9.1 miles), approximately 79 kilometers or 49 miles. (*Charles Gosse*)



▼ **Below:** Captured LVG C.II on display in the Place de la République in Toul on 4 June 1916. (*Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*)





▲ **Above:** Guynemer standing next to his Nieuport 11 N. 836, March 1916. (Christophe Cony)

Georges Guynemer has seven confirmed victories and has just been promoted to the temporary rank of Sous-Lieutenant [2nd Lieutenant]. He is on the books of Escadrille N 3 which has been on its airfield at Breuil-le-Sec since 16 August 1915. Guynemer writes afterwards that he had been assigned a typical patrol or *ronde* – a “circuit” beginning at Lassigny and then north to Chaulnes and then back to Breuil. He has been flying his Nieuport 11, N 836, for only a short time. The type is called “Bébé” by its pilots because of its diminutive size compared to its predecessor, the two-seat Nieuport 10. This is the second plane Guynemer has dubbed “Le Vieux Charles,” after Charles Bonnard, a friend from earlier days in the squadron. The name is written across both sides of the fuselage as well as on the spun metal cowling.

He is at his typical patrol height of 3,400 meters and is heading north-east towards the start of his route. After some 20 kilometers or 12 miles, he notices anti-aircraft artillery fire off to his right over Compiègne, flies towards it, and soon spots an LVG. The *Bébé* had a top speed of 156 kph while, according to French tests, the LVG at 2,800 meters – its ceiling was 3,000 meters – had a top speed of 105 kph.³ At lower elevation it could do as much as 120 kph.⁴

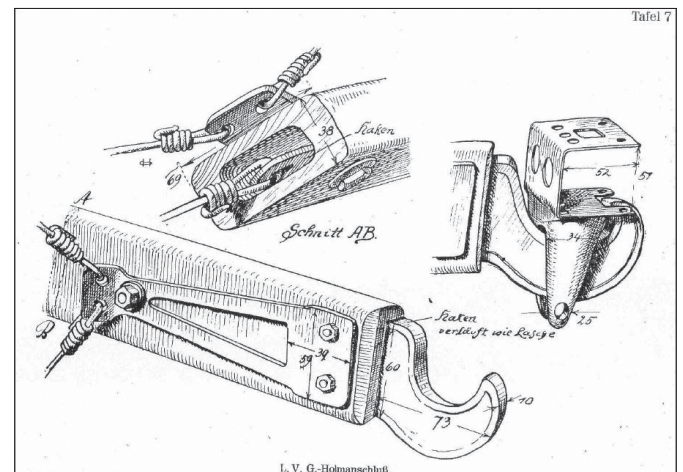
Guynemer gained on the LVG, overtaking it at Ribécourt. The observer, *Ltn d Res* Marquardt, opens fire from the rear cockpit at 100 meters range but the French pilot waits until he is within 15 meters. He opens fire but his single Lewis gun jams at ten meters. He clears it and fires 30 rounds. They do enough damage to plane or crew or both that the LVG falls out of control and Guynemer watches it all the way down until it crashes below in the woods. He writes:

“Quelques balles, le feu. C’est fini: un de moins pour les Boches, un de plus pour moi”

“A few bullets, fire. It’s finished: one less for the Boches, one more for me.”

One published photo of the wreckage shows that the fuselage has broken into two pieces and the rear third of the aircraft lies upside down. Behind it eight French infantryman in helmets and webbing and two officers in *Kepis* are looking at various debris on the ground and a third is holding something in both of his hands which he appears to be reading, possibly an identification book from the body of the pilot. The photo is captioned “*Le 8e avion boche de Guynemer.*” The design of the stabilizer, the position of its supporting strut, and the arrangement of the formers of the fuselage all confirm that this was an LVG C.II.

▼ **Below:** Drawing showing the hook or *Holmanschluß*. (*Skizzenbuch für Flugzeugkonstrukteure*)





▲ **Above:** The fuselage broken into two pieces- the rear third of the aircraft lies upside down. (*Bernard Klaeylé*)

▼ **Below:** The right lower wing upside down. (Charles Gosse)





▲ **Above:** Close-up of the hook that attaches the wing to the fuselage. (Charles Gosse)

An unpublished photo from a different angle shows the lower right wing upside down on the ground, its fabric covering removed and the rear portion of the wing ribs visible as well as the rear wood box spar that slides through these ribs. At the bottom of the photo can be seen the end of the wood box spar at the point where a metal fitting called a “*Holmanschluß*” hooks the wing to the fuselage. The specific design of this hook helps to identify the aircraft as an LVG C.II.

Above and to the left of the spar’s attachment fitting is a thick, square piece of wood that forms part of the inner edge of the starboard upper wing. The round opening is for a gimbaled compass. Further to the left is the observer’s very long boxy camera. Terry Finnegan has identified this camera as a 50 cm *Fliegerkamera II*.

