



THE BELGIANS REMEMBER THEM

PATRIOTIC ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER N° 1

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EDITORIAL



As I write this editorial, the news of the health crisis that has been disrupting our daily lives for many months seems to be taking on a disturbing dimension again! Let us hope that vaccination campaigns and the providing of the vaccine can be carried out efficiently and without incident, so that we may quickly see beyond this world full of economic downturn and weariness with our current circumstances.

Until the situation became clearer, we had to make decisions about the few events we wanted to organize this year. It goes without saying that if the pandemic reoccurs in our country, we will review all of our projects, but I hope that will not be necessary.

The 2021 General Assembly of the Association was postponed until 1 April 2021. The latest steps taken by the authorities forced us to cancel it. The financial and moral reports for 2020 and the outlook for 2021 are published on our French-language website: <http://www.rebecq-memorial.eu/ag2021.php>

The memorial service for the Soviet Armed Partisans originally planned for October 2021 has been moved to 9 May. It will be held at the Rebecq Communal Cemetery, in front of the «National Memorial to Soviet Armed Partisans in Belgium» and in the presence of H.E. the Ambassador of Russia and General Orlov, Head of the Russian Delegation to NATO.

As regards our annual solemn tribute to the airmen of the RAF and to the Resistance who helped crash survivors escape, we have postponed it until September 29, 2021. By then we will have been assured that this event can be held in the most favourable conditions. Details of these events can be found later in this letter.

This year, we celebrate the association's 10th anniversary. I am particularly pleased to have been able to serve our patriotic organization and to have been able to help preserve the memory of those whose courage and sacrifice we regularly recall, sacrifice given more than 80 years ago now. How far we have come since the morning of May 7, 2011, when, at the Rebecq Memorial monument, installed two days earlier, we organized our first solemn ceremony of tribute to Rebecq! I am also mindful of the team who has been working since then to ensure everything runs smoothly.

We've come a long way with our friends at 550 Squadron in North Killingholme since the unveiling of the monument dedicated to their Airmen who crashed at Rebecq. Since then, we have been honouring those who crashed at Bérinzenne, Jalhay, Westerlo, Sint-Niklaas and Lichtervelde. In these places, we met the people who preserve the memory of the airmen who crashed there in 1944. If these place names recall the memory of the Airmen of the 550 Sqd who crashed there, they also evoke lasting and beautiful friendships established with the leaders of the various memorials dedicated to the pilots of the 550 Sqd.

Since its unveiling, the Initial Memorial has honored the memory of all RAF airmen who crashed in Belgium. They were more than four thousand involved in more than 700 plane crashes. They came from about fifteen different countries.

It has taken us a long time to provide the descendants of all RAF and Commonwealth RAF airmen with our "The Belgians Remember Them" database, a tool where they can now find as much information as possible about their ancestor who fell on Belgian soil defending the freedom of the peoples of Europe.

When I began the tedious work of listing all the RAF airmen who fell in Belgium between May 1940 and May 1945, I did not imagine that, for each of them, I would experience their tragedy and feel the pain of their loved ones when they received the fateful news of their disappearance. It was a journey filled with emotion and empathy for these young men destined to lose their lives so that, today, I can live in freedom. I express these feelings in a short poem that you will read below.

In this first issue, you will read articles published by historians working with our universities and whose expertise is recognized. There is an overview of the air battle in Belgium during WWII. Two other articles relate to the Resistance movement «Front for Independence» and its armed wing «The Armed Partisans» which was involved in many rescues of survivors of Allied aircraft crashes. The story of the Lancaster W4317 of 61 Sqd's mission which ended in Givry (Hainaut), where we plan to erect a memorial to the memory of members of this crew and that of the crew of the Lancaster JA976-LQ-S which crashed at Webbecom, in Flemish Brabant, complete the topics covered in this review.

I end the few lines of the editorial of this first newsletter in the hope that it will arouse the interest of many readers all over the world. I extend my friendly greetings to you all!

Wilfred Burie,
President

ELEGY TO THE HEROES OF SILENCE

DEDICATED TO THE ROYAL AIR FORCE AIRCREWS FALLEN IN BELGIUM DURING WW2

They were twenty years old
They were young, they were handsome
They were brave
They were heroes

I hear their laughter and their jokes
They hide their fears by getting on board
I imagine their silence
As the engines start

I think they're meditating
As they fly towards their objective
Maybe they're praying
Asking for a safe return

They were twenty years old
They were young, they were handsome
They were brave
They were heroes

I hear the sound of Flak
And the doors open for dropping bombs
I imagine the rumbling when they explode on target
I hear the Pilot saying, «We're going back»

I hear machine guns firing
As enemy fighters pursue the plane
I hear the bullets bursting
When they hit the aircraft's wing

They were twenty years old
They were young, they were handsome
They were brave
They were heroes

I hear the Pilot saying on the microphone
«We've been hit!, we've been hit!
We'll try to land
Good luck to all!»

They were twenty years old
They were young, they were handsome
They were brave
They were heroes

I hear the plane descending inexorably
And imagine the anguish that embraces them
I hear the plane crashing
I hear them screaming "Mummy!"

And then I hear the silence

I hear their mom's groan
Who, when opening the telegram
She learns that her son is declared Missing
It's a scream of pain

And then I hear the silence

You were twenty years old
You were young, you were handsome
You were brave
You are the Heroes

The Heroes of Silence

THE FRONT FOR INDEPENDENCE, BY FABRICE MAERTEN, MEMBER OF THE SCIENTIFIC TEAM OF THE STATE ARCHIVES/CEGESOMA

Born at the dawn of 1942, the Independence Front numbers tens of thousands of members in 1943 and 1944, making it the most extensive resistance movement during most of the Occupation. But at the Liberation, the movement appears as a colossus with feet of clay.



