

**BELGIAN BRANCH NEWSLETTER**

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RAFA Belgian Branch Account  
BE58-0014-2061-1779      BIC GEBABEBB

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**NEWSLETTER NO 112**

**OCT - NOV - DEC 2013**

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**THE ROYAL AIR FORCES ASSOCIATION**  
**Maison des Ailes – Rue Montoyer 1-B 33-1040 Brussels.**  
 Branch No: 0645  
**Patron:** Her Majesty The Queen  
**Honorary Patron:** H.E. Jonathan Brenton British Ambassador  
**Branch Honorary Co-Presidents:**  
 Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper KBE MA CCMI RAF  
 Sqn Ldr (Ret'd) E Hearn DFC\*

## COMMITTEE CONTACTS

CHAIRMAN	Robert (Dick) Whittingham (Gp Capt Ret'd)
VICE CHAIR	Wg Cdr Ross Mckenzie
HONORARY CHAPLAIN	Father Walter Peeters
SECRETARY	Flt Lt Arlene Walker
TREASURER	David Trembaczowski-Ryder (Wg Cdr Ret'd)
HONORARY WELFARE OFFICER (HWO)	Mrs Ghislaine Walkden
ASSISTANT HWO	Mrs Deborah Whittingham
MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY	Mrs Brigitte Horton
BRANCH WEBMASTER	Bob Jenkins (Wg Cdr Ret'd)
SHAPE RAFA LIAISON OFFICER	Sgt Richard Atha
DEPUTY SECRETARY	Sgt Mark Lawson

*For a quick answer to any query, please contact via email [rafa.belgianbranch@gmail.com](mailto:rafa.belgianbranch@gmail.com) or to the Secretary on 0032 (0) 707.5470, NOT via the Post Box at Rue Montoyer*

From: Group Captain R J Whittingham FRAeS, Royal Air Force (Retired)

Brussels  
November 2013

Dear Friends,

### **CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION**

The Seasons must pass at the same rate, but somehow I get the impression that they have speeded-up! So we have now moved from high Summer to the start of Winter and much has happened in the Branch since our last Newsletter. Sadly one must start with 3 obituaries in this edition: Mary Laden a dear friend of the Branch over many years and widow of former RAF pilot Eddie Laden who died in 2008; Brigadier General 'Lulu' De Mey and Lieutenant General Albert Debêche both wartime RAF pilots who went on to long and distinguished careers with the Belgian Air Force. We will remember them.

The keynote of our Branch year was our highly successful Anglo-Belgian Remembrance Service in the National Basilica, Koekelberg on 28 September. This important event enabled the Branch to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the dedication of the stained-glass windows in the Air Force Chapel by bringing together not only our own members but also many from the other like-minded organisations in Belgium. It is my hope that we may now build on this beginning so that 'our' Chapel can provide a focus for Air Force Remembrance in Belgium. Please see the last 3 pages for a report of the event, and, if you are electronically enabled, please go to our website <http://rafabelgianbranch.yolasite.com/> to see additional material.

In this edition too are reports of the Branch involvement in a number of commemorative events around Belgium – it is really heartening to see the effort made by individuals and organisations to keep memories alive. It is very much appreciated by the families of those who are no longer with us. We also have the penultimate episode of our Co-President's 'Chronicle' – I was trying to persuade him yesterday to write a sequel to bring us up to date!

Please note the list of future events – all members are always welcome to attend – it is not just the prerogative of the Committee. Please note particularly on the next page the 'flyer' for the Branch Christmas lunch on Wednesday 18 December: if you have not already done so, please book in NOW. Note too please that the 2014 Annual General Meeting will be held on Tuesday 18 March 2014: the Agenda is in this edition, accounts and proposals for elected officers will be in Newsletter 113. We need volunteers to join the Committee: if you feel you would like to help, please let me know.

On page 11 our Honorary Chaplain nicely brings together our acts of Remembrance and the Christmas spirit: I wish you all a healthy and happy Christmas and hope that we may retain this linkage into the New Year.

Yours most sincerely,



# RAFA Belgian Branch Christmas Lunch

Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> December 2013: 12:30 for 13:00

NATO Staff Centre, NATO HQ



- A glass of Rosé Pro Secco  
Crème brûlée
- 1. Duo of pheasant croquette with chanterelle mushrooms & foie gras  
Or  
2. Fantasy of lobster with mango salad
- A. Breast of Guinea Fowl stuffed with foie gras & chestnuts  
Or  
B. John Dory filled with scampi served with chicory
- Pastry basket with ice cream & fruit compote
- Coffee



1 glass of assorted wine with the starter, another one with the main course

*Serving and Retired RAF personnel are also cordially invited to attend.*

Cost: RAFA Members - 25€ P.P. Non-Members - 40€ P.P.