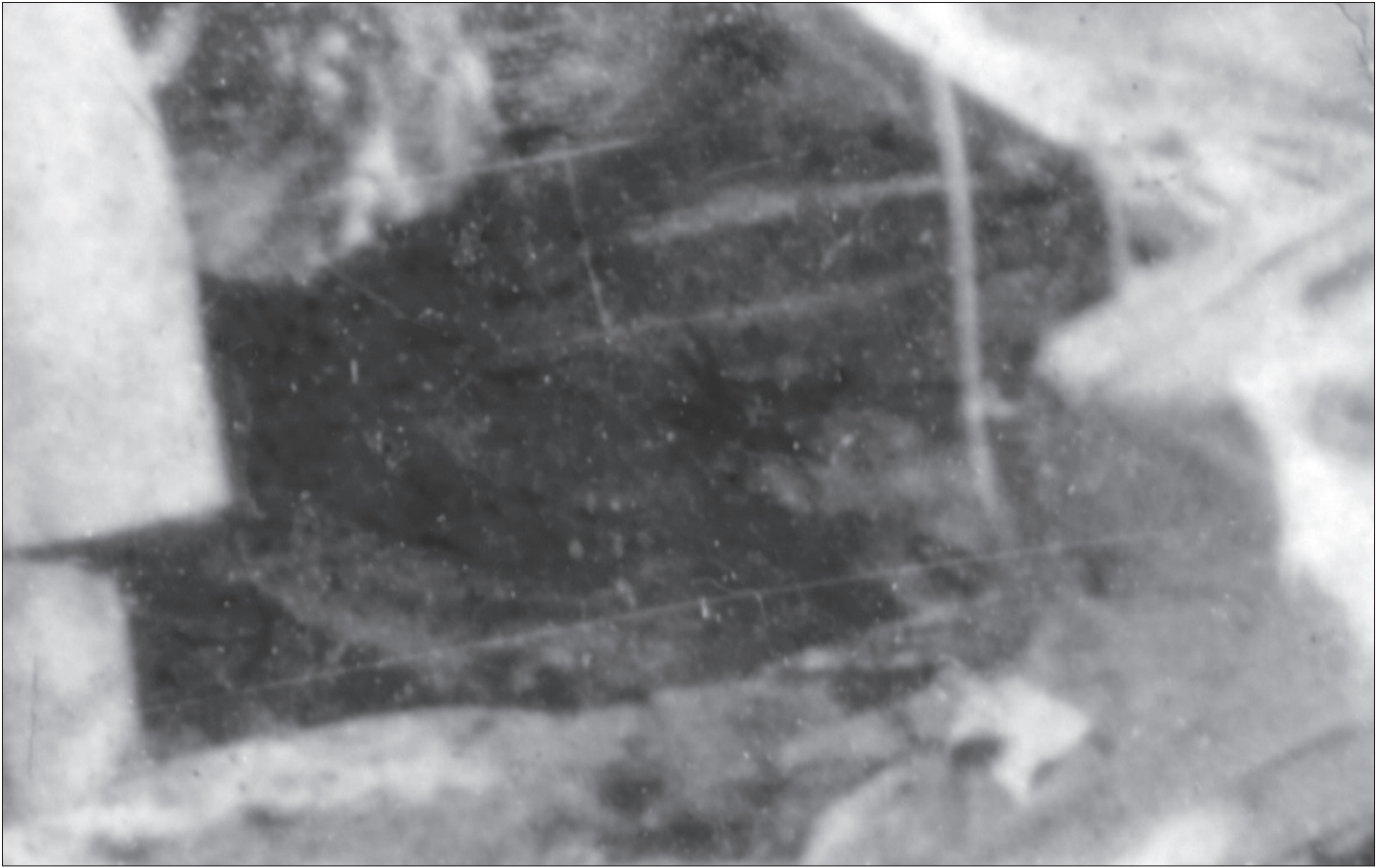
As some sixteen soldiers look on, two of their countrymen in helmets are laying out a long piece of fabric torn from the lower wing. They are draping the corpse of the pilot who can just be

seen beneath it. The photographer of this unpublished photo wrote on the reverse “*Avion abattue par Guynemer le 12 Mars 1916 a 10h du matin Forêt de Thiescourt dont fait une les débris. Ch. Rueach.*” The caption gives the time of the crash as 10 o’clock in the morning while the official reports cite 11 o’clock. The notation is signed and the writer prefaces his name with “Ch.” which is sometimes used as the abbreviation for “*Chasseur*,” though it could also be an abbreviation of the photographer’s first name.