The myth of its creation, a slow start

The Front for Independence (FI) was not set up on 15 March 1941, as its main leader, journalist Fernand Demany, wrote after the war. In fact, it was created in several stages. In May 1941, the Communist Party of Belgium published a «Manifesto to the peoples of Flanders and Wallonia for the independence of the country». The attack on the USSR by Nazi Germany on 22 June 1941 enabled the Communists to seek dialogue with like-minded people. The new organisation thus put together took the form of a Walloon Front for the Liberation of the Country, officially launched in the first issue of the underground newspaper “La Meuse” published in October 1941. The Walloon Front, which united Communists, Walloon militants, anti-fascist intellectuals, and «anglophiles», served as a model for the FI which first appeared in certain regions in late autumn 1941 or early winter 1941-1942. But it was not until March 1942 that the group organized itself throughout the country and that the name «Front of independence» (FI), emphasising the national character of the fight, was mandatory everywhere.

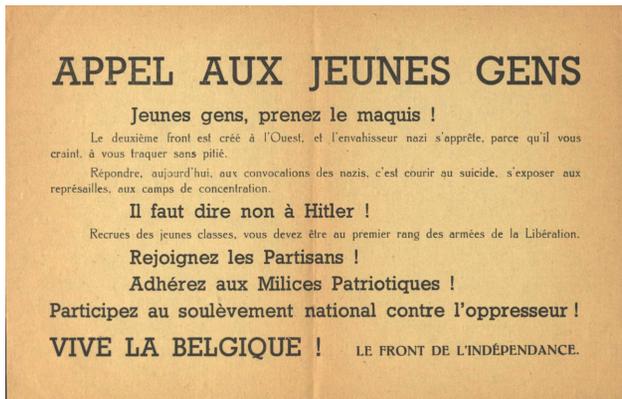
A failure and a great success

The initial objective of the Communists, who were began the FI and led it throughout the war, was to bring together all the existing groups in order to better coordinate action against the occupying forces and, thus, better cooperate in driving them out of the country. But this desire ran up against the mistrust of the Underground Socialist Party and right-wing groups, who refused to be part of an organization set up by communists. Therefore, apart from the circles linked to or close to the Belgian Communist Party and the small band of free thinkers often from the liberal family, membership was on an individual basis. Initially, in 1942, the FI speech seeking volunteers and disseminated by small underground newspapers, in leaflet campaigns, in conversations and by posters attracted very little response outside the circles of those originally involved. The development of the international situation and especially the introduction of compulsory work in Germany (Service du Travail Obligatoire – STO) from October 1942 changed the situation. In particular, the involvement of the FI in the fight against deportation by the creation of committees to help those who refused to join STO from the spring of 1943, allowed it to gradually expand into large sections of the population.

Essentially an unarmed popular movement

Since the FI advocates direct action against the occupying forces and has, as its final objective, a national uprising, it thus portrays itself as, above all, a propaganda and humanitarian resistance movement. So, in 1943 and 1944, thousands of members were mobilized to draft, make and/or distribute some 150 underground hand-outs directly or indirectly linked to the FI. They are also responsible for spreading leaflets and decorating towns and villages with the colours of the national flag on symbolic dates. In addition, the organization helps not only the rebels, but also the families of political prisoners, (via Solidarity with FI), Jews hunted down, (through the Defense Committee of Jews), resistance fighters in hiding, French prisoners and Russian and Polish escapees. Moreover, it supports the patriotic and social struggle in companies, via the Trade Union Struggle Committees (CLS) which publish instructions through a hundred underground newspapers and numerous leaflets, initiate work stoppages and sabotage production destined for Germany.

Direct action is carried out during most of the Occupation by the (Belgian) Partisans, who, while being affiliated to the FI, act semi-independently of the movement as the armed wing of the Communist Party. In order to work for the liberation of the country, the communist leaders at the head of FI created, in the spring of 1944, the Patriotic Militias



Tract of «Front de l'Indépendance» (CegeSoma)

A vain initiative

In January 1944, the FI released a plan in which the Liberation Committees formed, under its initiative, would assume certain powers for maintaining law and order in the context of a national uprising supported by a general insurrectionary strike. However, the hostility of the Belgian government in London which forced the FI to abandon this project and the little impact of the FI on the liberation of the country prevented the FI's organization from playing an important political role in September 1944. Nevertheless, to show his gratitude to the movement, the government of Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot, back in the country after the Liberation, included Ferdinand Demany in its team.

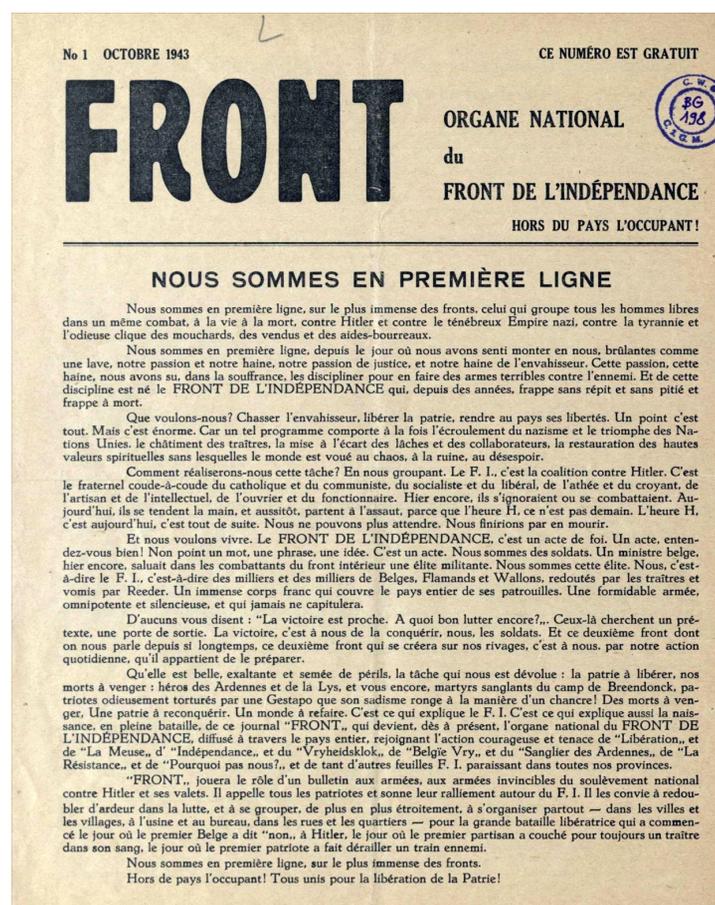
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Newspaper «Front» n° 1 of October 1943 (CegeSoma)

