

## ***The Romance of a Belgian Airman and the girl from North Cray***

If you stop to look at the poignant names engraved on the St. James' War Memorial Cross for WWII, you might be surprised to find a Belgian airman's name - Gaston Frans Mertens.

Gaston came to know North Cray following his friendship with Harry Brunt's daughter, Norah. The Brunts at the time were living at a detached house called "Wychwood", Parsonage Lane. Harry Brunt worked for the Co-Op, who were contracted by the Government to try to ensure sufficient food for the civilian population of south east London. His daughter, Norah, a schoolteacher at a Grammar school, wanted to improve her French and persuaded her mother to befriend a young Belgian escapee who had by way of France and Spain eventually made his way to England in order to enrol with the British Forces.

Gaston Frans Mertens was still a young man, just 23-years-old, and had already undergone several years of medical training before making his way to England. Enrolling in the Air Force, he was first sent to Canada and then to Scarborough, North Yorkshire, for training, but thought the harsh discipline totally unnecessary. He would communicate with Norah in French, but they both spoke in English when others were present. Eventually, Norah and Gaston became more than just friends and hoped to marry in Belgium after the war. But Norah knew that should the worse happen she would be much better off both financially and morally if they were married.

The date for the wedding was set for Saturday 24th October 1944, but Norah's local church of St. James in North Cray had recently been damaged in an air raid, and so it was necessary for them to make the longer trip through North Cray down to Foots Cray to All Saints Church where Father Mack married them in the presence of several of Norah's family. Unfortunately no one from Gaston's family could be there. The young couple planned to have another ceremony in Belgium when Europe was free.

Following his training, Gaston was now a flying officer with the RAF and placed in 320 (Dutch) Squadron, RAF. The squadron was based at RAF Dunsfold from 18th February 1944. On the 18th April 1944, shortly before D-Day, General Eisenhower, then Allied Supreme Commander, visited Dunsfold. On the morning of 6th June, all three Squadrons were in action to support the D-Day landings. After the liberation of Belgium, the Squadron was moved to Melsbroek, Belgium.

Following their very brief honeymoon, the orders the newly weds had both been dreading were given to Gaston and he had to report to his allotted Air Base. Sadly, they were never to see each other again. In January 1945, Norah was first told that her new husband was "*missing in action*". This was always a cruel way to learn about a loved-ones fate because it left the door open to hope that he would be found alive and well, perhaps as a prisoner-of-war, or in the care of the French resistance.

One bright afternoon at her home in North Cray, a Mitchell bomber (the same aircraft

that Gaston's Unit used) flew low over their house, and circled three times. Norah and the family were frantic with hope and rushed into the garden waving handkerchiefs, thinking that it might be Gaston's plane. The girl soldiers, who were looking after a barrage balloon in the field opposite the house, saw it too and were amazed. Although Norah and the family never actually discovered the truth about the incident, it could well have been a colleague of Gaston's returning from a raid over Europe.

A month after the bizarre incident, a Belgian padre personally visited Norah to confirm that her young husband had been shot down at Manderfield in the Ardennes, while parachuting from his damaged plane. The R. A. F. records state that on 13th January 1945, during a flight in an American built Mitchell aircraft, a bomb exploded on board at 14.29 (GMT) in mid-air over the target of Manderfeld (Belgium) and crashed. The plane was piloted by Lt. J. H. Muntinga (a Dutch citizen), with Gaston as the navigator and with two other crew members - Cpl. P. H. Peetoom and Cpl. P.J.E. Van Dam. All four men were killed.

The heart-break was very difficult for Norah to cope with, but unfortunately was being repeated time and time again throughout Europe. The young people of that generation paid a high price for our freedom. We should value every day their unselfish sacrifice. After the war had ended in Europe, Norah was able to be at Gaston's funeral in Belgium when hundreds of local people from his village attended.

Gaston was later posthumously awarded the **Croix des Evades** (Escaper's Cross). Instituted 25th February 1944 by the exiled Belgian Government in London, it was awarded to those who had escaped from the enemy occupied territories of Germany and then subsequently served again in a patriotic fashion in the war effort.

In a brief written account that Norah wrote after the war, she contrasted the way the Belgian's treated their "hero's" with the British attitude to their armed forces, especially after the terrible First World War. Norah's father had been a young soldier and fought for his country in the Somme, Mons and Gallipoli. He was gassed and wounded in the arm, but received no pension or recognition apart from the three ordinary medals given to every British soldier.

Norah later re-married another Mertens - (Gaston's brother) and the couple had several children. She embraced her new life in Belgium but a little of her heart must have always been in that intimate little churchyard in North Cray where her husband's name is carved on the poignant memorial and where all North Cray people can honour and remember his bravery and unselfish sacrifice.

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