Of the two soldiers draping the corpse, the one on the right is in a dark tunic unlike the rest of the group which all appear to be wearing the typical horizon blue, whether they are wearing tunics or great coats. This is most likely *Capitaine* [Captain] Frédéric De Bélinay whose *3e Groupe de Chasseurs Cyclistes*, a unit of some 200 mobile infantrymen, were stationed nearby.⁵ At the start of the war, ten such elite groups were formed with 400 soldiers assigned to each but their strength dwindled to half as many men in each unit by March of 1916. Equipped with folding bicycles, they were a modern day cavalry, able to be rapidly deployed wherever they were needed.

▼ **Below:** Chasseur cycliste du 3e Groupe (Bruno Barrier)





▲ **Above:** The pilot, *Uffz* Ackermann, under the draped wing fabric. (*Charles Gosse*)

De Bélinay was 41 years old when the photo was taken, having been born in 1875. He graduated from Saint-Cyr, the French military academy, at age 20 and served with the Dragoons. He left the service and became an ordained Jesuit priest but was back in uniform when he was mobilized in September 1914. Initially on the General Staff of the 3e DC, his request for reassignment was met in October and he moved to the 3e *Groupe de Chasseurs Cyclistes* where he served under *Capitaine* Maurice Eugène Hurel who was the senior and more experienced of the two Captains. They have three 1st Lieutenants under their command, each commanding one platoon.

The 3e *Groupe de Chasseurs Cyclistes* does not have an individual unit badge but wears the badge “18” of the 18e *Bataillon de Chasseurs à pied*, to which their unit belongs.⁶ De Bélinay is seen elsewhere in this article in a portrait photo in which he is wearing his dark tunic with the unit badge “18.”

While leading a surprise attack on 11 May 1917, De Bélinay is shot twice, one bullet puncturing his right arm and the other breaking his scapula. His daring in this attack forms part of the citation for his award of the *Legion d’Honneur*. After the war he took up his vocation again and became an army chaplain in Chad from where he published several books, including *Sur Le Sentier De La Guerre*,⁷ or ‘*On the Path to War*’.

The body of the pilot, *Uffz* Friedrich Ackermann, is buried at

▼ **Below:** *Capitaine* Frédéric De Bélinay, 3e *Groupe de Chasseurs Cyclistes* (*Marie-Laure et Arnaud de Bélinay*)





▲ **Above:** The first grave of the pilot Ackermann. (Christophe Cony)

first in a small cemetery of 50 mixed headstones in a tiny hamlet just on the southern edge of the Bois de Thiescourt called L'Ecouvillon.⁸ On at least one old map, the little wood at the bottom edge of the much larger Bois de Thiescourt is, itself, called the Bois de Ecouvillon. A relic of the crash in another private collection – a piece of one of the LVG's bulkheads or formers - is labeled "...tombe dans le bois de l'Ecouvillon."⁹

In the ground over this first grave was placed a wood cross which reads "Ici Repose Frederick (sic) ACKERMAN Pilote aviateur allemand. Age de 25 an. Ie' en SAXE. Cut en combat accede par le sous lieut. GUYNEMER le 12 MARS 1916." Presumably the age of the pilot was taken from papers on his body but elsewhere it is recorded as 20, not 25, years of age.

One of the documents related to Ackermann in the archives of the Red Cross notes that his first burial was on the "route de L'Ecouvillon a Elincourt" which is a road just outside the forest running west from the tiny hamlet of L'Ecouvillon to the larger Élincourt-Sainte-Marguerite to the west. After the war, Ackermann's body is removed to the Vignemont German Cemetery¹⁰ where his name and the date of his death are etched into a large white headstone which he shares with one other German soldier; they are but two of 5,333 German war dead in the cemetery.

We know that the body under the drape is Ackermann because it could not be the observer, Marquardt, who, according to his records in the Red Cross archives, was buried over two miles directly to the south of the crash site in Machemont près Montigny, back in the direction of Ribécourt, where Guynemer closed in on the LVG. Such a wide separation of the bodies of the pilot, who is with the aircraft, and the observer, who is not, leads to the conclusion that the observer fell out of the aircraft as it came down and that the aircraft did not fall vertically over the Bois de Thiescourt but glided some five kilometers or 3.2 miles from Ribécourt to the Bois de Ecouvillon where it crashed.

After the war, Marquardt's body was probably moved from Machemont to the *Cimetière Allemand de Maizeray* (Maizeray German Cemetery) where a combatant of the same name and a date of death two days later is buried along with 2,875 other German war dead, but that has not been confirmed.

Guynemer probably landed in one specific field bordering the short *Route de L'Ecouvillon a Elincourt*, the road between the little hamlet of L'Ecouvillon and the larger Élincourt-Sainte-Marguerite to the west. It is possible that he landed a little further east just next to L'Ecouvillon but he would have been even closer to the frontline and potential fire if he had.

