

The Rebecq Story

Lancaster JA712, BQ-H was returning from a mission to Aachen. It was about two o'clock in the morning on the May 28th 1944 and the plane, commanded by Pilot Officer Curtis Purney, RCAF, had skirted Tirlemont and was then attacked between Hal and Enghien. The aircraft began to descend, quickly losing height. The Bomb Aimer, Sergeant Elie Molnar, RCAF, knew that if he did not get free at once, he would be lucky to get out alive. Thus he jumped and from his parachute was able to see the plane crash a few hundred metres away.

It was dark and the villagers, in any case those living to the west of Rebecq, were woken by the noise of the plane as it began its fatal descent. When the plane hit the ground there was an enormous explosion which was heard across a wide area. As soon it crashed, several people who lived in the immediate neighbourhood ran up to the scene to see the damage: parts of the plane were scattered across the meadows on both sides of the river and the wreckage was still smoking. They looked for possible survivors in the heap of twisted metal. It was still night and lanterns barely lit the wreck. It was necessary to work quickly because Germans were quartered in barracks about twenty kilometres from the village. They also organized night patrols and one of them might have heard the noise of the crash and arrive at the scene of the accident.

Meanwhile, other villagers arrived at the smoking wreckage. Doctor Dupureur, the doctor of the village as well as Abbot Piérrard, who we called here "Big Ziré", had joined the search. Two bodies had already been discovered. Apparently, there was nothing more that could be done for them and they were left where they were so that the Germans wouldn't notice that the plane had already been searched. Then, villagers discovered about fifty metres from the fuselage the body of Sergeant David Yardley, RAF, the mid-upper gunner. Although very badly wounded, he was alive but unconscious. His face was stained with blood. The doctor asked that someone bring a board or something able to serve as a stretcher so that they could carry the wounded airman at once to the Hospice (the village's hospital) because it was dawn and would quickly be daylight. It was more and more dangerous to stay in the area because the occupying forces were not going to delay their appearance.

The Germans arrived at the Hospice and searched the buildings in search of Sergeant Yardley, as a traitor in the village who collaborated with the German police had observed everything and told them of the villagers' actions.

David Yardley was transferred to Nivelles prison as soon as condition allowed and became a prisoner of war. Elie Molnar was picked up by the Belgian Resistance and with their help managed to evade capture and escape after a long trip.

In Rebecq, 22 villagers were arrested and three later died as a result of their imprisonment. The prisoners were sent to Saint Gilles's prison in Brussels from where some were sent to concentration camps in Germany, the others to the transit camp in Leopoldsborg and the rest put aboard the last train from Brussels to Buchenwald. This train was never to arrive at its final destination because Belgian railway employees sabotaged locomotives and track so that all traffic was stopped. The date was 3rd September 1944 and the Allies arrived to liberate Brussels.

For years after the war both David Yardley and Elie Molnar kept in touch with the people of Rebecq and visited Belgium several times to visit their friends.

This is a fascinating postscript to this story. The “stretcher” that was used by the villagers’ of Rebecq to carry David Yardley from the crash site to the hospital was in fact the rudder from the downed Lancaster. It was found in the 1980’s having always remained hidden in the bell tower of the hospital’s chapel.

As testimony to the disastrous events of the night of the 27/28th May 1944, the rudder and other parts from Lancaster JA 712 BQ-H will be donated to the 550 Squadron and RAF North Killingholme Association when representatives from Rebecq visit the squadron reunion in 2012.

If you knew David Yardley or Elie Molnar please contact us.