*Please pay in Cash on the day.*

*We need to know if you can attend the lunch **AND** your choice of menu items as above (e.g. 2A for Lobster followed by Guinea Fowl)*

***by 12 December 2013.** Please book by email to [rafa.belgianbranch@gmail.com](mailto:rafa.belgianbranch@gmail.com) or by telephone to the Secretary 02.707.5470, or via the 'Contact Us' link on the Branch website: <http://rafabelgianbranch.yolasite.com>*

**2014 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BELGIAN BRANCH  
OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCES ASSOCIATION  
NATO STAFF CENTRE – TUESDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> MARCH AT 11:30 HRS**

**AGENDA**

- |    |   |           |
|----|---|-----------|
| 1. | Dedication  | Chaplain  |
| 2. | Minutes of the 2013 AGM held at The NATO Staff Centre,<br>5 March 2013 (as published in Newsletter 110, Jun 2013) | Secretary |
| 3. | Chairman's Address  | Chairman  |
| 4. | Election / Re-election of Officers / Committee  | Chairman  |
| 5. | Treasurer's Report / Approval of Accounts 2013<br><i>(to be circulated in Newsletter 113 in Feb 14)</i>           | Treasurer |
| 6. | Honorary Welfare Officer's Report and Proposals for 2014  | HWO       |
| 7. | Budget for 2014   | Treasurer |
| 8. | Any Other Business  |           |

**ITEM 4 - ELECTION OF OFFICERS**

1. Extracts from Branch Standing Orders:
  - a. Only those who have paid their subs. for the current year may vote.
  - b. Nominations for election to the Committee must be in writing, signed by two paid-up members, and **must reach the Chairman by the 7<sup>th</sup> Feb 14.**
  - c. Existing Members of the Branch Committee holding office for one year are re-eligible for re-election.
  - d. No person nominated may be elected if not present at the Annual General Meeting unless his/her absence is justified and the Members present approve his/her election in absentia.

2. The following are officials of the Branch and do not require re-election:

Sqn Ldr (Ret'd) E.H.E. Hearn	Branch Honorary Co-President
Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper	Branch Honorary Co-President
Father W. Peeters	Branch Honorary Chaplain

3. Nominations for elected members of the Committee will be circulated with Newsletter 113 in Feb 14.

# The Chronicle of a Passer By

By Edward Harty Elliot Hearn

*Editor's Note:*

*This twelfth (penultimate) episode of our Branch Honorary Co-President's 'Chronicle' as transcribed by Gp Capt (Ret'd) Mike Connor, contains extracts from Part 3 Chapter 3 concerning his adventures following his move to Brussels in 1963. Please see Newsletter 101 for the Contents List.*

## **PART THREE – 1947 – 1993**

### **3 - 3. Belgium, Challenges and Chivalry**

*Extract from episode eleven: So it was that, in June 1963, I set off alone for Brussels with a capital of £2,000 to set up a new office, search for living accommodation and hoping with some anxiety that I would find my first client.*

In my black with red upholstery MG Magnet (in France we had a Citroen which served us well until a burst tyre frightened us while doing 90 kilometres an hour on a narrow Normandy road) I crossed the border on the other side of Lille, then travelled onwards on the motorway to Brussels. Arriving in that City, I found a small hotel close to the inner circular road. It was named the Maison des Ailes (House of Wings) in the Rue Montoyer and was mostly used by international pilots on overnight stays. There were few rooms and I was fortunate to find a vacancy. The Maison des Ailes was mainly a bed and breakfast establishment, though there was a small dining room and a larger one with an overlooking balcony where receptions were held. This small resting place was ideally located for settling in and finding out more about Brussels. My four weeks there passed agreeably enough, spare time being spent sitting at the bar chatting to pilots of different nationalities who came from all parts of the world. It also served as a club for serving and ex-Belgian Air Force airmen (the ex-serving men were, mainly, British ex-Royal Air Force pilots, now captains on the Sabena commercial airline). Shortly after my stay there, half of the hotel was demolished to house a new development of offices. Already, that phenomenon had hit the City, the economics of the smaller establishments forcing them to sell.

Except for weekends, when I drove to Arras where I had left the family, I parked my MG in the underground car park and left it there. I decided I would get to know the City better by walking or travelling on the trams.

Since my immediate objective was to find a suitable office, I confined my search to the inner City. During my first foray across Brussels, sitting in a tram and running smoothly between the South and North Stations, a lively discussion (or near

argument) took place between the travellers. The talking started when a voluble bearded passenger with his back to the tram driver made a strong speech decrying the destruction of town houses and their replacement by double glazed box 'monstrosities'. "Look out of the windows!" he cried, "the City is being pulverised!".

The passengers joined in and a lively discussion took place, some violently agreeing, others hesitatingly against, with a minority being content to listen and take it all in. It was my first insight into the outwardness of the Belgian character that delighted in open conversation on any topical subject that came to the fore. I could not help but compare this with that of their French neighbours. My impression was that the French, because of the troubled times stretching back for many years, had grown introspective and carried their worries on their shoulders, thus losing their pre-war art of lively conversation.

It did not take me long to discover that Brussels was probably the only City in the west where the West End was in the east and the East End in the west. A canal with numerous docks ran along the whole length of the western border. Industrial complexes straddled the canal. On the eastern side were the residential buildings, parks and lakes. I walked along the main arteries from north to south and sidled off into the side streets. In the centre, I climbed the Mont des Arts, circled the Grand Place, already in the heart of the City in the XI century, and strolled the length of the Avenue Louise to the Bois de la Cambre. In my first ventures outside those limits I could not help but observe that, unlike Paris or London, in the space of a few minutes one could be well out of the City and walking in woodlands, and open green spaces with ponds and lakes.

I called at the British Embassy and registered with the Consul, visited several property agents and obtained lengthy lists of available property. Every thoroughfare had houses or offices to let or for sale. My first objective was to find an office and my secondary aim was to obtain a suitable apartment.

In a short period of time I signed a lease for office accommodation. It was on the mezzanine floor in a block on the corner of the Boulevard de Waterloo and the Rue du Pépin ('Pip Street?'). Later I found that the official address was on the Rue du Pépin, but it would have been preferable if it had been on the Boulevard de Waterloo.