After visiting the wreckage and taking a photograph, he took off again and landed at Estrées-Saint-Denis and then back at his airfield at Breuil.¹¹ He recorded his patrol as lasting one hour and forty-five minutes.¹² Two-thirds of the time he was probably on the ground.¹³

The Copper Tank

Having buried the pilot, *Capitaine* de Bélinay took from the wreckage a 35-inch long copper gravity-fed reserve fuel tank as well as a piece of the plane's shattered propeller. The tank is flattened but that is most likely due to the aircraft flipping upside down; there is no sign that the tank caught on fire or exploded.

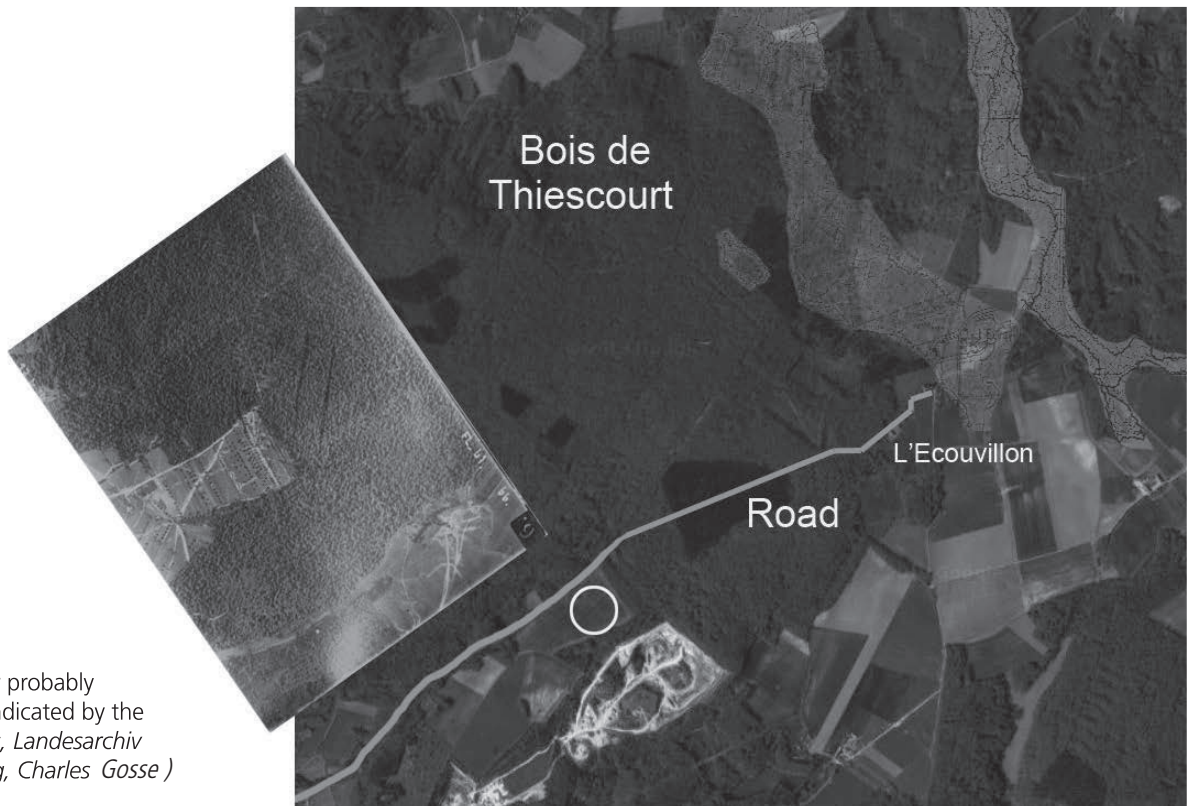
Because the propeller is marked "150 P.S. Benz 6 Cyl 025," we probably can conclude that this particular LVG C.II was fitted with the 150-hp Benz Bz. III engine rather than the 160-hp Mercedes D.III. Jean Dupuis, writing about the LVG C.II in *l'Aerophile* in 1916, however, goes to great pains to emphasize that Benz propellers were found on Mercedes engines and vice-versa so apparently they were interchangeable. Dupuis also concluded that the Mercedes engine was used much more often than the Benz in 1916.

Because the exhaust header of the Benz engine was on the port side of the engine, the fuel tank had to be placed either on the side opposite to it - the starboard side - in which case it was under the upper wing - or in the middle of the upper wing. The opposite was true of the Mercedes engine - its exhaust header was on the starboard side so its reserve tank was on the port side - or above the wing.