THE ARMED PARTISANS,

BY FABRICE MAERTEN, MEMBER OF THE STATE ARCHIVES/CEGESOMA SCIENTIFIC TEAM

Germany's invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941 leads the Communist International, which at that time ran all the communist parties from Moscow, to issue an order, on June 30, that all parties must use every means possible to disrupt enemy activity in their area in a bid to relieve the Red Army. The Communist Party of Belgium (PCB) experiences difficulty in implementing this directive because it is contrary to communist working class tradition in the country and to accepted Marxist theory. The move to action is that much slower and the recruitment of sufficient numbers is made even more difficult because public opinion is not in favor of violence and because, from the outset, the occupying forces exert unrelenting repression on the first small band of partisans. So, from August 1941, the PCB calls on former Spanish War veterans, militants directly linked to the Communist International and intellectuals to run existing active cells. Due to the lack of men, means and experience, any actions carried out until the spring of 1942 are sporadic and generally have little impact.

The first wave of attacks

In March 1942, those whom the PCB will henceforth refer to in its newspapers as the Belgian Partisans begin executing collaborators, and in particular Rex Party mayors*. Although it is still little appreciated by the majority of the population, the organization can now count on its membership of communist militants from the working class in the big cities and industrial centres of Wallonia. However, these groups, which step up attacks from the summer of 1942 and are now supported by the Front de l'indépendance (FI), while retaining their autonomy, are too weak to withstand German police investigations for any length of time. In Brussels, action is led, in particular, by young Communist Jews who attack Germans from the end of 1942. The resulting repression suffered is such that the survivors quickly abandon direct attacks on the occupying forces in favour of focusing on executing Belgian collaborators and sabotaging the German war machine.

(* Rexist, in French, *rexiste*: a member of REX party, a political party of extreme right-wing views, supporters of collaboration with the Nazis, whose leader led the Wallonia Legion to fight on the Eastern Front. Sentenced to death in absentia after the war, he took refuge in Spain to escape justice)

a brief cessation and a rise in power

In the summer of 1943, a wave of arrests among the ranks of the PCB, which had started a few months earlier, overwhelms the Party and the Partisans who are still closely linked to it. The blow to the armed wing of the CPB leads to a sharp decrease in its activities for the first time since its creation. However the slowdown is only short-lived. As early as the autumn of 1943, the Partisans carry out attacks and sabotage, especially on the railways, at a rate never before attained. As a result, from this time on, recruitment takes place far beyond Communist hot-beds. In fact, the movement now attracts non-politicized young people affected by the constant deterioration of living conditions, directly threatened by the imposition of compulsory work in Germany, convinced of the final success of the Allies and in admiration of Red Army successes. That said, apart from Limburg and Flemish Brabant, membership is mainly based in Brussels and in the Walloon industrial areas, where the Communists succeed in establishing the organization and where the Socialists, by their wait-and-see attitude, leave a great void.



A bomb attack on Rex's premises on Rue de Laeken in Brussels on 1 October 1941 resulted in the death of a rexisit. This isolated attack foreshadows the series of bloody attacks perpetrated mainly by the PA, which will multiply from 1942. (CegeSoma)

Terror and counterterror

After the Allied landings on the beaches of Normandy, acts of sabotage are stepped up. Moreover, in several regions of the country, there is a real mini-civil war between the resistance, and in particular the Partisans now called Armed Partisans, on the one hand, and the armed groups collaborationist groups, incensed by the ever increasing number of their members killed at that time by the Resistance. The increased repression carried out by the occupying forces and collaborators no longer managed to stem the flow of actions led by constantly renewed teams of Partisans.

Immediately following Liberation

In spite to increasing membership during the last year of Occupation, the Armed Partisans (Partisans Armés - PA), named on the eve of the Liberation «Belgian Army of Partisans», will never constitute a mass movement. 13.246 individuals are recognized as members after the war but, given the intense repression suffered (in Hainaut for example, one Partisan in two is arrested and one in five dies) and the effect of this on communist militants not active in the armed struggle, there are probably only a few thousand of them actively engaged at the time of Liberation and, since they are poorly armed, their role, essentially, is to supplement the numbers of Allied infantry troops in those areas where numbers of partisans are relatively high and to act as warders of alleged collaborators now in prison.

Following the battles which resulted in Liberation, the PCB intends to use the armed Partisans as a means of exerting forceful pressure on the government, but the Party's appeal to them to march on Brussels on 28 November 1944 to help bring down Hubert Pierlot's conservative government ends in great disappointment for the Communists. Few men assembled in answer to the call and those who did respond were easily pushed back by the gendarmes. The PCB failed to understand that most of its elite troops fought only to drive the occupying forces out of the country and not to further a political purpose.

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The group 023 of Armed Partisans of Braine-le-Comte in October 1944 (Picture: coll Rewisbique)

GIVRY, A FITTING MEMORY PROJECT,

PURPOSE TO RECALL THE TRAGIC MISSION OF LANCASTER W4317-QR-R AND TO REMEMBER THE AIRMEN WHO FELL THERE,
BY WILFRED BURIE



Control tower of Syerston

Formed as a British Flying Corps fighter squadron during the First World War in late July 1917, 61 Squadron was reformed in 1937 as an RAF bomber squadron and returned to service during the Second World War before being disbanded in 1958.

In 1943, 61 Squadron was based in Syerston, near Newark in Nottinghamshire and brought together heavy bombers such as the most modern Manchesters, Lancasters and Wellingtons.

The squadron's first operational mission - armed reconnaissance over the North Sea by 11 Hampden bombers - took place on Christmas Day 1939. A few months later, on March 7, during an initial security patrol over Sylt-Borkum-Norderney, a Hampden bombed an enemy destroyer that had opened fire on it.

