

THE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER POPIȘTEANU ALEXANDRU, COMMANDER OF THE HEROICAL 7th FIGHTER GROUP IN THE AIR BATTLE FOR THE LIBERATION OF BASARABIA AND THE CONQUEST OF ODESSA

Jănel TĂNASE

”Henri Coandă” Air Force Academy, Brașov, Romania (tanase_janel@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.19062/2247-3173.2021.22.29

Abstract: *Called by his qualities to become a flyer, a personality with a complex aeronautical training, being a graduate of the Romanian Higher War School and the French War School, with a unanimously recognized activity in military aviation in the interwar period, aviator commander Alexandru Popișteanu, commander of the elite group of the fighter aviation, the 7th Fighter Group of the 1st Fighter Flotilla, fell in the whirlwind of aerial combat facing the enemy, in the sky of Odessa, on August 21, 1941, by his deeds at the head of his unit that executed in 60 days of combat 233 missions to the enemy, with 40 air battles, from which 55 victories resulted, he constituted and constitutes for the generations of aviators the perfect war aviator commander and a legendary figure of the Romanian wings.*

Keywords: *military aviation, aviation group, air mission, air combat, air victory.*

1. INTRODUCTION



August 21, 1941 was a great day of mourning for the Romanian wings. On that day, in the hot sky of Odessa, where two worlds were facing each other, one of true faith in God and the other of paganism [1], the book of the life of an elite fighter aviator ended. He fell on the field of honor, facing the enemy, in the midst of his subordinates, in the whirlwind of air battles with Bolshevik aviation. The deed of the commander of the 7th Fighter Group, Lieutenant Commander Aviator Popișteanu Alexandru, was inscribed in blood in the Golden Book of Aviation and will always remain a living example for all pilots. Under his leadership and impetus, his valiant Fighter Group covered himself with glory in the holy struggle for the liberation of Bessarabia, giving epic elements to our young aviation, shining with admiration forever, His very death as a hero [1].

2. VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND MILITARY CAREER

Lieutenant Commander Popișteanu Alexandru was born on January 3rd, 1903, in the commune of Bucharest, Ilfov County, the son of Iulian, a military doctor by profession and Elvira, assigned to the first position of officer on July 1, 1922, being a graduate of the Military School of Engineering. He married Stefania T. Atanasiu on September 12, 1940 [2].

Built on a positive and honest working life, trained and steeped in the harsh flying schools that operated in the interwar period, with a superior tactical instruction mastered at the highest war schools in the country and abroad, the officer's career is a constant ascent and well-deserved, to the commander of the 1st Fighter Group equipped with modern German war material [2].

During 01.07.1920-01.07.1922, he completed his first military studies at the Military School of Engineering and, according to the regulations in the training of army personnel, he continued his initial training, during 01.11.1922-01.10.1924, at the Special School of Engineering.

After graduating the Military School of Engineering Officers with the rank of lieutenant, on July 1, 1922, he was assigned to the Engineering Specialties Regiment. His special qualities were nicely highlighted by the school's student commander during the school period: „character - very lively, constitution - very strong, healthy, education - beautiful, springing from a neat growth and love with which military education was built, well-trained social and military education, strong character, honest, knight, noble soul, is intelligent, has a lot of common sense, has a sense of duty, initiative and strength of work, courage-giving will, dignified and decent attitude, is a very a good performer, he will become a good instructor, he will become a good officer” [2]. The commander of the specialties regiment, Colonel Fomescu, also noticed him as: “Serious, kind-hearted, promising officer” [2], “Intelligent, with good qualities, pretty good military education, he has qualities, he will become a good officer” [2].

During his initial service training at the Special Engineering School, 01.11.1922-31.10.1924, the commander of the Engineering Schools and Training Centers, General Amza, praised him as an “intelligent officer with very good career skills, he promises to become a good officer” [2], “1st Lieutenant Popișteanu has the moral and intellectual faculties for any hard work and he has high hopes for the future. He has a great love for the Air Force Army”, with the proposal to advance to the rank of lieutenant” [2], the ratings obtained rising up to these assessments.

