

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was the author of 'Le Petit Prince' and, in France, a war hero. But 60 years after his mysterious death, the wreckage retrieved from his watery grave is threatening to destroy his reputation. **Martin Buckley** reports

The other side of the story

At midday on May 23, 2000, Luc Vanrell was 200ft beneath the surface of the Mediterranean. He would need a full hour to regain the surface, and he was diving alone. The sun's rays were vertical, the sky cloudless, the seabed almost shadowless. "Perfect diving conditions," he recalls. Barely a mile away, Jacques Cousteau had begun his illustrious career, diving on the wreck of a Roman ship. But Vanrell was looking for something more recent. Steadily he flipped deeper and deeper.

and one of the world's best-loved authors, could have disappeared into thin air one summer's day in 1944.

It was assumed that the pilot had been shot down in the Alps during a reconnaissance mission. But Vanrell believed that Saint-Exupéry had in fact been very far from the supposed path of his flight. "There are dozens of warplanes on the seabed around Marseilles, and I'd gradually eliminated all the others," Vanrell says. The plane before him had clearly exploded, scattering fragments across a square mile of seabed. But Vanrell knew exactly what to look for. A veteran fighter pilot had sent him the factory's original drawings. Then he saw it: lying on a lump of coral, wreathed with seaweed, a 3ft column of metal.

"It was the landing gear of a Lockheed Lightning F-5. The F-5 was very rare in the Mediterranean theatre of war, and of the three shot down, I'd already identified two. There couldn't be any more doubt. I knew I'd found the plane – and the grave – of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry."

Not everyone welcomed Vanrell's discovery. Many in France would prefer Saint-Exupéry's grave to remain a mystery – including his wealthy and secretive family, the literary establishment that has implacably guarded his reputation, and a political establishment keen to retain its wartime hero. "Legends like Saint-Exupéry's should not be tinkered with," pronounced his nephew, Jean D'Agay, in the French press, a view echoed by the family's supporters.

If the plane could be shown to have been shot down, the author's reputation would remain untarnished. But when the wreck was finally raised last autumn, no bullet holes were found. Still, as France prepares to mark the 60th anniversary of its national hero's death, few are willing to confront the possibility that the author of *Le Petit Prince* deliberately plunged his warplane into the sea.

It was "St-Ex" who inspired me to take up flying. Three years ago I retraced his final flight from Bastia, Corsica, towards the French coast, throwing a handful of petals from the window of my Piper Cherokee plane in homage to the poet-aviator. But the more I looked into his life, the more it appeared that his final months were unhappy.

In the summer of 1944, Free French squadron 2/33 arrived at Bastia in northern Corsica as the Allies chased the Germans north. The squadron's mascot was Saint-Exupéry: a debonair literary legend who had made his name with *Night Flight*, a book about early adventures in aviation. By 1940 he had already published *Le Petit Prince*, though he had yet to make any money from it. By now St-Ex was also, according to letters and anecdote, a deeply unhappy man in the habit of hitting the bottle.

The source of his unhappiness was varied. Having learned to fly in the 1920s, he loathed the complexity of modern aircraft, and Squadron 2/33 was being equipped with one of the most advanced yet – the American-built Lockheed Lightning. On just his second mission, a reconnaissance flight over occupied France from North Africa, Saint-Exupéry wrote off a Lightning – and, to his humiliation, was grounded.

He was well enough connected to get Eisenhower, the Allied Supreme Commander, to intervene on his behalf. But



Antoine de Saint-Exupéry Few people will accept that the author of 'Le Petit Prince', inset, killed himself. 'Legends like his should not be tinkered with,' says his nephew

at that moment General Charles de Gaulle made a speech implying that Saint-Exupéry was a collaborator with the German-installed Vichy regime, largely because he had a war book (*Flight to Arras*) published in occupied France. De Gaulle had become convinced that the aristocratic author was turning the Americans against him. (St-Ex, for his part, refused publicly to support de Gaulle, telling friends that the general put political ambition above the good of France.)

The general's power was growing steadily – and he proved a vindictive enemy. De Gaulle placed the author under observation, his mail was intercepted, even his books were banned from sale in Free France. And his requests for active service were denied.

Saint-Exupéry was devastated. He began to drink heavily, and saw himself being shot as a collaborator after the Liberation. His worries did not all relate to the war. He was in constant pain from a dozen flying accidents, could barely move his neck, and suffered crippling back pain. He also had run up serious debts (had he lived, *Le Petit Prince* would, ironically, have made him very rich).

There were personal troubles, too, according to confidantes who spoke after the author's death. Saint-Exupéry had difficulties in his physical relationships with women, suffering from impotence. In 1931 he had married Consuelo Gómez Carillo, a mercurial, hysterical and unfaithful Salvadorian. Sexually the marriage was never a success. Saint-Exupéry had a series of un consummated "affairs"; while Consuelo was indiscreet about her own, causing him acute public embarrassment.