After the war, the squadron remained operational until it was disbanded in 1958.

On Friday, April 16, 1943, it was sunny all over the British Isles. In Hemswell, all Pilot Officers were called for an operational briefing. The target, the Skoda factories, is located in Czechoslovakia in Plzen. This huge industrial site manufacturing vehicles was taken over by the Germans when they invaded the country in 1939. This company is vital to the Nazi war effort.

327 bombers will take part in the mission, which is dangerous in more ways than one. Firstly, the good weather covering the entire continent will make the RAF's aircraft more visible to the Luftwaffe's fighters. In addition, Plzen is at the extreme limit of the bombers range and the return flight is to be undertaken as soon as possible to avoid fuel shortage over the North Sea. Furthermore, the escort of Spitfire fighters, which ensures the safety of heavy aircraft with low maneuverability, cannot be provided throughout the mission since the British fighter planes do not have the same range of action as the bombers.

At about 19:15, in Syerston, all crews involved in the mission took their places on board their aircraft. Aboard the Lancaster W4317-QR-R, the seven men strapped themselves into their seats and prepared for a flight that would be longer than usual. William MacFarlane, 22, is the first Pilot. The second is Donald Holdworth, 21, who will also serve as a Rear-Gunner. John Edwards (at 23 years old, the oldest of the crew) is the Wireless Operator. Alongside them are the Navigator, Cyril Williams (22), bomber and Front-Gunner, William Dawson (22), Rear-gunner Jack Rees (21) and Flight-Engineer Peter Keay (22) and the only Australian. All the other crew members are British.

During the preparation of the flight (checklist), a vehicle brought a young airman to join the crew of W4317. Sergeant Edward Davidson was rostered as Second Navigator to further his training. He presents his mission order signed by the Chief of Operations Dayvelord to Pilot Officer MacFarlane



*From left to right: Sgt Holdsworth, F/O Williams, F/Sgt Dawson, Sgt Keay, F/Sgt Edwards, F/Sgt Rees et P/O MacFarlane.
Sgt Davidson don't appears on the group's picture but here, at right (Ph. Aircrews Remembered)*

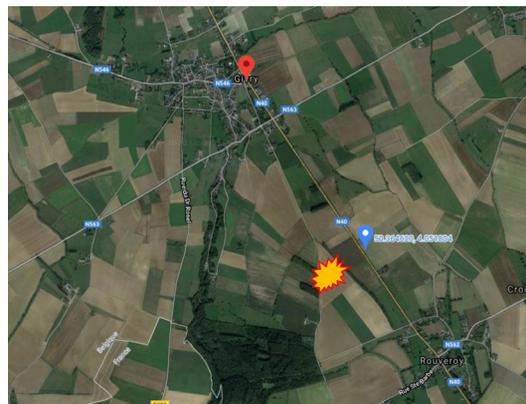


Pilsen (Pilsen in Czechoslovakia - Factories Skoda bombed)

At 19:45, all 61 Squadron aircraft participating in the mission took off from the base to join the rest of the formation somewhere over the North Sea. The planned route flew over the Channel, approached the mainland coast at Dunkirk, followed the Franco-Belgian border and then through Bavaria to Czechoslovakia. The return flight is usually in a direct line, avoiding German anti-aircraft fire as much as possible.

It seems that during the flight over Bethune, the Lancaster W4317 was hit by anti-aircraft fire causing fatal damage. Three men died on board - the two navigators Williams and Davidson and the engineer Keay. It is very likely that a salvo of bullets pierced the fuselage and killed the three unfortunate crew members. The accident was reported to the British authorities around 11:00 pm. The Lancaster was then over Bavaria.

From that moment on, we have no information about the rest of the mission. By calculating the flight time and the time of the crash, it can be reasonably inferred that MacFarlane decided to turn back, as his aircraft lost maneuverability. Did it drop its bombs somewhere in Bavaria? We don't know. However, we do know that the Lancaster approached the Meuse around 4:00 am, local time.



*Givry, in Hainaut. The area of the crash is indicated in yellow
The field where the plane crashed. Behind the trees, the red dotted Beaumont Causeway*

It was also at this moment that Lieutenant Rudolf Altendorf took off with his Messerschmitt 110 from the Luftwaffe base at Laon-Athies (F). The German caught up with the Lancaster W4317 at Solre-sur-Sambre (B) and hit the British aircraft, which immediately caught fire. The plane was now practically uncontrollable and gradually lost height. Still pursued by the German, the Lancaster headed West in a straight line. It flew over the communes of Vieux-Reng, Bettignies and Vieux-Harveng and executed a loop which brought it to Givry. The plane, which had been flying for some time a few metres above ground level, crashed into a field farmed by Maurice Rosart of Givry. The explosion produced by the impact on the ground was enormous. It created a deep crater 4 metres long and 20 metres wide. The blast threw debris over a half-hectare area. The remaining fuel ignited and spread over the ground. The view of the fire was breathtaking.



Pictures taken few hours after the crash (Pictures: Le Vieux Givry)

Villagers quickly arrived and looked for possible survivors despite the intense heat generated by the fire. It was clear that the entire crew perished in the crash. In addition, German vehicles soon arrived at the accident site. Civilians were removed and the scene of the tragedy was surrounded by a security cordon. The German soldiers set to work to collect the bodies of the eight airmen whose remains littered the ground. The remains were taken to Chièvres, where they are buried in the town cemetery.

Our eight heroes are still there today.

The day after the tragedy, Sunday, April 18, the parish priest of Givry announced to his congregation that «a service for the dead will be celebrated at 9:00 am in memory of the English airmen who fell in our locality». He adds: «All costs will be paid for by Mr. Alfred Doriaux. It would be greatly appreciated ».

On Monday, the church was again full to pay tribute to the Royal Air Force airmen who died two days earlier. As the priest celebrated his service, Gestapo agents broke into the church. Both the server of the Mass of Remembrance and the priest were arrested, taken to Mons prison and then transferred to Charleroi to be tried. They were sentenced to imprisonment on 5 August 1943.