During the period 01.11.1924-31.10.1926, he carried out his activity at the Aeronautics Arsenal and the Aeronautics Training Center, the assessments being in line with the desire to improve the officer and transfer to the category of navigating personnel, respectively: “Character and high education, passionate at work, he carries out most difficult tasks impeccably, being keen in mind and endowed with a remarkable spirit of observation, he will become a distinguished officer of the army and trustworthy, very eager to become a navigator and at the same time highly trained physically and intellectually, he entered the school of aerial observers on May 11, 1926, where he passed among the leading students” [2].

Attracted by flying, he requested the transfer to the Military Aeronautics, obtaining the approval to attend the School of Air Observers (11.05-24.11.1926), and as a result of the remarkable results obtained he carried out his activity until October 1, 1931, at the training applicative institution of the aeronautical personnel, Aeronautics Training Center.

The commander of the Aeronautics Training Center, the pilot with patent no. 3 in Romania, Lieutenant Colonel Negrescu Gheorghe remarks, for the period 01.11.1927-

The Lieutenant Commander Popișteanu Alexandru, Commander of the Heroical 7th Fighter Group in the Air Battle for the Liberation of Basarabia and the Conquest of Odessa

31.10.1928 [2], the passion of the officer for flight: „With a lot of love for flying, very good pilot, bold, calm, enthusiastic, very good officer”, aspects also highlighted by Major Vasiliu who followed him at the command of the center: „He flies on any plane and has remarkable qualities for aviation, an officer which can be counted on and in which the Aeronautics will have to hope a lot” [2], „He has a special love for flying, which he practices with skill and mastery, for which he was also awarded an award, an excellent officer and a pilot” [2].

The deep knowledge of the secrets of flight and the mastery in the use of fighter jets was achieved by going, step by step, through the complex aeronautical education system of that time:

- Air Observers School, 11.05-24.11.1926;

- Flying School, 01.11.1926-31.10.1927 and the granting of the pilot's license on Morane 80HP, Proto, Brandenburg and Morane 38 (180 HP) aircraft, in accordance with the Order of Command of the General Inspectorate of Aeronautics no. 88 of November 30, 1927 [3];

- War Plane Advanced Training School, 31.05-03.09.1928 [2], followed by confirmation as a fighter pilot on Fokker D. 11 and Spad 51 aircraft on 03.09.1928, in accordance with the Agenda of Command of the General Inspectorate of Aeronautics no. 56 of September 22, 1928 [3];

- Military Prep and Special Schools of Aeronautics, „Regele Carol al II-lea”/Special Aeronautics School - complementary course, 01.11.1930-01.07.1931, the assessments being as high as the recorded progress.

Noted for his flying qualities, he was enlisted on June 1, 1930, with the rank of lieutenant, as a pilot at the School of Air Observers, and later on October 1, 1931, in the Battle Flotilla.

At the suggestion of the flotilla commander, ”a very good officer, well trained and a good war pilot, deserves to be promoted”, he was promoted to the rank of captain on April 1st, 1932, and promoted to flotilla flight instructor.

Given the career prospects, thanks to the talent and remarkable professional qualities, the commander of the Battle Flotilla, the aviator commander Stoicescu and the commander of the 1st Air Division, General Hentzescu supported the officer's participation in the entrance exam to the highest military education institution in Romania: “The value of this officer is exceptional, which ensures a straight and clear path in our aeronautics, admirable flying skills, capable of activity that goes beyond the ordinary training and will always know how to cope with exceptional events, one of the elite elements of our aeronautics. He deserves to be presented at the Higher War School” [2].

The commander of the Battle Flotilla, the famous aviator commander Negrescu Gheorghe, who knew him very well, noticed the ascent and the progress made, appreciating him in the spirit of those times: ”An excellent fighter pilot, he flies with a lot of love on all types of planes and knows how to be a good example for his subordinates. He has carried out numerous raids in the country, he is a distinguished aviation officer” [2].

In 1931, in a crew with Captain Gheorghe Iacobescu, he competed with the Italian and Romanian pilots in the competition for the "Bucharest-Rome Cup", the two pilots obtaining the best time of the year, after crossing the distance between the two capitals five times.

At one of the crossings, the engine suffered a major breakdown off the Adriatic and only the dexterity of the crew prevented the emergency landing on the water [4].

Four years later, in August and October, together with the crew of Lieutenant Constantin Perju and Major Gheorghe Davidescu, in the crew with Captain Alexandru Papană, the famous acrobat of the "Red Devils" Squadron, carried out the raid on the route Bucharest- Tel Aviv [2].

