

# The unknown Canadian

## Hudson widow alerts British village to heroic pilot's grave

By PEGGY CURRAN, The Gazette November 11, 2010 11:08 AM



Elizabeth and Clare Connor head to Buckingham Palace in October 1940, when the king presented him with the Distinguished Flying Cross. The Canadian airman was killed on his next raid, on Nov. 4.

Only one airman is buried in the graveyard at St. Cuthbert's Church in Brattleby, a village with 91 residents and a few dozen houses in Lincolnshire in northeast England, up the road a ways from the Royal Air Force base at Scampton.

Clare Connor was 27 when he died in November 1940, just a year into the Second World War. Newly married, with a baby on the way, Connor and his 20-year-old bride, Elizabeth, had been billeted with the family at Manor Farm and had attended Sunday services at the tiny 600-year-old church.

But as the war escalated and the death toll began to mount, the local vicar feared St. Cuthbert's would be overrun, and he allowed no more war graves there. The marker erected by Britain's war graves department reads simply Flying Officer C.A. Connor DFC, RAF.

There is no hint of who the lone airman was, where he came from or how he died.



**Elizabeth Connor DuBoyce, 90, with daughters Diane Davis, 59 (left), and Clare Connor Dowie, 69, at the Fritz Farm, remembering the husband and father who died so long ago and is buried so far away.**

**Photograph by: Bryanna Bradley, The Gazette**

**At 90**, Elizabeth (Betty) DuBoyce has a full life, surrounded by family and friends. The mother of five, grandmother of 14 and great-grandmother of two, DuBoyce lives on a pretty street in Hudson with her son Tony and his wife, Irene, a few houses down from her daughter Diane and her family. Once a week, DuBoyce, who has been driving since she was 15, toots over to Fritz Farm to play bridge with her eldest daughter, Clare Dowie. But her life has not been easy. After Connor, she married twice, and is three times a widow.

A year or two back, DuBoyce began to fret about the remains of her first love, alone in that faraway churchyard.

“If the church would ever go into disrepair – because so many are now, aren’t they? – well, I was wondering whether I should have his grave moved to a war graves cemetery. That’s how it really got started,” she says over tea and shortbread in Diane’s sun-filled kitchen.

What happened next, says daughter Diane Davis, has been “a voyage of discovery” – for her mother, who rarely talked about the war and the husband who died months before her first child was born; for Davis and her siblings, who have unearthed old letters and shared their findings; and also for the people of Brattleby, who have discovered and embraced the Canadian war hero they never knew was there.

**Clare Arthur Hovendon Connor** grew up in Toronto’s Rosedale and Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. The son of an architect, he wanted to join the Royal Canadian Air Force, but at age 25 he was told he was too old. So on the eve of the Second World War, he worked his way overseas on a cattle boat and signed up with the RAF.

“The war started, and he never came back,” says DuBoyce, who was 19 when she met him in a pub in Somerset. “There were two Canadians, an Australian and a New Zealander. They walked into the pub, and my boyfriend, who was very interested in flying people, immediately began talking to them and so we all became friends.”

Things happen fast during wartime. By the following spring, Connor and Elizabeth were married. She followed him to his new posting with the 83 Squadron at Scampton, where they were housed at Manor Farm.

“There was no bathroom in that farmhouse,” she recalls. “There was a big hip bath hanging in the scullery. Miss Emerson used to get the hip bath down and put it in the dining room and fill it with water and I would have a bath once a week. I was always sure someone was going to burst in.”

Her husband, meanwhile, was coping with the hazards of trying to fight the enemy in antiquated Handley Page Hampden bombers. On Sept 15, 1940 – now known as Battle of Britain Day – Pilot Officer Connor was flying back from a bombing mission when his plane was struck by anti-aircraft fire over Antwerp, Belgium.

“I could see we were in trouble when I saw the reflection of flames in my windscreen,” Connor explains in a British Pathé newsreel. “The flames were getting close to the back of my head.”

Connor kept flying as the fire spread, triggering rounds of ammunition, many of them spraying into the cockpit. Two other crew members parachuted to safety while John Hannah, an 18-year-old Scot whose parachute was destroyed in the fire, stayed behind.

“He had terrible burns over his body,” says Dowie. “He was behind my father with the logbook, whacking out the flames.” Hannah, the rear gunner and wireless operator, was able to extinguish the fire, and Connor landed the plane safely.

On the recommendation of Connor, his senior officer, Hannah was awarded the Victoria Cross. Connor would receive the Distinguished Flying Cross.

“It seems to me most of the credit ought to go to Pilot Officer Connor,” Hannah told reporters. “People don’t fully realize that while I was doing my best to put out the fire, he was sitting up aloft, all cool as a cucumber, taking no notice of the flames, which were either whizzing by his head or hitting the armoured plating above. He was pretty calm and if it hadn’t been for him, I should not have got back.”

“To get the VC, you needed a superior officer,” says Clare Dowie. “My father could not recommend himself.”

**On a family trip to England two years ago**, Davis stopped by Connor’s grave, as she has often done over the last two decades. This time, she planted two Canadian flags her mother had picked up at Canadian Tire.

“When Mum said she wanted to contact the war office to see about getting his grave moved because of fear of neglect, I said we have to give St. Cuthbert’s Church a chance.”

Afterward, Davis got in touch with Mike Spencer, a member of the parish council in Brattleby and self-appointed church historian, beginning an email conversation in which she shared part of the Connor story and voiced some of her mother’s concerns.

Spencer was eager to hear more, setting up a small tribute inside the church and passing the story along to the local newspaper.

