

Marina's Gift



By Catherine Munn Smith

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I was born on a crisp, clear, cold Monday in the middle of February 1941. A month later, Uncle Bill stood at my christening as godfather. Fourteen months later, on the fifth of May 1942, his plane was shot down over France. The entire crew was killed.

Bill was my mother's younger brother. He was his father's favorite of three children and a cherished friend to many. He was young, handsome, had played university hockey and football and was reputedly fun loving and immensely popular.

After completing a science degree at the University of Alberta he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and in the spring of 1941 was stationed in Quebec, close enough to my parents to attend my christening service. It was touch and go whether he could get leave, but at the last minute it all worked out and there he was, agreeing to the responsibilities of god parent. He was, apparently, a doting uncle, and at my christening I was given a tiny gold cross by a family friend. On the accompanying card she wrote, *for Bill's girl.*

Within weeks he was sent overseas where he was assigned to RCAF 149 (Royal Air Force) Squadron flying primarily in Stirling aircraft on bombing runs over Germany.

He had, of course, imagined himself a pilot, but preliminary testing showed he was better suited for the position of navigator, sitting behind the pilots, directing them to their targets, then hopefully, toward home.



Stirling Aircraft by Philip West

His particular crew had first flown together in late April; new to each other and learning to work together, they dropped their bombs that night on the docks of Dunkirk to disable German installations on the French coast. Their second flight to Keil was not completed and they returned to England with their bombs intact. The third trip was their last.

In just ten days, the crew flew three missions. But on that final run, their plane was shot down by a German night fighter. A Lieutenant Knosch, flying a twin engine ME 110, claimed the Stirling, the only one of its kind shot down that night. The Stirling fell near the town of Laon in the north of France.



ME 110 by Nicolas Trudgin

Laon is a medieval town that sits on top of the highest hill for miles around. It was long ago fortified with stone ramparts that surround and protect the city. The streets are narrow and cobblestoned, the houses abutting each other in long winding rows. The cathedral, still the main church in use, was built in the mid-eleven hundreds. With very few differences, the old town looks the same now as it did in 1942, and the same as it has for hundreds of years. Just outside the rampart wall, on the north face of the hill, the graveyard sprawls toward the valley floor.



In my mind's eye, I envision the events of that May day following the crash. From their vantage point above the surrounding fields, the townspeople of Laon knew a 'plane was down, so when it was safe, a small group of men found their way to the wreckage. Did they wait for the cover of darkness? Did they have to be cautious of German patrols or spies within their own village? Probably. At whatever risk to themselves, they approached the aircraft and removed the bodies of the crew. Each body was carefully lifted onto the deck of a farm cart and covered with grass and refuse from the field so that it appeared they were just going about their usual field work. The horses struggled up the steep hill, back to the town where the bodies were gently unloaded into a barn. Later, the men dug a trench in the town cemetery where the eight airmen were laid, side by side in a communal grave; six Brits, one New Zealander and one Canadian, Bill.



Some years later the Commonwealth War Graves Commission took charge of the grave site. A concrete curb now separates these graves from all the others. In this centuries old cemetery, where many graves are disintegrating from age and lack of attention, the site for these airmen looks new and well-tended. Inside the curb, the ground is covered with small white stones and each grave is marked with a rectangular white stone, exactly like all the others in every other Commonwealth grave yard. Each headstone bears the name and rank of the man buried beneath it, and some have a short epitaph, paid for by the family.

The Sterling in which Bill flew, was shot down in May, 1942. Weeks later his parents received word that he was missing in action. It wasn't until early 1943 they got word that he had, in fact, been killed. It took another four years before the authorities located the grave and notified my grandparents that their son lay in the St. Just cemetery of Laon in northern France.



In 1947 Bill's mother and sister (my mother), travelled to France to see for themselves where their son and brother lay. Sixty-four years later I visited the gravesite with my daughter, Marina.

Marina and I had other reasons for being in Europe, and there had been no conscious pre-planning to go to Laon, but after we did what we wanted to do in Holland and Belgium, we were left with a space of time before our final commitment in Zurich. I put it to Marina that if we could conveniently go to Laon, I would like to do that. I had brought a special Remembrance Day poppy pin with me, just in case.

So on a grey November morning, with a bitter wind in our faces, we followed the cobblestone road from our B&B to the north edge of the village. Just beyond the rampart wall lay the Cimetierie de St. Just. After wending our way past hundreds of deteriorating graves and falling headstones, we found the little oasis of Commonwealth graves. Protected by a hedge and huge evergreens and well below the crest of the hill, the site was still, free from the biting wind. I placed my pin at the foot of Bill's stone; two tiny red poppies, one in the foreground for those who served their country in war, one behind for all who supported the troops, flanking a gold maple leaf. I had pinned it to the standard red cloth flower, so ubiquitous in November in Canada. Marina placed a tiny angel with a broken wing that she had found on our way down the path.

Over the years, mother, sister, god daughter and great niece had come to pay their respects.

Once again at the top of the hill, and at the mercy of the wind, we found half a dozen red poppies still in flower on the village side of the ramparts. As tempted as I was to pick one for a keepsake, we left them there to mark the way to Cimetierie de St. Just.

It was only because of a gap in Marina's obligations, and her generous invitation to me to join her during that time that I happened to be in Europe at all. And it was thanks to her skills with the language, the computer, and scheduling that we were able to make our way to this out-of-the-way part of France. Old Laon is a delightful place to visit; fascinating in its history, charming in its village atmosphere, and wonderful in food and accommodation. But it is hard to express the gratitude I feel for the gift I received in being reunited, in a sense, with my uncle. Even though I never really knew him, I guess I've always felt a little bit like Bill's girl.

Afterword

A week after my return to Canada, my husband and I attended a play at Calgary's Lunchbox Theatre. It was the second to last performance of their November production, *Jake's Gift*, the story of a Canadian WWII veteran who returns to the scene of his wartime experiences in France. It is a wonderfully playful and poignant piece, made even more special by the amazing performance of the playwright and sole actor. Coming on the heels of, first, a visit to Flanders Fields in Belgium, and then to Bill's grave in Laon, I found the whole November Remembrance experience touching me in ways I could never have imagined. The coincidence of three totally unplanned events coming together within two weeks of November 11th was more than a little mind bending. But I was to be given one more gift. As we walked in to the theatre, ushers were handing out little packages containing the same special poppy pin I had recently left at the foot of Bill's headstone. I blurted out, "I just left one of those on a grave in France last week" and the dear lady gave me a second one. Coincidence? Guidance? Happenstance? Who can say for certain? But I do know, I will never experience Remembrance Day quite the same way again.

Historian's Note:

149 Sqn Stirling, Aircraft N6124, Coded OJ-R took off from Lakenheath on the night of 4/5 May 1942 on Ops to Stuttgart. "R", a B Mk 1 aircraft was built by Shorts at Rochester, and arrived on 149 Sqn on the 11th December 1941. It fell at Aguilcourt (Aisne), 30 Km SE of LAON, France.

The crew is all buried in Laon (St. Just) Communal Cemetery. The crew, composed of:

- F/O Moodie K.W.B. RCAF Observer - Bill
- F/S Carriline V.
- Sgt. Pomeroy F.B.
- F/O Cheetham A.F. Pilot
- F/S Jago F.D.
- F/S Shaw J.A.
- Sgt. Smith B.E.



All members of the crew are commemorated in the 149 Sqn Roll of Honour.

This information was provided by Alan Fraser, 149 Sqn Historian. Photos by Marina Elliott