Witnesses at the time say that, for about ten days, the Germans secured the crash site, preventing access to the villagers. They then cleared the field of the wreckage and likely shipped it to Germany, as was usual in these cases.

It was probably the day after he shot down the plane that the German pilot responsible for the crash reflected on what he had done. He recorded his 17th victory.



The next day of the crash, the German pilot came to see his work on the spot (Picture: Le Vieux Givry)

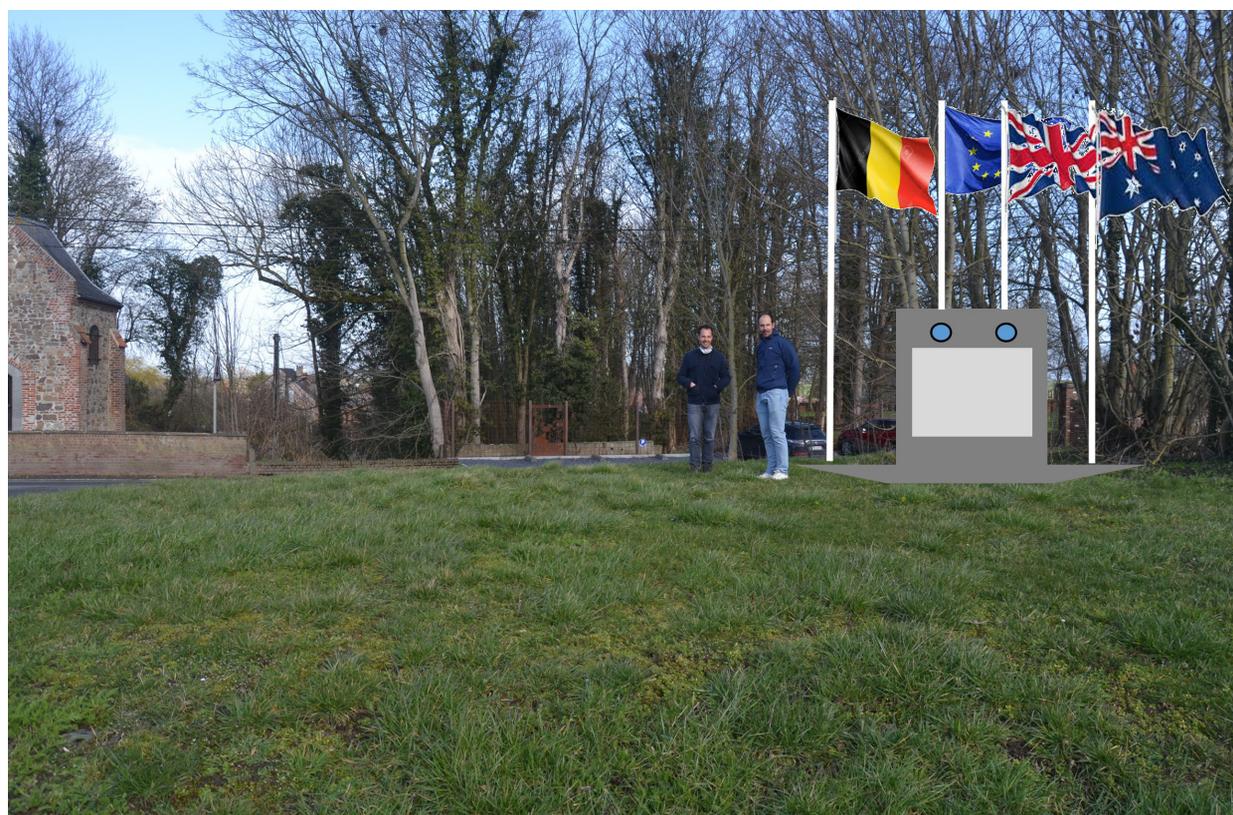
At the end of 2020, Frédéric Gaillard, a young man living in Givry, learned that the field owned by his family, was the site of a British plane crash 77 years earlier. Curious about this page of family and local history, he began research which led him to «The Belgians Remember Them» website. He contacted me and said that he would like to learn more and, if possible, erect a monument to the memory of the airmen.

After several visits to the Gaillard family, where I was very warmly received, we decided to join forces in this project to build a memorial dedicated to the victims of the Lancaster W4317-QR-R crash.

We hope to inaugurate this monument in 2022!



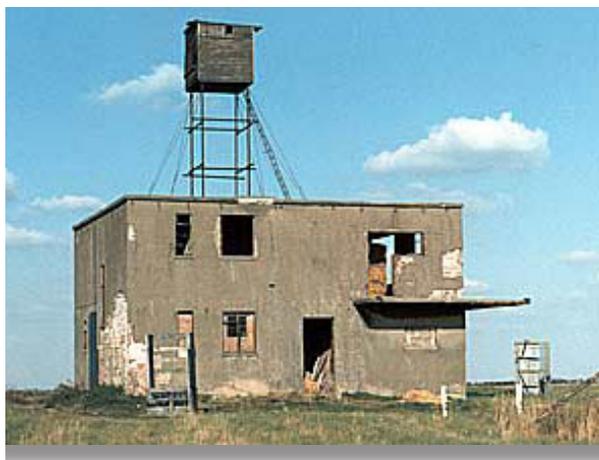
Above: The family Gaillard, the parents, Julien and Frédéric. Below: the first draft of the memorial projected



THE WEBBECOM TRAGEDY

BY WILFRED BURIE

On 27 April 1944, Bomber Command prepared and carried out a raid to destroy the Montzen railway marshalling yard in Liège province. This railway hub, of great strategic importance for the German army, is used to transport numerous convoys of military equipment and armaments to the occupied countries and especially to the Western Front, the Atlantic Wall. This raid was part of the Allies campaign to reclaim occupied territory and, should it succeed, it would paralyze the supply of equipment to help the Nazis in their defense during the landings due to take place a month later.