I moved in, bought a desk and chairs, a typewriter, blinds for the windows (which looked directly into those ten metres away in the opposite building), office materials and equipment including a second hand manually operated calculating machine of Swedish manufacture which looked like a miniature tank with a handle resembling a bent howitzer.

Forms for the telephone installation were filled in and I waited patiently for the installation. During the first weeks, not having a secretary or any staff or paying work, I typed my own letters and reports, did my own calculations (twice to check them!), swept out the three rooms every morning and dealt with the papers coming

through the letter box. The loneliness was broken by the many visits from my London Partners – Tony Mahon and Bob Sears. During the first few weeks of the Brussels office's existence, no work came in, money was running out and no possible clients were evident. Tony and Bob showed no outward anxiety, but I knew it troubled them as it did me. Tony, the brother of a bishop, which he emphasised himself by always wearing mauve socks, was supposed to be on a diet because of his weight. He made up for any misgivings he felt towards the Brussels venture by raiding the patisseries and demolishing massive portions of chocolate cake. They had formed their partnership in 1946, Tony being the 'outside man' dealing with clients and Bob the 'brains' in the office. Operating out of Harley Street, most of the employees had been with the practice since its inception and a good many had finished their professional training there.

Through a series of lunches and other meetings previously arranged by mutual friends, we obtained introductions to various organisations and commenced the rounds of chatting up prospective clients. The rules ingrained in me during my initial training in Folkestone could not be easily forgotten. There, and now here, no other professional spheres of interest would be encroached and we would not blatantly advertise our wares. We were not to know that Continentals, with the same rules, found other ways to steer clear of ethical problems!

At my very first client interview, on presenting my carefully prepared (and embossed) visiting card, the prospective client took the card, read the inscription, then gazed upwards with a quizzical expression smoothed out by a half smile. This happened so often in subsequent meetings that my puzzlement grew until I found out that our newly acquired office on the mezzanine floor was sitting on the corner of what was once the night club area, known in pre-war years as 'the Red Light' district because of its close proximity to the Army barracks. I had only recently signed a three year lease so there was nothing I could do immediately about that. In my subconscious mind I imagined a solemn-faced dignitary, suitably attired with a red, yellow and black sash, declaring in this main City thoroughfare, "I hereby name this street 'Pip Street'!"

After several interviews and the passage of twelve long weeks, we were retained on two large contracts. That the awards were made to us made me think that they were the result of kindness rather than conviction. We were appointed as independent financial controllers in the building of a new steel cold rolling mill at Zelgate, fifteen kilometres north of the Flemish city of Gent and the construction of the new British Embassy in the Rue Joseph II in the Brussels capital. Although it did not affect us at all, Brussels sat comfortably between the Flemish north and the French (Walloon) south. The 'Independent and perpetual neutral Sovereign State' of Belgium was established in 1831 after a religious, cultural and linguistic revolution which separated the country from Holland. We knew that the traces of the cultural divide still existed and would continue, but we were to enjoy the confidence of both

the Flamands and the Walloons. Indeed, we found that where the two cultures were brought together for a single purpose, there were no apparent differences.

With that start, we were able to take on staff from London and from Belgium. Our missions increased to cover a teaching hospital for Leuven University, several projects in both Flanders and the French-speaking part of Belgium, and new buildings and refurbishment works in Paris, Lyons and Gex – a neutral area between France and Switzerland.

At Gent, we worked with a humorous Belgian by the name of Janssens, a retired Belgian Air Force officer who had crossed the Channel at the beginning of the last war, then flew with the Royal Air Force throughout his time in exile. His Headquarters were on a hired ex-cross Channel ferryboat anchored in the river adjoining the site thus adding a touch of romance to this highly industrialised project. Our other immediate contact was a French engineer who spent the evenings and weekends of the six construction years painting a two metre by three metre picture of fishing smacks while exasperating me during the daytime by requiring every figure to be produced to three places of decimals. I was never able to persuade him that figures rounded up or down to the nearest whole number would, at the end of an addition, equal his addition with all its decimal points.

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In the seventies, there was a general abundance of work for everyone. Order books were full, unemployment was at its lowest ebb, State establishments increased and prosperity was evident everywhere. This state of affairs was queried by one of our clients, a respected investor and developer from the City of London for whom we were looking after two projects in Brussels,

“Things are going well. Too well” he told me. “This situation cannot last. I’ve never seen so much thriving activity, including my own. It is frightening me.”

Those remarks would be remembered in the not too distant future.

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Once the office affairs had become stabilised, the whole family moved home for the fifth time in fourteen years, coming from Arras to move into a residence on the second floor of a building on the Avenue Reine Marie Henriette, overlooking the park at Forest, one of the nineteen communes in Brussels. Our two sons had been signed in at the French Lycée on the Boulevard Poincaré, named after the French statesman who was President during the First World War. A brand new lycée was planned to be built on the other side of the City and the boys would later move there. Meanwhile, the Boulevard Poincaré was very convenient because it was on the way to the office in the mornings and the boys could be dropped off on the way.

The steady progress in the affairs of the Brussels office was shattered in the late seventies. The prophecy made some years before was reaching its pessimistic conclusion. The departure of the Shah from Iran, political and economic instability in

Turkey, the invasion of Afghanistan and the uprisings in Pakistan spilled over and caused repercussions in the Middle East and finally the western world. In a matter of months, the Brussels office, which had reached an annual peak of managing over thirty major projects spread over continental Europe, found itself reduced to looking after only five.

Watchful of the dangers ahead, I regretfully accepted a proposed contract to work in Nigeria.