He completed his training as a staff officer at the Higher School of War, between 01.11.1933-01.10.1936 and the Higher School of Air War in Paris, between 01.09.1937-01.10.1939 [2].

In the Higher War School, with internships at the "Mihai Viteazul" Guard Regiment, 1st Aircraft Defense Regiment, 1st Aircraft Flotilla, Aeronautics Training Center, for the period 01.11.1933-31.10.1936, Director of the Higher War School, General Spiroiu, characterized him as follows: "Very generous military education, a passionate aviator, a very knowledgeable connoisseur and a perfect pilot, a very good officer" [2].

To the remarks of the commander of the Superior Air War School in Paris, for the period 01.09.1937-01.10.1939 [2], of the military attache of Romania in France, captain commander Nicolau added the following description: "Smart officer, made a good impression in the professional environment of the School. Extremely dynamic personality, eager to fly, having up-to-date training on modern devices, good navigator and trusting his own knowledge, he'll be a good unit commander, imposing himself by determination and dynamism".

On April 1, 1937, with the transformation of the Battle Flotilla into the 1st Fighter Flotilla, having the rank of captain, he was appointed commander of the 2nd Fighter Squadron, a year later, by High Royal Decree no. 1899 of 10.11.1938, being promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander.

The commander of the Air Region, General Benoniade, characterized him for the period 01.11.1936-31.10.1937: "Very good officer, excellent pilot for all categories of aircraft. Intelligent, educated, he proved during the year a serious specialized training. At the command of the squadron, he proved to be a good instructor, educator and administrator. Officer of hope and future" [2].

For his qualities and special training, on October 1, 1939, he was assigned to the Air Force Command, and later, on May 1, 1940, he was seconded to the 1st Fighter Flotilla with service in the Air Force Command and was a staff officer on May 28, 1940..

In the run-up to the dismantling of Greater Romania, on June 1, 1940, he was appointed commander of the 7th Fighter Group, the first fighter group in the Romanian Royal Air Force to be equipped with the modern German Messerschmitt 109 fighter jet. In the days of the Soviet ultimatums at the end of June, he was mobilized with his group on June 29, 1940, according to the Royal High Decree no. 2175/1940, being demobilized on November 15, 1940 based on the High Royal Decree no. 3798/1940.

For this period, the commander of the 1st Fighter Flotilla, Captain Commander Tătulescu, characterized him as follows: "When Messerschmitt 109 arrived, he was given the command of the 7th Fighter Group to be formed and moved to the oil area. Hard working, he sought to fulfill the task entrusted to him and succeeded fully after two months" [2].

On June 22, the 7th Fighter Group of the Air Combat Wing was mobilized in the area of operations according to the Royal High Decree no. 1798/1941. When the take-off order was issued, the commander of the 7th Fighter Group, led by his fighters, took off in the first mission of the Air Battle for the liberation of Basarabia.

The exceptional activity of this great commander of the air unit was beautifully highlighted by the commander of the 1st Fighter Flotilla, the great air hunter, Captain Commander Mihail Romanescu: "On June 22, 1941, the holy day of the nation, he took off first at the head of the group for the first enemy mission.

*The Lieutenant Commander Popișteanu Alexandru, Commander of the Heroical 7th
Fighter Group in the Air Battle for the Liberation of Basarabia and the
Conquest of Odessa*

A wonderful leader, an example of courage, he carried the fame of his unity to the Prut, Basarabia, the Nistre and Ukraine, always being an example. He has carried out 36 enemy missions on the front. On August 21, 1941, he fell in the air as a hero. He was post-mortem decorated with Michael the Brave, 3rd class, the Golden Cross of Aeronautical Virtue and the Star of Romania with swords and ribbon of Military Virtue. His name remains written on the frontispiece of his unit as a sign of admiration and love from his bosses, comrades and subordinates" [2].

For the activity of peace support he had been Knight of the Cross "Aeronautical Virtue" (High Royal Decree no. 1813/1932), Knight of the "Crown of Romania" of peace (High Royal Decree no. 1403/1933), holder of the Decoration "Poland Restituta" and the Cross Gold of the Aeronautical Virtue with swords with two straps [2].