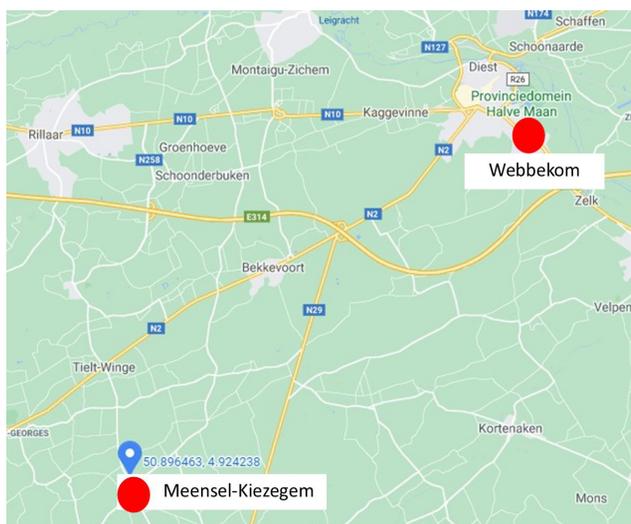


The airfield at Gransen Lodge which served as a post-war racing facility and then became a flying club in gliders still in operation today - On the right, the old control tower

144 heavy bombers from several squadrons will take part in the raid. Among them is 405 Squadron, a Canadian unit based at Gransden Lodge in eastern England, north of London. This squadron specializes in target-hunting and is part of the Pathfinder Force.

Among the 405 Squadron aircraft is a Lancaster JA976-LQ-S. Take-off took place at 00:01 from Gransen Lodge. These aircraft flew ahead of the rest of the strike force. Their function was to highlight the target by dropping incendiary bombs of specific colours. Thus, when the waves of bombers arrived on the spot, the target would already be identified and could be easily bombed.

As soon as the first British and Canadian planes reached the target, the Germans put up very strong resistance. Both anti-aircraft fire from the ground and attacks by German fighter planes put the aircraft participating in the raid in danger. Planes which had identified the target were to clear the area and return to base. The Lancaster JA976 was very quickly pursued by Oberleutnant Johannes Hager, Staffelkapitän of 6/NJG 1 based at Saint-Dizier aerodrome in France. It approached the bomber from the rear. The bomber caught fire immediately. Squadron Leader Edward, known as Ted Blenkinsop, Pilot, ordered the evacuation as the plane was out of control. Several members of the crew were probably killed by the attacker's fire. The German pilot then turned to other "engagements", having ensuring himself that his victim no longer posed a threat.



Between the crash site, Webbekom and Meensel-Kiezegem, the locality where Ted Blenkinsop found refuge, there are about twenty kilometers that he had to travel during the day, hiding to avoid being spotted by the enemy

The eight men of the Lancaster crew were highly specialized and had already demonstrated their expertise in the past. Four of them were Distinguished Flying Cross holders. Two bombers were on board: Lieutenants David Ramsay and George Smith. The other crew members were Lieutenant-Airman Clifford Allen (navigator); Pilot Officer Robert Booth (flight engineer); Air Sergeant James Bradley (wireless operator); Pilot Officer Leslie Foster (rear gunner) and Pilot Officer Nicholas Clifford (front gunner). The captain (Pilot) is Squadron Leader Edward Blenkinsop. All are Canadian except Bradley, who is British.

The crippled, out of control plane began its return to base. Loss of height was inevitable and it seems that several of the men opened their parachute and jumped. Among them were Bombardier Smith and the captain, Ted Blenkinsop. The

first was found seriously wounded by the Germans who brought him to a local hospital where, as a result of his serious injuries, he died a few days after being admitted. The remaining crew members were found by the occupying forces when the aircraft crashed in the district of Webbekom, 2 km from Diest, Flemish Brabant. They were immediately buried in the town cemetery where George Smith's body will also be transported and buried.

Alive, Ted landed near the crash site and, after getting rid of his bulky parachute, he moved away from where he landed to avoid being spotted and stopped by the occupying forces. His evacuation from his plane did not go unnoticed, as we can imagine. He arrived in the village of Meensel-Kiezegem and found refuge among the locals. The local resistance organized his transfer to Spain through the escape line "Comète". They provided him with Belgian identity papers and civilian clothes. The time spent with the Resistance allowed him to recover from the emotional shock caused by the death of his seven brothers-in-arms who had been killed in the accident.

It is August 11, 1944 - a day that will forever live in the memory. On that day, a «Flemish Guard» collaborator is shot and killed by the Resistance. The Gestapo, backed up by «Stormgroep Verbelen», a group actively collaborating with the enemy, made reprisal raids in the townlands in and around Meensel-Kiezegem. Four Resistance members were shot dead on the spot, while many residents were arrested and taken to Saint-Gilles prison (Brussels), where they were interrogated in the harshest and most cruel way. There were about 80 of them and Canadian airman Ted Blenkinsop was one of them. Some of the Resistance members arrested in Meensel-Kiezegem were no longer able to withstand the ill-treatment inflicted on them by their torturers and confessed.

From then on, the 64 people arrested that day would endure a lengthy and very trying ordeal. Their deportation to German concentration camps was ordered. Of the 64 tortured, only one will return after the liberation of the camps by the Allies.

According to sources, Squadron Leader Edward Blenkinsop apparently died of a «cardiac arrest» in the Bergen-Belsen camp or in Neuengamme. He had been imprisoned in camps such as the Eurotank oil refinery and later at the Deutsche Weft shipyards in Hamburg. The abuse, the lack of food and the many illnesses suffered by men who were severely physically injured undoubtedly caused the death of our Canadian airman.

He is said to have died between Christmas 1944 and New Year 1945. His body was never found, so he is declared Missing in Action. His name appears on the Runnymede Memorial.

After the war, 64 stones were erected in Meensel-Kiezegem, each bearing the name of one of the 64 deportees who did not return from hell.



The section of the Deportees of the communal cemetery of Meensel- Kiezegem where the civilian victims of deportation are commemorated. At left, picture of Squadron Leader Edward Blenkinsop and of his memorial stone which stays between these of his companions of deportation who never returned at home.