In May 1944, after eight months of desperate string-pulling, Saint-Exupéry was reinstated with squadron 2/33. But his flying was now dangerously uneven, and his

superiors conspired to keep him out of the air. St-Ex darkly told René Gavoielle, the Commander of 2/33, that it was obvious that he was going to disappear one way or another, and he'd rather it was on a war mission. St-Ex gave him his papers with instructions on what to do with them in the event of his death.

The war was nearing its end – the Allies had invaded Normandy and would soon take southern France – but Saint-Exupéry brooded in letters to

taken a flight earmarked for another pilot. What is certain is that he turned up at the airfield, ordered the ground staff to prepare his oxygen suit for flight, and took off. When Gavoielle arrived at the airfield he is said to have barked at the ground crew, "Why the hell did you let him fly?"

As Saint-Exupéry crossed the sea, he would have known this was almost certainly his last chance to fly a military mission. At about 9.30am he crossed the French coastline.

'Eight days before his last mission he had hinted that he was thinking of suicide'

friends about the mechanised, consumerist world he believed was around the corner. He wrote of his indifference to life, and gave away his typewriter and cherished chess set.

Before a mission, pilots were supposed to get an early night. On the eve of his final flight, Saint-Exupéry didn't even get to bed – it was found undisturbed by his batman. It is unclear if he was even authorised to fly: he may have

He was never heard of again.

Fifty-four years later, there was a sensational development. A fisherman, Jean-Claude Bianco, announced that near the tiny island of Riou, south of Marseilles, his nets had snagged an identity bracelet on the sea floor. "For a moment, I thought it was a practical joke," Bianco says. "My number two, Habib Ben Amor, handed me this little glinting thing, which I rubbed at, and the name Antoine

appeared – my middle name. Then I saw the names of Saint-Exupéry and his wife Consuelo, and I realised it was less a joke than a miracle."

He was soon to express not wonder but hurt, as sceptical journalists and the Saint-Exupéry family implied that he was a hoaxer. The Saint-Exupérys, to whom the bracelet was sent for identification, denied its authenticity – but hung on to it. Few newspapers reported that Consuelo's descendants believed the bracelet to be authentic.

Enter Luc Vanrell. His father had always claimed to have seen a plane in the area where Bianco fished, and Luc had glimpsed wreckage in the depths. He began an intense study of the 40-odd warplanes in the waters around Marseilles, and discovered that certain design details would distinguish Saint-Exupéry's late-model Lightning from any other plane. Sure enough, when he dived on May 23, 2000, the tell-tale undercarriage segment was there.

It was illegal to disturb the wreckage, so Vanrell declared his find to the Ministry of Culture and asked for permission to search for serial numbers to identify the plane. "I thought it would close a chapter, bring peace of mind to the Saint-Exupéry family, and clear the name of Jean-Claude Bianco," Vanrell tells me. Instead, it caused acrimony. Vanrell was accused of grave-robbing. The wealthy Saint-Exupérys used their political influence to push for a ban on diving and even fishing at the site.

The Ministry took 19 months even to register Vanrell's declaration. Meanwhile, television and undersea-exploration companies began to explore the wreck. The French government reluctantly conceded an investigation, and fragments of the plane were raised last autumn. An aluminium panel was discovered bearing five hand-engraved characters – 2734 L. It proved beyond any

doubt that this was the plane Saint-Exupéry flew.

One of aviation's – and literature's – greatest enigmas was solved. The official announcement came on April 7 this year, at a Ministry of Culture press conference. The massed journalists were informed that the wreckage suggested an almost vertical crash at about 500 miles an hour. But they were told the cause would "never be definitively known". The government's preferred explanation is oxygen-supply failure – a hypothesis not supported by any evidence.

There is one lone voice putting forward the theory that nobody wants to discuss. Bernard Mark, an aviation historian, has suggested that the most likely cause of Saint-Exupéry's death is suicide. "Eight days before his last mission he had hinted that he was thinking of suicide," he says. "He was spotted by German fighters over Turin, who were intrigued to see that he didn't vary his course: he let them come. Saint-Exupéry even said himself that he saw them arrive; he turned his rear-view mirror and waited for them. In the end the Germans left."

St-Ex has been sold to the French public as a kind of superman – pilot, patriot and literary genius all rolled into one. The truth seems rather different. Luc Vanrell believes that if St-Ex did fly his plane straight into the Mediterranean that bright morning, it would be wrong to blame him.

"St-Ex was a flyer about to have his wings taken away, and he was subjected to intolerable bullying by politicians. If he chose to end his life that way, I think it was an honourable and courageous death. I'd say he couldn't have chosen a lovelier place. He lies in turquoise waters off one of the wildest and most beautiful coastlines in France."

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Marseille Luc Vanrell and Saint-Exupéry's wrecked warplane



Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: the daredevil author went missing while flying a reconnaissance mission over the Mediterranean in 1944

Author's wartime mystery resurfaces

Saint-Exupéry's disappearance is one of France's literary riddles. The recovery of a silver chain may solve it, writes **Susannah Herbert**

ONE of French literature's great mysteries — the final hours of daredevil author and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry — may be solved after a Marseilles fisherman netted fragments of his crashed aircraft and an inscribed silver wrist-chain.