Until then, few people in the village knew Connor was a Canadian and a decorated airman. Yet Davis soon learned his grave had its share of visits from strangers.

John Beacham, retired from the RAF, first noticed Connor’s grave in 1992. “He and his wife thought it poignant that his was the sole RAF grave and so they began the practice of leaving flowers.”

DuBoyce and her daughters sent a donation to help with the upkeep of the church and its graveyard, money the tiny congregation used to purchase the Clare Connor Memorial Lawn Mower.

**On Oct. 12, 1940**, Elizabeth Connor wrote a wonderful letter to her mother-in-law in Toronto describing the private investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace, which had been strafed by enemy bombs a few nights earlier.

“Lots of people came and shook hands with them both. It was exciting, then a policeman said that if we didn’t get along in we would be keeping the king waiting.

“The men left their hats, coats and gas masks with a footman, and we went up about six very shallow wide steps into a most beautiful room, it had a gorgeous rose pink carpet and the chairs were gilded and pink brocade. ...

“Clare looked at me and I smiled at him, then he and Hannah started walking toward large double doors at the far end. ... When they were a couple of yards away from the doors, they opened, as if by magic, and there stood the king of the British Empire. Clare’s shoulders went back, as if he had a pin in him. Gosh, they were straight enough before the doors opened. I nearly fell on the floor with excitement. The king looked wonderful.”

After the ceremony, King George VI stopped to talk with the men’s families.

“The king said how thankful I must have been when Clare returned. I said, ‘Yes, I was, terribly, but of course I didn’t know until the next day how different that night had been from others.’

“It was lovely to see Clare and the king smiling at each other, they have both the most beautiful smiles.”

“It’s a good job I wrote the letter, because I don’t remember any of it,” DuBoyce says of the letter, which Clare Dowie received from her Toronto aunts several years ago. She put it away for safekeeping and only recently shared it with her siblings.

“When we read this, it took our breath away, because it is so fresh and in the moment,” Diane Davis says. “For most of us, this is a new discovery.”

**On Nov. 4, 1940**, his first mission after receiving the DFC, Connor’s plane was shot down over the North Sea.

“He had sent out an SOS and a naval ship was just near and picked him up a few minutes after they crashed into the sea,” DuBoyce says. “One of the officers on the ship wrote to me and said he was already dead when they picked him up, they couldn’t revive him.”

After the funeral, Elizabeth Connor moved back to Somerset to live with her parents. Her daughter, named Clare in memory of her father, was born four months later.

“My husband and I had arranged that if anything happened to him, I would come back to Canada. But then there was the most appalling tragedy – a ship full of children was torpedoed.” She decided to wait out the war in Somerset, farm country with few factories likely to attract warplanes.

“Nana said a bomb went off in the back garden once,” Clare Dowie says.

“There was a huge bang when a German plane dropped a bomb in the yard; it blew all the glass out of the room where you were sleeping,” DuBoyce says.

“I slept through all that,” says Dowie, who recalls hearing the echo of distant gunfire in France during a trip to the beach when she was a toddler. “I remember asking what the noise was.”

After the war, Elizabeth Connor moved to Canada. She lived in Toronto until 1948, when she remarried and moved to Montreal, where she started a second family.

Both Dowie and Davis, whose own father died of a heart attack when she was 4, say their mother didn’t talk much about the war or the hardships she endured afterward.

“Maybe it was wrong, but I did what I thought was right,” says DuBoyce, adding that she was wary of setting up a rivalry among her children about whose father was best.

“No one spoke of anything, really, did they, in the 1950s?” Dowie says. “A lot of people didn’t want to talk about the war.”

“Although we grew up knowing Clare Connor’s story, she would rarely talk about him as it was just too painful for her,” Davis says. “Over the years, it has been a nagging worry for her that Clare Connor’s sacrifice will be forgotten, that the church will close.”

**On Oct. 3 of this year,** Elizabeth DuBoyce returned to Brattleby with her daughter Diane and her husband, Alan, for a commemorative service at St. Cuthbert’s Church honouring Clare Connor.

“Not only did they find out that he was a war hero and a Canadian, but then this 90-year-old woman pops up,” DuBoyce says. “Everyone is quite thunderstruck at that.”

Mike Spencer organized the evening service, with most of the townspeople, a delegation of officers from RAF Scampton and John and Carol Beacham filling the pews. Spencer has also erected a small memorial to Connor, with photographs and news clippings.

“I am still so overwhelmed that I can’t seem to put it all together,” says DuBoyce. “It had been raining, but it stopped. English weather is so obliging. We got out to the grave and we had a wonderful little service there, and a Hurricane flew over.”

DuBoyce was invited to visit Manor Farm, where the minister who led the service now lives, but wasn’t sure she could handle it.

That didn’t stop her from wondering. “I asked the vicar, ‘Have you got a bathroom at the Manor Farm?’ and he said, ‘Yes, three.’ ”

Clare Dowie wasn’t able to make the trip to Brattleby this fall, but hopes to arrange a visit soon with her own children. She has powerful memories of her own visit to the church a few decades back. “The sun was flooding in, and I felt very happy that he was there.”

Davis can’t help asking herself whether Connor isn’t better off where he is – not as one among many who fought and died for their country, but as Brattleby’s own – no longer unknown – soldier.

“My mother will be 91 in January and my sister will be 70 in February. One lost her husband, the other her father. They both deserve recognition for the loss they suffered for our freedom,” says Davis. “My mother has finally understood that if she wants people to remember Clare Connor, she has to let his story, and her story, be told.”

pcurran@montrealgazette.com

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