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Eventually we were paid, but with part of our fees blocked in the bank. The whole operation created a tremendous strain on our resources. Our only satisfaction was that we had struggled through the crisis in Europe and were able to retain a nucleus of faithful staff.

Many other offices were not so fortunate. The first years of 1980 had seen the drying up of investments, the bankruptcy of developers and a trail of broken consultancy offices and disbanded contractors. Unemployment rose sharply and many architects and engineers were faced with the closure of their practices through lack of work.

We therefore had to be thankful that the Nigerian venture, although taken at considerable risk, enabled us to survive and continue to function until the worst of the crisis was over. The decade of success for the office followed by the struggle for survival took place while there were setbacks in the family circle.

Brother Charles, who had helped me so much during the post-war years, died after a thrombosis attack. A year later, in 1968, Paule's mother passed away after a long illness that had started in the previous two years. We received the news of her sickness on the way to a holiday in Aviemore in the Highlands of Scotland. We never arrived at our destination because we turned around and drove back across Scotland and England, crossed the Channel and made for Normandy. From then on, Paule travelled every week between Brussels and Normandy to help her two sisters in the 24 hour vigil by their mother's bedside. Then, in 1975, Paule's father died peacefully, but also after a long bedside vigil. Both parents had died in their own homes as they wished it to be. In 1982, sister Paddy was buried in Surbiton surrounded by her husband, son, daughters and grandchildren. Cissie obtained special permission to travel over from her Convent in Ireland to be at her sister's funeral.

Shortly after Paule's mother's death and to relieve the pain of that loss, we decided to look around in search for a change of residence. In twelve months we found a town house in the Avenue Bel Air. Even after one visit and, although it was in need of extensive renovation, we sensed that we would be happy there. Also, the number in the road was 61 – six plus one equalled seven – a sufficiently good omen for the future.

*Continued on Page 15*

## THOUGHTS FROM OUR HONORARY CHAPLAIN

### Light of Christmas Shining on our Comrades

On 28 September an Anglo-Belgian Ecumenical Service was held by our Belgian RAFA Branch in the Air Force Chapel within the National Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Koekelberg; Brussels. This was an appropriate Jubilee Service to commemorate the 25 years since the founding of that Chapel. The stained-glass windows and those many Shields of Air Force Units are displayed showing where our brave Belgian comrades had served during World War II. It was a solemn Ceremony stressing the importance of gratitude and it was formulated in one common vow: We Shall Remember Them.

Some time later on 20 October our Belgian Friends of Complete Kinship honoured their own heroes that had died in fulfilling a tremendous mission of conveying downed Allied Airmen through France to the Spanish Border, helping them to get back to Britain in order to continue the general effort of warfare.

These commemorations, and those reflected elsewhere in this Newsletter, highlight the heroic effort and sacrifices of our brave Airmen in their common commitment to liberate our Continental countries from the enemy. Even after the European tragedy the RAF continued to free Eastern Asian Countries from tragic occupation. Nowadays our Forces are on stand-by all over the world to protect freedom and human dignity. It is also at continuous risk of their lives.

We are grateful that now we live in free countries and that we have not been called upon to pay the heavy price of sacrifice. Nevertheless, at the Coming of Christmas and as was done at our Remembrance Sunday Services held on 10 November, we should vividly remember those who gave their tomorrow for our today.



May the Shining Light of Christmas - perhaps aside the Christmas Tree - enlighten our hearts with prayers and thankfulness for all those who offered their lives to let us enjoy a new era of friendship and comradeship!

Father Walter Peeters,  
RAFA Belgian Branch, Honorary Chaplain

*Photograph – Holy Trinity Church, Brussels Remembrance Sunday 2013 – courtesy Alan Puplett RBL*

## IN MEMORIAM

### Mary Laden



Born in Hitchin, England on 3 October 1923, Mary Laden née O'Hannan, passed away at Wezembeek-Oppem on 17 October 2013, just 2 weeks after her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Mary, widow of Colonel Aviator Eddie Laden, was a firm friend of the Belgian Branch over many years. Eddie, who sadly passed away in 2008, was an RAF Navigator/Bomb Aimer/ Air Gunner who was commissioned in Nov 1944 before being posted to Transport Command in Cambridgeshire. It was there at the Cambridge Town Hall Ball in July 1945 that Mary and Eddie met and they married the following May.

When they returned to Belgium in 1947, Eddie became a founder member of the Branch and served on the Committee for over 20 years, particularly acting as the key driving force behind what became the Barry Horton Memorial Golf Tournament. In later years, Mary faced the challenges of poor eyesight and ill-health with fortitude and bravery, and, thanks to the help from her family and friends, remained in good form throughout. The funeral on 26 October was conducted by Father Pat Power in the lovely old church of Saint Pierre in Wezembeek-Oppem: the Church was crowded and included many old RAFA friends offering sympathy to her sons and grandchildren and their families. As a mark of respect and in recognition of her long association with RAFA, the Branch Standard was paraded by Jean-Pierre Blanckaert.

## IN MEMORIAM

### Brigadier General Lucien 'Lulu' De Mey,



Born on 31 Jul 1921, General Lucien 'Lulu' De Mey, a long-standing member of the Belgian Branch who moved to France following his retirement in 1975, passed away in October 2013. He joined the Belgian Royal Military Academy in 1939 and, following the fall of Belgium and a period as a Prisoner of War, he set out for England in Aug 1941. Escaping through France, where he met his future wife Monette, and following imprisonment in Spain, he eventually reached England in July 1943 where he joined the 100<sup>th</sup> Belgian Promotion and completed his initial RAF training.