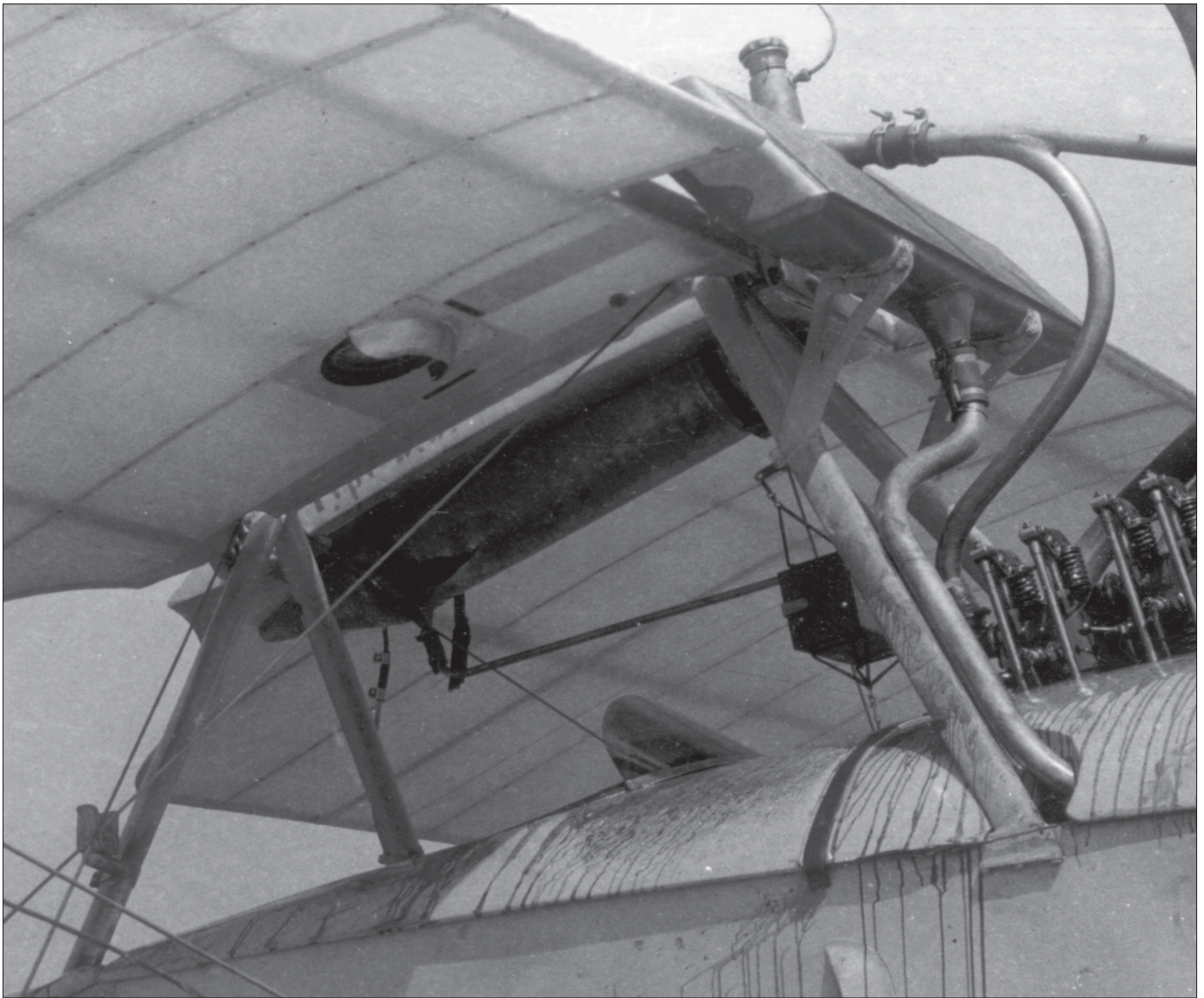
▼ **Below:** A piece of the LVG.'s propeller marked "150 P.S. Benz 6 Cyl 025." (Xavier Aiolfi)



► **Right:** The second and final grave of the pilot Ackermann (*Thorsten Pietsch, Frontflieger, Die Soldaten der Deutschen Fliegertruppe 1914-1918*)



► **Right:** Guynemer probably landed in the field indicated by the circle. (*Google Maps, Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Charles Gosse*)

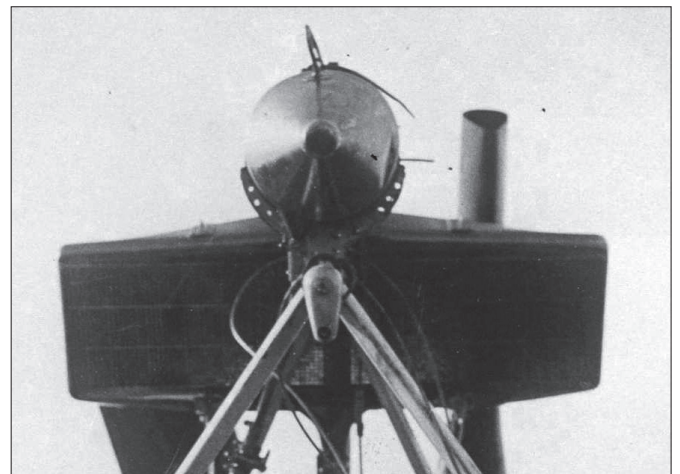


▲ **Above:** A view of the under-wing mounted reserve fuel tank on an LVG C.II. The damaged remains of the relic from Guynemers 8th victory can be seen on the inside front cover. (Greg VanWyngarden)

