

Our visit to Granges-sur-Aube by Chris Beare

On July 19th 2004 I travelled to France with my brother and my son & daughter to visit the war grave of my uncle in the village of Granges-sur-Aube in the Champagne-Ardenne region of North Eastern France.



Dennis William Blumfield was my mother's only brother and he was serving with 49 Squadron as a navigator with Australian skipper Flying Officer William Appleyard on a mission to attack the rail junction at Revigny, when their Lancaster crashed in a field on the night of 18/19 July 1944. They died along with the rest of the crew George Jameson (air bomber), Everett Matheson (air gunner Canadian Air Force), Geoffrey Perry (wireless operator/air gunner), Howard Turner (Flight engineer) and Robert Viollet (air gunner) and they were all buried in the village churchyard.

My parents had visited the grave on a previous occasion but my mother's age now prevented her from accompanying us. We had chosen this date as it was exactly 60 years since the event and was also my brother's birthday (he is named Dennis after his uncle).

At the time of their deaths some of the crew members families corresponded with each other but this ceased with the passing of their parents generation. My own grandmother, Margaret Blumfield, had kept letters received at the time from the mayor of Granges-sur-Aube, expressing the support of the village and sharing information about the night of the crash.

These are copies of letters sent to my Grandmother & to the Violet family

Translation of letter from the Mayor of Granges-sur-Aube, Marne, France.

To Margaret Blumfield – mother of Dennis Blumfield.

Granges 20 November 1945

Dear Madame,

In replying to your letter of the 3rd November I have the honour to inform you that the plane in which your son was flying was in flames before its fall.

The disabled machine had lost many parts – tail, wing, engine and was out of control. Sergeant Violet was found inside his turret some 250yds from where the machine fell; thus we were able to identify him. Another body was found about 20 yards away badly charred and carried the inscription “Canada” on the shoulder of his flying jacket.

As for the other members of the crew, it was unfortunately impossible to identify them; they were too badly disfigured by the exploding bombs still in the plane. Their remains have been placed in a communal grave.

Such belongings as we were able to collect were handed to the military authorities (civil establishment).

I have just had a visit by the British Air Force Officers who came to do honour to and salute the grave and take a photograph of it, one of which will be sent to you. In addition they also collected all information concerning the fall of the machine.

The population here make it always their duty to care for the grave and to place flowers on it as well as possible; although they are far from you, they are not forgotten/abandoned.

I beg you to believe, Madame, in my assurance of our respectful sympathy.

*Le Maire
(The Mayor)*

Translation of letter sent to family of Sgt Viollet

Department De La Marne
Arrondissement D'Epernay
Canton D'Anglure
Grange –Sur-Aube

Grange 27 May 1945

Sir,

In answer to your letter of 19th May, I have the honour to give you the following information.

After the fall of the machine in which Sergeant Viollet had taken place, I went immediately to the place of the accident. I did belong to the Resistance and I wanted despite the danger of the unexploded bomb, to frustrate the Germans of all the documents and personal objects which the airman possessed.

Sergeant Viollet was the only man recognisable. He was still at his post at the guns. His hand was bandaged, having probably lost a finger. He also had a few wounds in his face and we found out at his burial that both of his legs were fractured. I was able to take his identity disc and also some money and a French map which he carried on him. The Germans then gave us the order to take away the corpses and bury them. Despite the occupation we gave him and his companions a moving service in which all the population took part. Your comrade was placed alone in a coffin of planks; his belongings were put in it with him.

Two other coffins placed near his contain the rest of the non-identified airmen. You can feel reassured in what concerns the tomb; it is kept with care by the borough and all the population makes it a duty to flower it with respect.

I am unable for the moment to let you have a photograph of the tomb, films being unobtainable but I will do my best as soon as possible.

I add, to end, that the personal objects have been collected together by a Lieutenant Kenneth, Commandant of the Military Cemetery at Champigneul (Marne), this officer having come and taken all information relating to that crew.

I pray you to believe, Sir, the expression of my distinguished sentiments.

The Mayor

The villagers had shown great care and compassion for the victims and their families and to this day, as we found on our visit, are diligent in their care for the graves in their churchyard.

My uncle's cousin, Flt St K W Cameron, had been able to visit the graves and the crash site a few years after the event and had sent photos and a detailed hand drawn map of the location of the crash site to my Grandmother.

In July 2004 we took with us to Grange-sur-Aube the copies of the mayor's letter and the hand drawn map as we travelled by train to 'Rommilly-sur-Seine' and then by taxi to the village. We were delighted to be greeted by the present Mayor and, as word got around of our arrival, we were joined by several others. We were overwhelmed by the connection these villagers still felt with us and with the responsibility they took for the burials at the time and the care of the graves since. We were so glad that we had taken a friend with us who was French and able to interpret all the conversations.

The mayor was most interested to read the letter from his predecessor in 1944.



Marianne Beare (daughter), Chris Beare (author), Dennis Holwill (brother of author), Peter Beare (son)

We met a lovely gentleman who had been a boy in 1944 and remembered the plane coming down. We heard how he and the young boys of the village used to collect pieces of window and craft them into rings to give the little girls. He also spoke with tears in his eyes of the memories and the loss of life.



Author with the gentleman who was a boy at the time of the crash and remembers it well.



The French lady from the village who takes care of the graves

A message was sent to the lady who has tended the graves over the years and always makes sure that have fresh flowers, and she arrived to meet us. We were so pleased to be able to meet her face to face and thank her personally. We had taken some small souvenir gifts from England and some photos, which were received with great delight.

Also present to meet us was a gentleman who was a great enthusiast on the history of WW1 and had with him a copy of the book 'Massacre over the Marne' by Oliver Clutton-Brock. He was full of information, as he had researched the event well. He showed us some small pieces of wreckage from the plane, which he had collected from the field where the plane had come down. We were full of questions about this and amazed that he claimed to have only collected these pieces recently. We couldn't believe that they could still be present after all this time.

After taking photos in the churchyard we were invited to walk the short distance to the Maire where we were served with local champagne and toasted the crew members and our new friends. After showing them our hand drawn map, we asked for directions to walk the mile or so to see the field for ourselves. Once again we were overwhelmed by their enthusiasm to drive us to the site themselves rather than explain the directions to it. We were driven just out of the village centre and down a long track to some fields. We stopped at the top of a field, which had a large stretch of sunflowers growing in it. This was where the plane had landed, and as is customary, the area had not been cultivated as it was also partly a burial site possibly still containing some of the remains of the crew who died there. Sunflowers grew there instead of crops and it was a most stunning and moving sight to see. We were invited to wander up and down the rows of sunflowers and words can not express the emotion we felt as we did this. On close inspection there were occasional small pieces of plane wreckage on the ground and as we all wandered along we each collected a few pieces.



The field of sunflowers



The Mayor pointing out the crash-site

I remember how surreal it was and I kept saying "It's 60 years today that my uncle died here and I can't believe that although I never met him, I am standing here and collecting pieces of wreckage from his plane"



Small pieces of the aircraft can still found



The Author holding several pieces of her Uncle's aircraft



Chris Beare, Mathieu Moos (a French friend living in Paris who translated for the family), Dennis Holwill, Peter Beare, Marianne Beare.

More photos were taken and our new friends insisted on driving us all back to 'Rommilly-sur-Seine' for our return train.

A truly memorable visit in so many ways! Having since researched the squadron a little, my mother has now become an Associate Member of the 49 Squadron Association and is hoping that it will not be too late to meet someone who still remembers her brother.

Mrs Chris Beare