Following flying training in Canada he was commissioned in the RAF as a Pilot Officer in March 1945. At the end of the War he returned to Belgium and had a long and distinguished career with the Belgian Air Force, flying Spitfire, Mosquito, Meteor, F-84-G and F-84-F and commanding 9 Sqn at Chièvres, 2 Sqn at Florennes, 29 Sqn at Brustem, 10<sup>th</sup> Wing at Kleine-Brogel and the 1<sup>st</sup> All Weather Fighter Wing at Beauvechain. He served with NATO at 2 Allied Tactical Air Force (ATAF) Rheindahlen as Chief War Plans, at AFCENT Fontainebleau and Brunssum, at Sector Operations Centre UEDEM, at 2ATAF again as Chief of Staff Operations in the rank of Brigadier General, and finally at Casteau as Chief of the Air Defence Branch.

*Photograph courtesy of André Bar*

## IN MEMORIAM

### Lieutenant General Albert Debêche,



Born on 19 May 1919, Lieutenant General Albert Debêche, a long-standing member of the Belgian Branch, passed away at Waremmes on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013. He joined the Belgian Royal Military Academy in 1938. In 1940 he was assigned to the Red Cross in France from where he set out to escape to England in Apr 1941. He was interned in Spain for some 8 months and eventually reached England in May 1942. He joined the 90<sup>th</sup> Belgian Promotion, was commissioned in the RAF and completed his pilot training in Canada in Aug 1943. He returned to UK and flew ops with a night-fighter squadron until 6 July 1944 when he was badly wounded while on mission.

In Apr 1945 he completed re-training for assignment to Transport Command and in 1946 returned to Belgium to 169 Wing at Evere. His subsequent long and distinguished career with the Belgian Air Force culminated in his appointment as Chief of Staff. Wing Commander Ross McKenzie the Belgian Branch Vice Chair attended as the RAF and RAFA representative on behalf of Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper: a poppy wreath was laid on the coffin.

*Photograph courtesy of André Bar*

*Episode No. 12-2 from 'The Chronicle of a Passer By'*

When our lease expired at the Rue de Pépin, we moved offices to a newly-built block on the Rue de la Loi (thus, we hoped, establishing our respectability!). The London partnership amalgamated with another City establishment and moved out of Harley Street where Tony Mahon and Bob Sears had started their practice in 1946. The new arrangement in the UK worked very well despite the different characters of the now many partners. It was the start of the period when many professional firms were combining their resources to obtain more stability financially and with the added aim of providing wider expertise.

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Coincidental with my arrival in Belgium in 1963 was my increased interest in the activities of The Royal Air Force's Escaping Society. I was amongst the founder members in 1945 and had been remotely active whilst in France but, in Brussels, I was closer to the operational centre in continental Europe and was appointed the Honorary Representative for the Belgian area. The aim of the Society was to help those who had aided Allied airmen during the war and who were in need. Also, the members of the Society who were all escapees, wished to maintain a permanent contact with their former rescuers.

The exploits of those who resisted capture during the war have been recounted in many books including 'Saturday at MI5' written by Airey Neave – exploits carried out under very hazardous conditions during which many hundreds lost their lives or were imprisoned in concentration camps. Airey Neave himself was a trustee of the Society. He was captured after being wounded in Calais; he escaped from the Spandenburg prison camp and was recaptured and sent to the Colditz camp where he organised his own and other breakouts before ending up in Switzerland prior to his return to England via Gibraltar. I met him in the Basilica in Brussels in 1965 when he came to attend a reunion of the Comet Line, famous for its bravery when its members were able to help over 800 airmen return to the United Kingdom via Spain and Gibraltar and so continue the combat. On his return to England after the religious ceremony in the Basilica, he wrote: "I was so glad to hear that our visit was a success. It certainly was with us (he was accompanied by his wife – later to become Baroness Neave) and I think it was in every respect worthwhile, besides being very moving."

It was almost beyond belief when this man, with his long and courageous history and devotion in helping others, was murdered by terrorists outside the Houses of Parliament in London in 1979, fourteen years after I had first met him.

The founder and President of the Comet Line, Andrée de Jongh, organised the escape route stretching from northern Europe down to and across the Pyrenees, with groups of helpers passing the evading airmen from safe houses to Gibraltar and then their return to England. She is mentioned in Graham Greene's book 'In search of a Character', after he came across her in French Guiana. After her

accomplishments in aiding airmen during the war years, she went out to Africa to nurse and look after lepers. She had been decorated by King George VI with the award of the George Medal in 1946 and, on her return to Europe, was honoured by King Baudouin of Belgium by bestowing on her the title of Countess.<sup>1</sup>

Our own President, Air Chief Marshal Sir Lewis Hodges, himself an escaper after being shot down, captured and interned in 1940, escaped and returned to England and took part in the attack which resulted in the sinking of the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau battleships in 1942. He then went on to dropping agents into occupied territory and picking up escapees for return to the United Kingdom during 30 missions for those purposes. Amongst those who he brought out from occupied territory were Presidents Auriol and Mitterand of France.

I quote the above people but, at the same time, do not forget other groups of helpers in both the Flemish and French speaking parts of Belgium. Indeed, such groups extend over continental Europe from Italy and Greece right up to Norway and even into the once enemy territory. No doubt history will record their courage and patriotism, but with time their reasons and principles might not receive the values they deserve.

The Escaping Society connection gave continuity in my ties with the Royal Air Force. I was able to meet old friends regularly and had relationships with other airmen from different parts of the globe. Wherever they came from, there seemed to be an unwritten or unspoken understanding and this comprehension appears to have spread to the new generations of flyers.

