

# A FINAL SALUTE TO GUYNEMER?

BY LUC VANACKER

SEPTEMBER 11 2012 MARKED the 95th anniversary of the 'disappearance' of the French WWI ace Georges Guynemer in the skies above the Flemish-Belgian village of Poelkapelle, near Ieper. After almost a century, this 'disappearance' is still shrouded in mystery. This is due partly to circumstances, partly to 'different versions' given of what happened and partly also to the fact that the case was never really seriously investigated.

## THE CIRCUMSTANCES

The French ace captain Georges Guynemer (1894-1917) was stationed at St Pol-sur-Mer near Dunkirk with his squadron, Escadrille N3, part of GC1, *les Cigognes*, in support of the French First Army that fought alongside the British troops during the infamous Battle of Passchendaele (31 July-20 November 1917). His 53rd and final victory had occurred twenty days earlier. When he took off on the morning of 11 September 1917, he was flying the high patrol in the company of Lieutenant Bozon-Verduraz. In the neighbourhood of the Forest of Houthulst, Guynemer spotted a German two-seater at an altitude of about 5800 metres and attacked it. Bozon said he also shot at it but, when he spotted some other enemy aeroplanes, he attacked those and left the two-seater to Guynemer. He never saw him back again.

The German aviator Kurt Wissemann saw Guynemer fall toward the ground, dived after him and fired at the plane in distress. He was credited with the victory because no one else claimed it. The Belgian publicist, Marco Fernández-Sommerau, investigated the possibility that Guynemer was



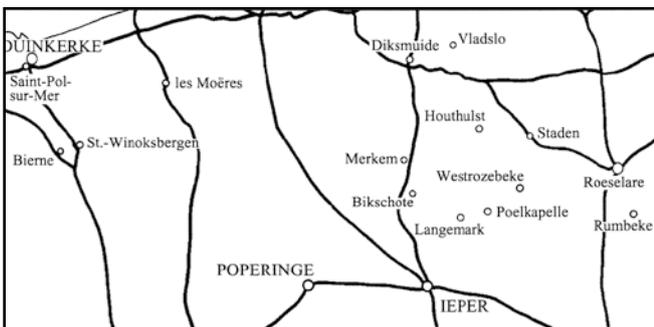
Lt Maurice Medaets.

brought down by 'a lucky shot', fired by the observer of the German two-seater.<sup>1</sup> This is plausible because this machine, a Rumpler C.IV, flown by the Flieger Georg Seibert and his observer Ltn d R Max Psaar, was shot down that same morning by the Belgian aviator Lt Maurice Medaets.

So Seibert and Psaar were unable to claim that victory.

Although this theory is more likely than *Guynemer diving away in front of the aircraft of Wissemann*, it does not totally exclude the possibility that Guynemer died under 'friendly fire'. So the question as to who shot Guynemer down is probably never to be solved conclusively, although we can exclude Ltn Wissemann.

Map of the French-Belgian border region where Guynemer achieved his final five victories.



## DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE EVENT

When the Germans were asked what had happened to Guynemer's body, they gave three different versions.

In October 1917 they first told Red Cross mediators that the body of Guynemer was buried at the military cemetery close to the crash site (*Ehrenfriedhof II*).

A month later (November 1917) the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that the body had been found, but stated that English artillery fire had destroyed all traces of the plane as well as of the body, before it could be buried!

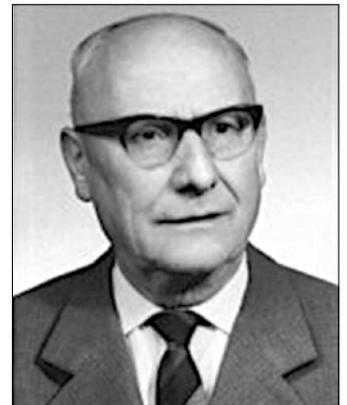
The Nazi ambassador to Paris, in 1938, rendered the last official version; that a rescue team first could not approach the wreck due to fire from French aircraft, but that the body had been buried afterward. This could be a mixture of the first and the second versions.

When British troops took the village of Poelkapelle at the beginning of October 1917, they couldn't find a single trace of the SPAD nor of a marked grave.

In addition to the three 'official' but contradictory versions, there is also the testimony of a German officer, Ltn Eugen Wendler, who headed a party that heard Guynemer's aircraft crash and hurried to search the wreckage.

This testimony was published in the official History of the 413th Infantry Regiment, from Württemberg, in 1936. It stated that the search party approached the wreck, found the body and took Guynemer's papers. This witness did not mention gunfire nor did he mention a funeral.

Although the archives of the 413th Infantry Regiment are still preserved, there is little to be found because, during the



Ltn Eugen Wendler in his later years:  
:E. Wendler jr

The 413th Infantry Regiment was the central regiment of the 204th Infantry Division south of Poelkapelle. There was a battalion at the front, one in first reserve (*Bereitschaft*) and a third one in second reserve. Guynemer crashed in the zone of the battalion in the middle. The command (B.T.K.) had by then moved to the place near the arrow, indicated with x, near the cemetery. (Map Otto von Moser, *Die Württemberger im Weltkrieg*, 1928).