The chain bears the name Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the address of the writer's New York publisher and the name of his wife, Consuelo.

It was found by Jean-Claude Bianco while fishing between Marseilles and La Ciotat, and has triggered a fresh search for the wreckage of the American-built Lightning P38 reconnaissance aircraft in which Saint-Exupéry disappeared on July 31, 1944. M Bianco said yesterday: "I saw the name Antoine and thought to myself, 'That's my middle name'. Then I saw Saint-Exupéry and I thought, 'It's not possible, I'm dreaming'. I was astounded."

Saint-Exupéry's death at the age of 44 cut short a

remarkable life and robbed France of one of its most revered writers, the author of *The Little Prince* and *Wind, Sand and Stars*.

A pioneer of airmail routes in Africa and South America, Saint-Exupéry was an experienced but eccentric pilot whose insistence on returning to active service after the fall of France worried his friends and infuriated his superiors.

He was grounded in Algiers by the Americans in 1943, after he crashed a Lightning.

When he complained of his punishment to the American colonel in charge, saying, "I want to die for France", the answer was curt: "I don't give a damn if you die for France or not, but you're not going to do so in one of our airplanes."

Characteristically, Saint-Exupéry proved the Americans wrong.

Although overweight, over-aged and insouciant to the point of irresponsibility, in 1944 he persuaded his superiors to let him fly

reconnaissance missions over France from Sardinia and Corsica, brushing off pleas to quit with the words: "I'll follow through now. The end is no longer very far off, I think."

He was declared "missing presumed lost" on July 31, six hours after leaving Corsica on a mapping mission of the region east of Lyons.

In 1948, he was officially deemed to have died for his country, but despite endless speculation and the work of the Saint-Exupéry's Footsteps Association, no one has yet proved exactly how he met his fate — or even where.

Henri-Germain Delauze, the head of an underwater exploration firm, said yesterday that one of the pieces of wreckage discovered with the chain was a metal support rib for the radio.

He and his team are searching for the rest of the missing aircraft in a 175-square-mile area between Marseilles and Bandol.



Henri-Germain Delauze with the silver wrist-chain

Wreckage of Little Prince author's plane found in sea

Mystery of pioneer's final flight is solved 60 years on, writes **Henry Samuel** in Paris

ONE of France's most enduring mysteries has been solved with the discovery of the wreckage of the aircraft piloted by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of the children's classic *The Little Prince*.

Two pieces of his Lockheed Lightning P38, which vanished on July 31, 1944, during an Allied reconnaissance mission, have been pulled from the Mediterranean near Marseilles.

Archives confirmed that the manufacturer's serial number, 2734L, stamped on a piece of salvaged fuselage, matched that of Saint-Exupéry's plane.

"I had tears in my eyes when I saw the number," said Pierre Becker, the head of Géocean, one of the engineering companies involved.

The discovery ends more than half a century of speculation over the final resting place of the aristocratic adventurer and author, whose blend of pioneering aviation, philosophy and literary genius made him one of France's most beloved sons.

The Little Prince, a disarmingly simple tale about a little boy who recounts his space-travelling experiences to a pilot he meets in the Sahara, is believed to be the

third best-selling book on the planet, beaten only by the Bible and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.

Much of his writing recounts the perilous and poetic experience of flying, in submission to what he calls "those elemental divinities — night, day, mountain, sea and storm".

He first flew a plane at the age of 12. Much later he crashed in the Sahara and walked for days without water before being rescued.

For what turned out to be his final flight, he took off from Corsica in good weather on a mission to photograph German troop movements in the Rhone valley.

He never returned and it was not clear where or why he crashed.

The hunt moved to the Marseilles area in 1998 when a fisherman recovered a silver bracelet with the inscription "Saint-Ex", "Consuelo" (his Salvadorean wife) and the address of his American publishers.

Sceptics branded the find a fake but, in May 2000, Luc Vanrell, a professional French diver, located parts of a P38 plane about 230ft down near the island of Riou off Marseilles.

A state ban on further dives meant he could not retrieve the pieces until last October. "The parts were given an acid



Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who illustrated his book *The Little Prince*, left, crashed while flying a Lockheed Lightning P38



“We are thinking of a near-vertical dive at high speed”

bath and once they resumed their former appearance the serial number appeared,” said Philippe Castello, a diver and aviation expert who compiled the culture ministry report on the plane. “When it tallied with Lockheed’s

number for Saint-Exupéry’s plane, we were all speechless. We had to go over it four times to be sure we weren’t dreaming.”

The mystery of why the plane crashed remains. “There was no bent

propeller, no bullet holes,” M Castello said.

“Looking at the pieces, we are thinking of a hypothesis of a near-vertical dive at high speed. But that’s just a guess.” Theories have ranged from hostile gunfire to

mechanical problems or suicide.

But one of the most enduring is that, at 44, Saint-Ex, as the French call him, was simply too old to fly an aircraft known to be difficult to handle.