THE WAR IN THE AIR IN BELGIUM, BY ALAIN COLIGNON – (CEGESOMA)

During the 1930s, film and press news bulletins focused largely on what was then called “the aerial threat”. The media showed extensive footage of the bombing of Barcelona and Guernica, while highlighting the effects of the «gas war» waged on the Ethiopians by the Italian Regia Aeronautica in 1935-1936. A League of Passive Air Protection (L.P.A.) was formed in February 1934 but there was no rush of volunteers to enlist. In June 1939, the «League» became the «Commissariat Territorial à la Protection Aérienne» (Territorial Commission for Air Protection). Even if there were sufficient numbers of the warning sirens in the Kingdom and even if the blacking out of lights could be organized, the country, on the eve of the Second World War, still greatly lacked large public shelters and the protection of its historical and economic legacies was at a very early stage of development. The Office of the Air Protection Commissioner also lacked executive-level talent.

Attacks from the sky

The amateurish nature of these inadequate arrangements became all too clear on May 10, 1940. Men and equipment were wiped out under the onslaught of Luftwaffe bombs. The Luftwaffe strikes were rapid and intense. The Belgian capital was attacked at 5:15 am. The military airfield at Evere and the training station at Schaerbeek were targeted, but Heinkels, Dorniers and Stukas preferred to concentrate their fire on the «air fields» at Bierset, Brustem, Gossoncourt, Diest, Gosselies, Nivelles, Wevelgem and Le Zoute. These raids, carried out in the first hours of the war, destroyed, on the ground, the best of the Belgian fighter planes. Simultaneously, Stukas attacked army positions along the Albert Canal, thus putting an immediate end to the weak, counterattack attempts designed to divert enemy fire from the garrison at Eben-Emael and from the canal bridges which had already fallen into enemy hands.



Tournai, May 1940 (Picture CegeSoma)

It wasn't until May 12 that the Luftwaffe really started blitzing the targeted areas and attacking the road and rail communication hubs, even though this meant destroying the buildings around them. The stronghold of Namur and the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse (including Philippeville and Beaumont) became regular targets for German fighter planes. On May 14, shortly after 1 p.m., it is the turn of Nivelles – an important intersection – to be blitzed by incendiary bombs. The centre of the town was on fire and the Town Hall and the large Gothic tower of the Collegiate Church were destroyed. While disruptive operations against the retreating Franco-British forces intensified, Mons (11-14-16 May) and then Tournai (16-17 May) were the Stukas targets. In Mons, the archives were destroyed. In Tournai, the whole historical centre, site of the Town Hall and the main churches, was hit. The cathedral itself, at one time threatened, was saved at the last moment, but at least 146 people were killed there.

The areas around Kortrijk suffered from the effects of the war in the air during the «Battle of Lys» (23-27 May). Although far from the land battle, Ostend would suffer as a result of its strategic economic position – a port and a vital link with Britain. The city was regularly targeted by the Luftwaffe from 15 to 20 May, before falling victim to two massive raids, one on 21 May and another from 27 to 28 May, the day before the Belgian army surrendered. With the fall of Ostend closely followed by the surrender of the «Flanders region», occupied Belgium experienced a new phase of the war in the air, marked by regular but often ineffective raids carried out by the Royal Air Force - raids designed mainly to disrupt activity at ports (Ostend, Antwerp in October '41) and on Luftwaffe bases.



Bombing to Morstel, April 1943

Resumption of bombing

From 1942-1943, the Royal Air Force would be powerfully reinforced by the United States Air Force, but this had little effect on the Allied modus operandi. With some exceptions, Belgium was not a primary target. One such exception was the bombing of April 5, 1943. On that day, the U.S.A.F. carried out a major mission over the Antwerp region – and more particularly the city of Mortsel – aimed at the «Erla Werke», an organization working for the Luftwaffe. This arms company was severely hit, of course, but, above all, it was the human toll - 936 victims, including 209 schoolchildren – that remained in people’s minds. This was the deadliest bombing of the occupation. After each bombing raid the collaborationist press made much of this «collateral damage». On 7 September of the same year, American B-17s **attacked the railway infrastructure at Schaerbeek and Etterbeek.** Once

again, misdirected bombs fell on densely built-up areas and at least 327 civilian casualties were reported.

A Spring-time of concentrated air attacks

It was in the spring of 1944 that Allied Supreme Command developed a comprehensive strategy as part of the Transportation Plan, a forerunner to the landings in Normandy. The aim was to systematically target strikes on the railway network controlled by the Wehrmacht between the Loire and the Rhine, with the aim of taking out the rail lines likely to be used to quickly move reinforcements and heavy equipment to the landing sites. In descending order of priority, railway marshalling yards, railway bridges and rolling stock repair works were targeted. In Wallonia, targets like these were situated in Hainaut, in the suburbs of Namur (Ronet) and in Liège (Angleur/Kinkempois).

In Flanders, the marshalling yards and railway depots in Kortrijk, Mechelen, Leuven and Ghent were priority targets, as were Schaerbeek and Etterbeek in greater Brussels.

The deadly impact of «CARPET-BOMBING»

On March 4, 1944, the small industrial town of Ransart was the first to suffer under the new Allied strategy, with «zone bombing» (carpet-bombing) the key. Other urban areas would be targeted in the next two or three months. Each strike resulted in many victims and caused significant damage. In Schaerbeek, on 8 May 1944, 473 people were killed and 634 seriously wounded, but the industrial centres of Hainaut (Saint-Ghislain, La Louvière, Mons, les deux Haines, Jumet, ...) as well as Kortrijk, Mechelen, Hasselt, Ghent ... also suffered the effects of this “friendly fire”. Material and human losses were so high that, in May 1944, following the lead of French bishops, Cardinal Van Roey found he had no alternative but to address a «pastoral letter» to the Allied political leaders, a letter in which he condemned, the destruction and deaths caused by this succession of raids.