During the course of visits from Blankenberge in the north to Coutrai in the south, Furnes in the west to Hasselt and Lommel in the east, I was able to make contact with many of those Flemish and French speaking helpers who, after the courage and bravery of their youth, were in need of moral and, sometimes, financial support in their closing years. Most were too proud to seek help themselves, but word came through third parties.

At our base in India, we had built a church to serve all denominations in 1945/6. Almost three decades later, in Brussels, I approached Canon Innes, the then Curé of the Basilica and asked him if the Church of England's padre to the Society, the Reverend Bruce Lyons, could be allowed to participate in the annual Commemoration Ceremony in his Basilica. A large number of the Society's members were Church of England followers. The Canon welcomed this initiative enthusiastically and so began the ecumenical service which now takes place annually when the different religions join together to pay homage to their past heroes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note: The exploits of Andrée de Jongh and fellow members of the Comet Line are vividly described in Airey Neave's book, 'Little Cyclone' which was republished in February 2013.*

The journeys through Europe, across the Mediterranean and into the African continent were mostly by way of trains, ships or by road. After the war, I very rarely flew and only took to the air when forced to do so because of time factors, the distances involved or pure emergency cases. The Tiger Moth crash over Wales, the near disaster with the Oxford aircraft in Canada, the maiming of the crew of the Lancaster over Cologne and the loss of many of them over Frankfurt, the forced landing by parachute from the blazing aircraft over Normandy and the five years in the air had left a mark which, ridiculous as it may seem, made me count the risks and the number of lives remaining to me. Also, after leaving the pilot's seat in Canada, flying as a passenger behind a closed cabin door left me sensing every movement of airplanes without having any control of what was happening up front. Again, with the progress of time, the small satisfaction of seeing propellers revolving with the visible interpretation of keeping airborne was lost with the introduction of jet engines.

The few excursions in the air were made in DC10s, Comets, Caravelles and the Concord. It was the flight to and fro between Paris and Dallas International Airport in a Concord which rekindled the thrill of flying because of the height, speed and resultant short time spent in the air whilst covering thousands of miles. There was only an absence of 48 hours from Paris and, of that time, only a fifth was spent in the air, the remaining hours being employed attending meetings, dinners and watching all night religious sermons on television. I wondered how many Americans stayed up all night to watch this strange timing of programmes.

The travelling, from the early times in Folkestone, across Europe, south-east Asia and North Africa, brought me in touch with a wide range of individuals, customs, religions and fundamental changes. I had witnessed the cry for 'Self Government and Liberty' – a natural and human instinct, but seldom saw its happy fulfilment. When one travels the vast railway network built by the Scots in India, or the schools and hospitals constructed by the French in Africa, or the efforts of the Belgians in the Congo, the 'colonial' era cannot have been so bad as is sometimes made out.

Because of the large populations and lack of natural resources, government is a difficult task for many of these countries. How does one manage or please over one billion people in India when it is not easy to govern ten million in Belgium?

Gilbert Chesterton wrote, "A beetle may or may not be inferior to man, but the fact remains that there is probably a beetle view of things of which man is entirely ignorant." Seeing myself as a beetle, I felt that I had uncovered some of the ignorance of Chesterton's man.

*To be Concluded*

## FUTURE EVENTS CALENDAR

**7 Dec 13 – London Christmas Lunch "Remembering the Escape Lines"**. For those with an 'Escape Line Connection', lunch at Leon de Bruxelles, 24 Cambridge Circus. Contact John Clinch [clinch.john@gmail.com](mailto:clinch.john@gmail.com).

**18 Dec 13 – Belgian Branch Christmas Lunch at the NATO Staff Centre at Evere.** Starting at 12:30 hrs. All members and friends are encouraged to attend. **Please register as per the 'flyer' on page 4 of this Newsletter.**

**18 Mar 14 (NB date change) – Branch Annual General Meeting and Lunch in the NATO Staff Centre** – see Agenda on page 5 of this Newsletter. All members are encouraged to attend.

**6 Apr 14 – St Clement Danes Church** in the Strand, London. Annual Sunday Service to commemorate the formation of the Royal Air Force. All are welcome to attend, but tickets are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis: contact Naz Angha in the South East Office, Tel: 020 8286 6667 or by e-mail to [naz.angha@rafa.org.uk](mailto:naz.angha@rafa.org.uk) no later than Friday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2014.

**4 May 14 – Hotton Commonwealth War Grave** cemetery, remembrance service led by Royal British Legion. <http://www.britishlegion.be/events.html>

**10 May 14 - 'Wings of Memory'** inauguration of 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary memorial to the loss of Halifax of 426 Sqn RCAF and Lancaster of 514 Sqn RAF. Those wishing to participate are invited to view the website <http://www.wingsofmemory.be> or contact the Branch Secretary or the event organiser Dirk De Quick (0495/15 01 66, [dirk@wingsofmemory.be](mailto:dirk@wingsofmemory.be)).

**16-18 May 14 – RAFA National Annual and Area Conferences** at Blackpool. Members who would like to join these policy-making events which also do much to foster the Association's comradeship aims, should contact the Chairman. It should be noted that although central funds only reimburse some of the costs of sending one delegate to Conference, it is Branch committee policy that available funds will be shared equally amongst all Branch attendees

**28 May 14 – Remembrance Service at Rebecq** to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the loss of 6 RAF aircraft. [www.rebecq-memorial.eu](http://www.rebecq-memorial.eu)

**End-Jun 14\* – Barry Horton Memorial Golf Tournament at the Duisburg Military Golf Club.** The Branch Committee are seeking to arrange this popular event once again next year on a Friday end Jun/early July: it is envisaged that the formula will be similar to previous years (golf plus dinner plus tombola). Details in Newsletter 113.