The right or left position of the exhaust header facilitates determining how many LVG C.II aircraft were fitted with each type of engine – Mercedes or Benz. An analysis of 128 photos in two publications¹⁴ reveals that three-quarters had a Mercedes engine. To put this in perspective, 525 LVG C.II were ordered by the end of 1915 and in February 1916, 214 of this type were in the front-line inventory.¹⁵

Because the tank was flattened and that probably happened when the plane flipped over, we can conclude that the tank was probably positioned above the upper wing rather than under the right upper wing. If it had been under the right upper wing the leading edge and box spars of the upper wing would have impacted the ground before the tank when the plane flipped over, limiting damage to the tank. The presence of the gimbal housing in the upper right wing also suggests that the tank was above the wing because, if the tank had been under the upper right wing, it would have blocked the crew's view of the compass.

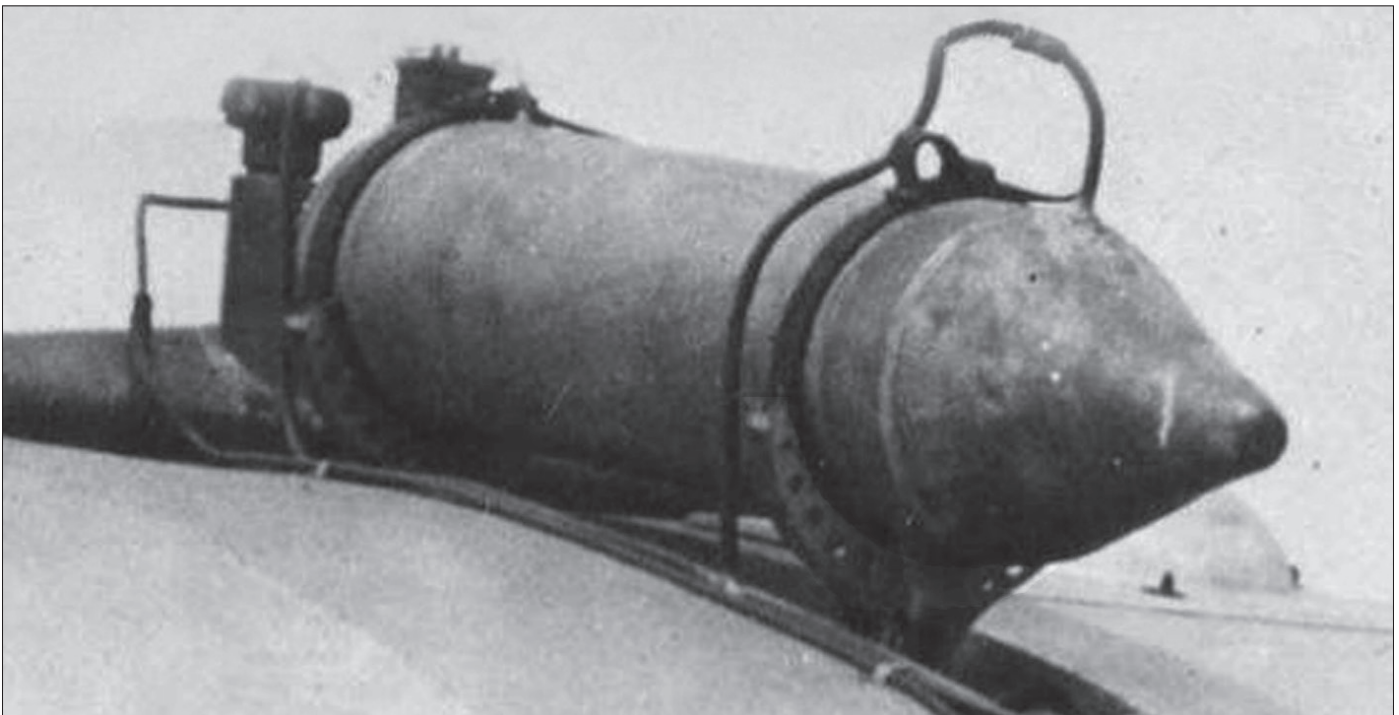
▼ **Below:** The gravity-fed fuel tank seen straight on from the tail on a different captured LVG C.II at the Parc Aéronautique at St. Cyr on 9 February 1916. (*Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*)