In the Operations Journal of the Air Combat Wing of August 21, 1941, it was written: "On this day we had the pain of losing one of our most valuable fliers, Lt-Cdor. Av. Popișteanu Al., Commander of the 7th Fighter Group, acting under the direct orders of the 4th Army.

In an air battle - after 8 planes had been shot down by his unit - Lt-Cdor. Av. Popișteanu had to give the most uplifting example of sacrifice.

For all this, His Majesty the King granted him, post mortem, the Order of Michael the Brave, and was summoned by the following agenda on the Air Combat Wing:

AGENDA No. 7 of 22.VIII.1941

At the end of the day of August 21, 1941, in the Battle for the Conquest of Odessa, Lt-Cdor. Popișteanu Alexandru - Commander of the 7th Fighter Group - summoned for his actions by agenda no. 2/941 on the 4th Army and the agenda No. 1/941, on the Air Combat Wing fell.

Distinguished with the Order "THE GOLDEN CROSS OF THE VIRTUES OF AERONAUTICS with swords" by the HEAD OF STATE AND THE COMMANDER OF THE COMMAND OF THE ROMANIAN-GERMAN FORCES, because on two occasions he landed in front of the battle lines to save his rescuers land in the immediate vicinity of enemy lines - thus showing the highest example of camaraderie and sacrifice.

Lt-Cdor. Av. Popișteanu Alexandru fought and fell heroically, leading his fliers with unsurpassed momentum and exemplary bravery in the fight for the reunification of the Fatherland and for the glory of the Romanian wings.

For these acts of arms and for his unsurpassed activity on the enemy...

I CALL BY ORDER IN THE AIR COMBAT WING

LT-CDOR. AV. POPIȘTEANU ALEXANDRU" [5].

At his hearse, King Mihai himself, accompanied by Marshal Antonescu, knelt down and awarded him posthumously the highest distinction of war, the Order of Michael the Brave, and General Aviator Emanoil Ionescu delivered the following report:

" Your Majesty,

The Commander of the Air Force reports today to Your Majesty the fulfillment of the duty, for some of his groups, for the heroic 7th Group under the command of Lt-Cdor. Popișteanu Alexandru.

In 60 days of fighting, the fliers of this group in front of Your Majesty carried out:

- 59 bombing missions.
- 11 enemy scout missions.
- 144 free hunting missions.

Totally 233 missions, in 40 de air fights, with the following results:

- 55 wins.

- 20 surface hit airplanes.

At the head of this group was the example of courage and sacrifice Lt-Cdor. Popișteanu Alexandru, who has 35 enemy attacks at the head of his fliers and two landings in the ground battle line, to save two of his fliers, hit by enemy bullets in the plane” [1].

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the original file of the officer, it was written briefly: ”Deleted from the controls, being killed in the air battle with the enemy aviation in the area of Vasilevha commune, Ukraine, according to the extract from the Register of the Dead no. 2/1941 issued by the officer of the civil war status of the 57th Fighter Squadron and PV no. 2 of 22.VIII.941, OZ 445/941” [2].

Built on a career as an aviator based on hard work and an exceptional vocation for flying, the commander of the 7th Fighter Group was an example of an aviator and commander, who managed to turn his unit into a granite block in front of the enemy air, for example alive in war for Romanian pilots, vivid memory for generations of aeronauts who have found and will find their professional ideal in his deeds of legend.

REFERENCES

- [1] Revista de Istorie Militară, “*A căzut Comandorul aviator Popișteanu*”, Anul XV, Nr. 9, septembrie 1941;
- [2]. Arhivele Militare Române, *Fond 3042-Memorii bătrâni*, Inventar nr. S 928/26.05.1982, 1922, nr. crt. 230 Popișteanu Alexandru, Dosar 1;
- [3]. Arhivele Statului Major al Forțelor Aeriene, *Dosar personal navigator*, nr. 2/1927-1928;
- [4]. Ion Gujdu, Gheorghe Iacobescu, Radu Stoika, *Aripi Românești*, Editura Militară, București, 1966;
- [5]. Arhivele Militare Române, *Copia Jurnalului de Operații al Grupării Aeriene de Luptă în Campania anului 1941 (22.VI-22.X.1941)*, Fond 329, Dosar 803/1.