**17 Aug 14\* - Tigelot Memorial at Jalhay.** 63<sup>rd</sup> annual commemoration in memory of the sacrifice of all Allied Airmen who lost their lives in the High Ardennes in the Second World War. A church service will be held at Jalhay, followed by wreath laying at the memorial to Halifax MZ 829 lost with all crew on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1944: the event will be followed by the normal convivial lunch.

\* Dates to be confirmed

## REPORTS ON PAST EVENTS

### Commemoration at Modave – Survillers - 28 August 2013

Returning from a mission to Nuremberg in Germany on 28 August 1943, 77 Squadron RAF Halifax Bomber JD371 KN-O was attacked by a German fighter and caught fire. Four men managed to parachute before the crash, one of them did not survive. The plane was moving straight onto the village but the pilot, with complete disregard for his own life and those of the other three crewmen remaining on board, managed to divert the aircraft which crashed into a meadow. The 3 crewmen who parachuted to safety (FS Catley, and Sgts Beard and Palmer) subsequently managed to return to England via the Comet Line. Those who died (PO Brannigan, FSs Humphries, Rogers and Silver (RCAF), Sgt Templeton) are buried in the Commonwealth War Grave at Heverlee, Belgium.

On 28 August 2013, the Halifax Modave group in collaboration with the Municipality of Modave organized a most moving commemoration of the tragic events of 70 years earlier. The day started with a ceremony in the City Hall of Modave where in the presence of members of the families, the eight crew members were posthumously made honorary citizens of the Municipality.

Later at the crash site in bright sunny weather a large crowd accompanied by the Belgian Air Force Band, a Guard of Honour and a fine group of Standard Bearers, witnessed the unveiling of a new monument to commemorate the event.

*Photographs courtesy Modave Group*



Wreaths were laid and the Belgian Armed Forces provided a fly-past to honour the occasion. The event was supported by the Branch Standard Bearer Jean-Pierre Blanckaert, Ghislaine Walkden, Brigitte Horton and Deborah Whittingham from the Committee as well as the Chairman who laid a Poppy Wreath on behalf of the Association. For more information see <http://www.rememberjd371.be/index.htm>

### RAFA European Area Conference, Guernsey – 4 – 6 October 2013

The RAFA Autumn European Area Conference was held in Guernsey from 4 to 6 Oct 13. The Conference was attended by members of the Area Council plus 14 Branch Delegates: the Chairman represented the Belgian Branch.

As a result of the action from the last meeting on the Area Council to review the opportunities for conducting Welfare Training in the European Area, it was reported that the new CHQ Director of Welfare Mr Rory O'Connor, had been tasked by the Secretary General to investigate the subject and to provide a report by end 2013. It was expected that the report would look favourably at recommending that some

welfare training should be undertaken outside the UK in Europe, and it was confirmed that Mr O'Connor would participate in the Area Conference in Blackpool on 16 May 14.

Conference noted that as a result of analysis by the CHQ Director of Finance and IT, there had been lively debate in Central Council concerning the validity, or otherwise, of the figures previously used to justify the supposed need for membership income to match membership costs. The net result was that Central Council had decided that there would be no need to go to Annual Conference 2014 to discuss possible subscription increases and that an article in the January 2014 AIR MAIL and the Chairman's Conference report would provide a clear understanding of the present situation: a most welcome clarification.

### **Belgian Air Force Remembrance at Parc du Cinquantaire 12 October 2013**

A grey day but, for a change, no rain and not too cold for the annual commemoration at the Belgian Air Force memorial at the Cinquantaire (below left). As normal, a large crowd paid homage with many wreaths laid by Belgian and International organisations. The Branch Standard was paraded, and a number of Branch members attended including Hélène Van Wersch and Bobby Laumans (below right). The Chairman laid a RAFA wreath.

*Photographs courtesy 1CC M Wolfs*



### **Comet Line Annual Reunion 19 and 20 October 2013**

The Comet Line Annual Reunion was held in Brussels on the week-end of 19/20 Oct 13. A special focus this year was the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the execution of the 11 Comet Line helpers on 20 October 1943 and of the death the previous month of Baron Jean Greindl 'Nemo' the Comet Line leader in Brussels who was killed in his prison cell at Etterbeek as a result of a stray bomb dropped from an Allied aircraft.

The Comet Line Helpers were executed at the National Rifle Range (Tir National) in Schaerbeek, Brussels. The Sunday commemorations started with a visit to the cemetery and memorial at the 'Enclos des Fusillés' on the site of the Tir National: the Comet Line and RAFA Standards paid tribute as flowers were placed at the graves and as the bugle sounded.



The normal Church Service in the Koekelberg Basilica was followed by wreath-laying at the Comet Line Memorial, where special tributes were read to the martyrs of 20 October 1943, and in the Air Force Chapel.

### **Commemoration at the Belgian Air Force Field of Honour and the Commonwealth War Graves, Brussels Town Cemetery, Evere 1 November 2013**

As arranged by the 'Comité de la Pelouse d'Honneur des Aviateurs' in collaboration with the Belgian Air Force and the 'Vieilles Tiges de l'Aviation Belge' (VTB), a ceremony was held at the Brussels cemetery on 1 Nov 13 to pay homage to Belgian airman who died in WW2. Lt Gen Wilfried De Brouwer President VTB led proceedings. Pride of place amongst the many senior Air Force attendees was taken by ex-RAF RAFA Life Members Bobby Laumans and Fernand Jaumouille. The Branch Standard was paraded. Warrant Officer Gary Warner and the Chairman laid wreaths on behalf, respectively, of the United Kingdom and the RAFA on the Field of Honour and at the Commonwealth War Memorial.