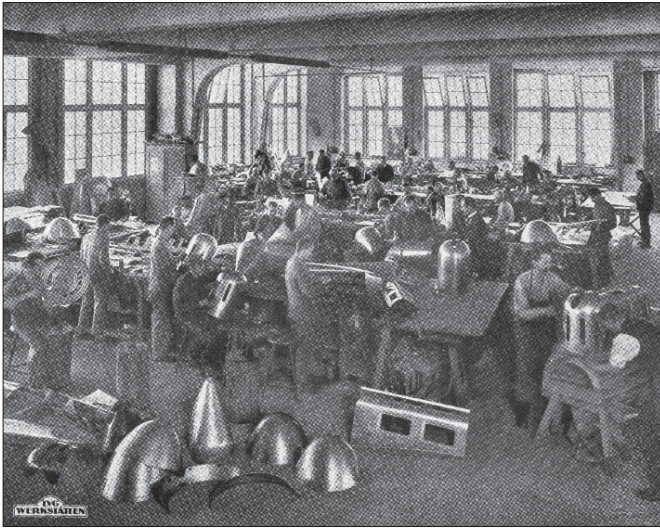




▲ **Above:** An RFC officer inspects the observer's gun on an LVG C.II captured by the British. This photo was taken at the British airfield at Gouy-Saint André on 28 May 1916. This aircraft is thought to be C.II 2234/15, which was eventually taken to England and exhibited in the Lord Mayor's show in London. The gravity-fed reserve tank is seen on the top wing with its aerodynamic design. (*Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*)

▼ **Below:** The reserve tank up-close. (*Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*)





▲ **Above:** "Montage-Klempner" or Assembly-Plumber, the part of LVG's factory where tanks were fabricated. (Peter Cohausz. Source: *Das Flugzeug - Vergangenheit - Gegenwart - Zukunft*, LVG Company, 1919)



▲ **Above:** Advertisement for the fuel tank fabricator, Alfred Römer & Co, Berlin. (Peter Cohausz. Source: *Heinz Erblich, Moderne Flugzeuge in Wort und Bild*, Richard Carl Schmidt & Company, Berlin, 1916)



The reserve fuel tank carried 20 to 25 liters. When the reserve tank was positioned above the upper wing, it was cradled by two half-round, metal brackets and was held in place by two flexible leather straps that reached up and over the tank. When the reserve tank was placed under the right upper wing, the tank hung from the same type of metal brackets.

The reserve tank takes the shape of a cylinder with a hemispherical cap at the front and a cone at the back.¹⁶ In the interior of the tank there are two metal bulkheads on each end which act as supports to maintain the round cylindrical shape of the tank. These bulkheads have multiple holes to minimize weight and allow the fuel to move through the bulkheads. Two metal tubes each with an outside diameter of 6.8 mm run along the top of the tank and up above it curving for a length of 12 cm. It acts as a vent to the tank. A heavy brass gas cap with a thick brown paper gasket is screwed into a brass tube which is welded to the copper tank; this area of the tank tore away during the crash of the airplane. A metal mesh fuel filter is still attached. Welded to the bottom of the tank is a drain for the fuel and to that is attached the beginning of a rubber hose.

It is not known whether LVG manufactured their own reserve tanks for the LVG C.II or if a sub-contractor did this work for them. The copper tank retains the outline of where a small oval-shaped metal plaque had been attached, possibly a plaque identifying the manufacturer.

Two calling cards embossed BARON DE BELINAY are attached to the copper tank on which are written various details explaining the origin of the tank as coming from the wreckage of Guynemer's 8th victim which crashed in the Bois de Thiescourt. These calling cards may have belonged to de Bélinay's father, who held the title of Baron. Usually this title passes down to the first son born. Research continues into whether Frédéric De Bélinay was the first or possibly the second son. He was not known to use a title.

The Next Day

The next day, 13 March 1916, Guynemer again took to the skies. As he related to Jacques Mortane, "So the next day, it was a 13th, but an aviator can scarcely linger over these superstitions, I left with the firm desire to shoot down at least two, since there were so many in the sky of Verdun."

Guynemer gets into a dogfight and his enemy "takes advantage of the situation and sends me a burst, shooting me at leisure. My hood, riddled, shattered. A ricochet hit me in the face, my cheek and nose and two bullets go through my left arm. I still have a fragment in the jaw: the doctors told me that it was better to leave it. It is a memory ... I bleed a lot ... While another comes with the help of his rival to try to finish me, I recover and, flying only with one hand, I manage to regain our lines."¹⁷

◀ **Left:** Another relic of the same wreckage helps to identify the exact location as it is labeled "tombe dans le bois de l'Ecouvillon." (Collection de monsieur Pierre-Guillaume Demetz)



▲ **Above:** Guynemer receiving medical aid the next day after his injuries. (Christophe Cony)

He would continue to fly for another 18 months until his last flight on the morning of Tuesday, 11 September 1917, from which he would not return.

Frédéric De Bélinay passed away in 1958.

