

## **Cornizzolo (Lecco, Italy) — A tragic flight**

Sunday - July 24, 1988 - 3.30 p.m. – Mount Cornizzolo, Lecco, Italy

Mount Cornizzolo (1240 m), 40 km north-east of Milan, is one of the most know flying site in Italy, with nearly 200 active pilots. It offers great possibilities for long distance flights, towards the North and Switzerland but also further at east, to Bergamo Alps and even the Dolomites.

On take-offs the mood is amazing and local pilots are ready to begin their flight. Despite the mist which raises from the Po plain, weather conditions seem good: a few small cumulus clouds crown the peaks. It seems to be a quiet summer day. A steady wind of 20 km/h has been blowing for a few hours and allows a slope flight without difficulty or turbulence.

Anyway, Giuseppe, the local flight instructor, wonders about this breeze and raising his head he sees a few altocumulus passing at high speed and a veil of altostratus advancing towards them.

Pilots are not aware of the drama that is preparing and continue to take off. It is although true that in Lombardy – the Italia Region which Mount Cornizzolo belongs to – are used to fly in strong conditions and flirting with the storm fronts when cold and unstable air coming from the North of the Alps clashes with the humid, warm, and stable coming from the Po plain. It's in these conditions that a barrier of cumuliform clouds – sometimes of cumulonimbus generating powerful ascendances – forms. Pilots have also taken the habit of flying into these clouds, persuaded that it is enough to go towards the South and the stability of the Po plain to escape the danger.

Giuseppe stays alert, scans the horizon, and soon glimpses, through the mist, a black cloud mass advancing at ground level, like a steamroller at more than 40 km/h. It's 4:05 p.m. The wind weakens before moving to south. The instructor understood: this is not a storm front but a cold front that is coming at full speed. He remembers that an ATR42, a small airliner, crashed a few months before, eight kilometers further north, in similar circumstances, leaving no chance for the passengers and crew.

«Land! All go to land!» he shouts on the radio. A few hang-gliders dive frantically towards apparent safety: the landing, 800 meters below. Others, assured by the presence of Felice and Mario, two of the most skilled pilots who have barely taken off, are still taking advantage of this easy ascend to extend their flight. But it takes, at least, ten minutes to reach the landing area and by then the steamroller will have crushed them...

Finally, **Felice** understands. Control bar at his knees, he pulls towards the plain as fast as he can.

**Mario** is still gaining altitude. In a few minutes everything changes. It's too late. It was already too late! Everything becomes confused, violent, wild. Mario, sucked first into the bowels of a monstrous cumulonimbus, these clouds which can exceed 10,000 m in height, is thrown against the slopes of the Grigna, a sharp mountain.

Several pilots die or are injured while insisting on reaching the landing field. When they approach it, the gusts of wind accompanied by hail reach 100 km/h!

As he prepares to land, **Angelo** is sucked into the cloud. Its wing, keel vertical, continues to rise before diving down. Thrown more than 5,000 meters into a hell of hail and lightning, he lands as best he can in Valtellina, 70 km from take-off. With his face and hands frozen, he is transported to Chamonix, where his ten fingers are amputated.

**Guido** is less "lucky". He has been massacred against rocks near take-off.

**Ezio**, above Lake Garlate, just has time to shout «HELP!» before diving into the waves. Groggy, prisoner of his harness and his sail, narrowly escapes drowning, rescued by boaters.

The tragedy continues.

**Marco** finally realizes the danger and is now fleeing the storm. Too late, too slow, not enough towards the plain. He is sucked in by the monstrous cloud which breaks his wing. He pulls his parachute not far from the ground. He dies after two days in a coma in Bergamo hospital.

**Memo**, the elder, despite all his knowledge about flying, is pinned against an industrial building in the nearby suburb of Lecco. He dies instantaneously.

**Roberto**, a young pilot, is one of the few to make the right decision: escape towards East, as quickly as he can in front of the terrible steamroller. It lands 70 km away, after only one turn.

Finally, the sun sets. Great confusion reigns on Cornizzolo. Later in the evening, this cold front of extreme intensity - the Bergamo-Seriate airport will be closed for several hours - claims a sixth victim: a German pilot who crashes into a stream in Alto Adige, about a hundred km away.

The curtain of night may fall on what has become free flight's greatest tragedy.

Pilots who died during the tragedy in Cornizzolo:

Guido Baruffini, Memo La Rocca, Antonio Legranzini, Marco Lietti, Mario Maspero.

15H30. Sunday 24 July 1988, Province of Lecco (I)