*Photographs courtesy Jozef Vanden Broeck*

*and*

*Norbert Niels VTB*



### **Reception hosted by the British Ambassador to Belgium 7 November 2013**

This year, the Ambassador Jonathan Brenton expanded his normal 'Veterans' Reception' to encompass all those who support commemorations in Belgium. The very convivial event was held in the refurbished British Residence in Rue Ducale: it was well supported by Branch members and provided an ideal opportunity to meet colleagues from the Royal British Legion, the Comète Line and other veterans' organisations in Belgium.

### **Remembrance Sunday at Holy Trinity Church 10 November 2013**

The Royal British Legion (RBL) Brussels Branch organised a Remembrance Sunday service at the Pro-Cathedral of Holy Trinity in Brussels on 10 Nov 13. A large congregation with strong RAFA Belgian Branch representation enjoyed an uplifting service during which special note was taken of the 11 RAFA Belgian Branch members who had passed away in the previous year. The Branch Standard was paraded, and a wreath in memory of members of British and Allied Air Forces who suffered and died in the cause of Freedom and Liberty was laid by the Chairman.

## Report on the Anglo-Belgian Remembrance Service held in the National Basilica, Koekelberg, Brussels – 28 September 2013

In 1987 the Belgian Branch initiated fund-raising to provide a permanent memorial to those many Belgians who served in the Royal Air Force in the Second World War. The Branch set out with a target of 400,000 Belgian Francs but in fact raised 1.5 Million (circa £30K) and this enabled the formation of an Air Force Chapel in the National Basilica of the Sacred Heart Koekelberg in Brussels.

The Air Force Chapel contains a set of 9 very fine specially designed stained-glass windows.



The windows were dedicated in September 1988 during a ceremony led by King Baudouin.

Christ sending forth his Spirit

Creation

RAF Belgian Airman and a parachutist



Water

Fire

Fire

The Elements

Air

Air

Earth



To mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication, and to provide a reminder of the role of the Chapel in providing a focus for the Air Force associated linkages between the United Kingdom and Belgium, a special Anglo-Belgian Remembrance Service was held in the Air Force Chapel on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

On the 'Great Day' the sun shone, the great and the good, as well as around a 100 guests, were in place, the magnificent 50-strong Royal Symphonic Band of the Belgian Air Force, resplendent in their 'gala' uniforms, were filling the Basilica with music and the singers of the Brussels Choir were tuned to perfection.



Photograph courtesy Doug Mitchell

The Service began on the dot of 11:00 to the sound of the Royal Air Force March announcing the arrival of the Principal Military Guests led by Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper KBE RAF, Director General NATO International Military Staff, and General Gérard Van Caelenberge, Aide de-Camp to the King and the Belgian Chief of Defence ( below).



*Photographs courtesy Steffen Oelschlägel and Norbert Niels VTB*

The RAF Ecumenical Service was led by the Reverend (Wing Commander) Andrew Jones with the support of Father Walter Peeters our Branch Honorary Chaplain (above). The Service that followed interposed the singing of rather ‘air force’ flavoured Hymns, with periods of prayer and of reflection both by the Symphonic Band, whose haunting tones of ‘Amazing Grace’ reverberated around the Basilica, and the Choir who delighted all with their most moving rendition of ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’.

During his introduction to the ‘Act of Commemoration’ Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper highlighted that a new commemorative plaque marking the Remembrance Service had now been placed in the Chapel. Following the blessing of the plaque by the RAF Chaplain, Colonel Musey, responded on behalf of the Belgian Armed Forces, thanking the RAFA for their initiative which would enable the Chapel to provide a central focus for Air Force Remembrance in Belgium.

**On the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dedication of the Memorial Stained-Glass Windows a Remembrance Service was held in this Air Force Chapel to Commemorate, with Grateful Thanks, all the Belgians who in the Second World War served in the Royal Air Force, as well as those who acted as Secret Agents in Belgium, together with the Civilians of the Belgian Escape Lines who risked their lives to save so many downed Allied Airmen**

**28<sup>th</sup> September 2013**

Belgian Branch of the Royal Air Forces Association

The 'Act of Remembrance' followed classic British lines, with the RAFA Dedication (Father Peeters), the Exhortation (Branch Chairman standing-in for veteran Mr Laumans who was indisposed) and the Kohima Epitaph (Mr Rubin), plus the Last Post and the Reveille faultlessly played by the Band.



*Photograph courtesy of Association du Mémorial de Rebecq*



The laying of floral tributes which followed was an impressive and emotional aspect of the Service. 22 tributes were laid on behalf of a wide variety of organisations and individuals: they made a very fine show. The Service closed with The Blessing by the RAF Chaplain and the National Anthems of United Kingdom and Belgium. The march-off of the Standards and the Principal Guests was to the rousing strains of the Belgian Air Force March.

*Photograph courtesy of Norbert Niels VTB*

The Service was followed by a Reception which was open to all, and by a very convivial lunch where over 70 friends strengthened their bonds of friendship and were witness to Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper presenting a European Area Presidential Certificate to Mr Léon Rubin for his outstanding support to the RAFA Belgian Branch for over 65 years.



*Newsletter Printed by evmprint, 1080 Bruxelles*