Resumption of bombing in August 1944

With the approach of the Landings, the bombing of Belgium eases slightly and attention switches to Western France. July is quite calm, because of the battles raging in Normandy. On August 3 Brussels is hit by what seems to be one last Allied bombardment, but this is only a lull. Anglo-American attacks will resume from August 18. In the meantime the situation has changed and the focus is now on causing maximum disruption to the German retreat, which began in France. Railway bridges on the Meuse, from Givet to Maastricht, and in particular the Luxembourg Bridge in Namur, which has already been bombed but not destroyed, are targeted.

Up until then, Namur had been bombed – especially on 1, 8 and 12 May '44 – but the attacks had not resulted in a serious bloodbath. However, on August 18, U.S. planes will score a hit by directing their bombs on the Luxembourg

Bridge. This work of art is damaged but not destroyed. It is the heart of this Meuse valley city that is hit, resulting in 300 deaths and the complete destruction of several hundred houses.

V1 and V2 missiles hit Liège and Antwerp

Liberation seems, at first, to have to put a definite end to the horrors of the war in the air. No such luck! Even if the Luftwaffe is only a shadow of what it was in 1940-1941, Germany does not give up. Even worse, it manages to aim its secret weapons, the type V1 and V2 missiles, at Belgium. The Liège region is the first affected. Three weeks after the Liberation, from 26 September to 3 October, it suffered 17 V2 attacks and then a wave of V1 attacks from 4 to 12 October causing a few dozen deaths. Serious engagement resumed on December 16, 1944, with the launch of the "Offensive des Ardennes", although several V1 missiles had already been fired on November 4 against the "the City which never sleeps" (city of Liège), supply centre for the 1st U.S. 1st Army. In total, 1592 V1 and 27 V2 missiles will fall on the borough of Liège, causing 1649 deaths and damaging roughly one building in two in the city centre. However, Antwerp suffers even more. The Germans know the vital importance to the Allies of this supply port. Antwerp does not escape. On 13 October, at around 10 a.m., the first "V" bombs, fired from the Netherlands, hit the city. The price paid by this large city is the heaviest yet - 4,229 dead and nearly 7,000 wounded. However the consequences could have been even more dramatic... but for a secret anti-aircraft command post «Antwerp X» set up by the Allies from October 1944. It operated for 175 days and fired over 530,000 shells. The success rate of the anti-V1 installation – the much faster V2 could not be intercepted – is impressive, rising from 62% at the end of November 1944 to 85% in March 1945. However, damage caused by a V2 missile falling on the junction of Keyserlei and Frankrijklei* on 27 November '44 - 128 civilians and 29 soldiers killed – taken together with a direct V1 missile hit on the Rex cinema on December 16 - 567 killed (271 civilians, 296 soldiers) – means a total of 6,448 Belgians were victims of "V weapons", as well as 882 Allied soldiers...

(* Lei: in Flemish: avenue)



The results of a V1 fallen to Antwerp on 7/11/1944: 128 killed and 196 wounded

The final engagements of the Battle of the Bulge

But it's not over yet! The "Offensive von Rundstedt" will see a determined return to action on the part of the Anglo-American Air Force. Allied bombers concentrated on «carpet-bombing» designed to reduce to rubble those small Ardennes unfortunate enough to be located on a network of major roads in order to slow down the enemy advance. This tactic, foreshadowing future wars in the air (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, etc.), proves effective, at the cost of the total, or almost total, destruction of Houffalize (197 civilian deaths in a population of 1,300); of La Roche-en-Ardenne (117 dead and the city 90% destroyed) and of Saint-Vith (250 dead and city 98% destroyed). The height of absurdity of the war is undoubtedly reached in Malmedy where the Warche area of the city is needlessly bombed three times by the U.S.A.F. (23, 24 and 25 December) in spite of the fact that it was never reoccupied by the Germans and that U.S. soldiers stayed there without ever seeing any enemy. Nevertheless, more than half of the area is razed to the ground and 202 people are killed ... as well as a hundred GIs. The American troops were calling themselves "the American Luftwaffe"

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During the last months of the war, allied Air Forces dropped over Belgium territories tracts announcing :

Buck up, Belgian friends!

Did you hear the other night the roar of our engines as we flew over your roofs? We were thinking of you, Belgians. We came back from Germany where our bombs left the Krauts with a big mess to clean up.

We thought you'd like to know that we gave them a hell of a night, because they're making to you a hell of a life. And now, night by night, we will continue to give them their due.

Courage, together we will defeat them!

The R.A.F. boys say hello!

(The verso of the tract shows the flemish version of it.)

MISCELLANEOUS

How did you found this first Newsletter?

Your opinion counts for us!

We want to publish this newsletter regularly, making it as interesting as possible. As so, you will be kept informed of our activities and projects.

Send us your opinion about this issue, eventual remarks and we will take account of it in the future.

If you would also like to publish in these pages, send us your articles to belgian.remember@gmail.com (text in Word format and images in JPG). We will gladly include them in the Newsletter of «The Belgians Remember Them»

We plan to add an announcement section. You have an event to announce, post it in our pages? Or any question? It will be read all over the world!

INFORMATION REQUESTS



From: Wilfred Burie, Belgium
Concerns: Technical information

Could anyone say if it was rotary barrel locks aboard Lancaster, like this one shown on the picture? In advance, many thanks!

Answer to: belgian.remember@gmail.com

HELP US - SUPPORT US

Do you want to help us?

Let your friends know the Web site and the database «The Belgians Remember Them».

Do you want to support us? Became Member of «The Belgians Remember Them»!

- Membership year starts on 1st January
- Current membership fees are € 15 per annum as Member and € 50 or more as Member Donor per annum
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- Payment must be done on the bank Paribas-Fortis account of “The Belgians Remember Them”,
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**Your support is vital for the association and will enable to realize our projects in duty of Memory
in advance, we express to you our deep gratitude!**

** In case of payment, please, advise us by Email with your names, address (city, country) and Email address.*



The monument of the Rebecq's Memorial dedicated to all the Airmen of R.A.F. fallen in Belgium during WWII

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