▼ **Below** Remarkable photo of the custom Lewis gun mounting on Guynemer's Nieuport 11 N. 586. This gun mounting was especially designed for Guynemer by the Nieuport firm. (Christophe Cony)



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Endnotes

¹ In early March, the commanding officer of *Escadrille N 3, Capitaine Felix Brocard*, was ordered to move a portion of his unit from its current airfield at Breuil-le-Sec to Vadelaincourt, near the battle at Verdun. He departed on or near to the 12th of March with the rest of his unit eventually catching up in April. Guynemer refers to departing on the 12th for Verdun but elsewhere also writes about simply leaving on a typical patrol on that date without mentioning Verdun, which is what he did, in fact, do.

² Listed as born 25-June-1888 in Ludwigsbau and died 12-March-1916 in Thiescourt in *Unsere Luftstreitkräfte 1914-18*, Walter von Eberhardt, *Generalleutnant a.D.* Vaterländischer Verlag C.A. Weller, Berlin 1930.

³ *L'Aerophile*, 1 Mars 1916, Jean Dupuis.

⁴ P.M. Grosz, *The LVG C.II*, Albatros Productions, Great Britain, 2004, page 10.

⁵ In his autobiographical work, *Sur Le Sentier de La Guerre*, pages 241 to 245, de Bélinay records the movements of his unit in an appendix titled "*Cantonnements et Journée de Combat*" and sub-titled "*Cantonnements du 3e Groupe Cycliste*" noting that in March, 1916, for 28 days they were in trenches beginning on the first at Marquéglise, then on the second at Elincourt followed by Bellinglise and then "*Tranchées sous le Plémont*," including the Bois de Thiescourt, Le Bocage, Le Marais, and La rue des Boucaudes, all of which are within a few thousand meters of where the LVG came down.

⁶ Roger Barrier, *Les Chasseurs Cyclistes au Combat*, Cambrai, France, 2017

⁷ de Belinay (Frédéric), *Sur le Sentier de la Guerre*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1920

⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, Archives, RAN 445, "*Décédé le 12/3/1916 Inhumé route de l'Ecouvillon à Elincourt.*"

⁹ From Page 16, *Catalogue de l'exposition "Guynemer, Un As pour Parraïn"* in the Archives départementales de la Côte-d'Or, Dijon, Colleton de monsieur Pierre-Guillaume Demetz

¹⁰ Thorsten Pietsch, *Frontflieger, Die Soldaten der Deutschen Fliegertruppe 1914-1918*, <http://www.frontflieger.de>

¹¹ Jacques Mortane, *Guynemer, the Ace of Aces*, page 191, translated by Clifton Harby Levy, Moffat, Yard & Company, 2nd Edition, 1918

¹² The range of the *Bébé* was 330 kilometers or 205 miles.

¹³ The distance from Guynemer's airfield at Breuil-le-Sec to the approximate position where he notices artillery fire off to his right over the Bois de Compiègne (22 km, 13.7 miles) and then from that approximate position to where he overtakes the LVG C.II at Ribécourt (15.5 km, 9.6 miles) and on to where he lands at L'Ecouvillon (5 km, 3.1 miles), and then flies on to Estrées-Saint-Denis (21.3 km, 13.2 miles) and finally back to Breuil-le-Sec (14.7 km, 9.1 miles) was approximately 79 kilometers or 49 miles. The *Bébé* had a top speed of 156 Kph or 97 Mph and assuming an average flight speed during the patrol of 129 Kph or 80 Mph, he would have been in the air no more than 37 minutes which means that he was on the ground for about an

hour and 8 minutes of the 1 hour 45 minute patrol and, as he stopped twice, he likely stopped for 34 minutes each of the two times he landed or for some combination of an hour and 8 minutes on the ground.

¹⁴ P.M. Grosz, *The LVG C.II*, Albatros Productions, Great Britain, 2004, and *Cross & Cockade Great Britain Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1983.

¹⁵ P.M. Grosz, *The LVG C.II*, Albatros Productions, Great Britain, 2004, and *Cross & Cockade Great Britain Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1983, page 18.

¹⁶ *L'Aerophile*, 1er-15 Novembre, 1916, Jean Dupuis, "La nourrice e (fig. 11,13,14 et 28), en cuivre, est maintenue au-dessus des ailes superieures par deux curroies de coir fixees a des consoles arrondies (fig 44); elle presente la dforme d'un cylindre avec une calotte hemispherique a l'avant et un cone a l'arriere et contient 20 a 25 litres."

¹⁷ Jacques Mortane, *Carré d'As*, Ed. Baudinière, 1934

Meet the Author

"Charley Gosse hosts an on-line museum, Aeroconservancy.com, which is a collection of artifacts from early flight. He has worked with the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Musée de l'air et de l'espace in Paris, as well as a number of smaller organizations and individuals and much of this research is available for reading on his website. He is currently working on the microscopic analysis of aircraft fabric, dope and paint and recently completed a study of the aluminum-pigmented dope applied to Pfalz aircraft."

