

An Arial Drama

February 1945, for nine months the Allied troops that had landed in Normandy and in Provence had been slowly driving back the Germans towards the Rhine. The Ardennes, having been liberated in September, certainly trembled once again when von Runstedt's counter offensive gave rise to fears of a new invasion, but this time, fortunately, the Panzers have not got across the Meuse.

At Thin, as in the entire region, life resumed its pre-war tempo. Of course the prisoners, those interned in concentration camps, a few volunteer fighters as well as several "evacuee" families have not yet returned home but the oppression, which weighed down upon all during the years of occupation, has vanished. Far from the front the tangible signs of conflict have almost disappeared. The echoes of the aerial war, noisy and spectacular, can alone be heard. The phenomenon even has a tendency to increase during these last weeks, with the return of the dry cold spells and the cloudless sky. The people of Thin are often able to witness U.S. formations flying over at high altitude on their way to the Reich. A gripping sight, these hundreds of aircraft implacably towards their objectives. The spectacle is impressive and the inhabitants that have been subjugated can only think of watching at first. It is only when the last plane has disappeared that they try to realise the object of this deployment of forces; it leaves them wondering....

The daily raids of the Americans give way to the night-time operations of the British air force. Those on the ground can only hear the muffled rumbling of the heavy R.A.F. bombers that cause doors and windows to vibrate.

It was 9.30p.m., so night had fallen on this day of the third of February 1945 when an explosion of extreme violence shook the sleepy village of Thin. The inhabitants, aroused from their first hours of sleep and hastily getting dressed, ran out of their houses asking one another what had happened. A large whitish glow lit up the sky beyond the hill to the south. This couldn't be one of those ridiculous V1s of which a crippled version had crashed on the countryside at "Gravelette" a short while ago. No, this was something else, this could only be a stricken aircraft...

The first ones to react were the young people who set off along the Potence and Piedcochet roads towards the source of the glow. Soon they heard the noise of multiple explosions; no longer were there doubts, as ammunition was exploding in the inferno. As they reached a spot not far from the intersection of the four roads they could make out, through the pale light to the right, a figure lying stretched out on the ploughed soil. It was a dead body. In the direction of the fire, at regular intervals, other bodies had fallen, six in total, gruesome "stepping stones" leading to the disaster site. Around the bodies, disembowelled by the impact, bits of equipment and parachutes lay scattered about. Finally the eyes of the searchers caught sight of the carcass of the burning aircraft. The plane had crashed at the locality known as "Les Fosses Huguette" a few metres away from the by-road.

The fire was raging, fed by the fuel and ammunition; a fair number of incendiary bombs were exploding, sending up dazzling jets of phosphorus.

From a distance the powerless onlookers gazed for a long time at the catastrophe; at last the fire died down, the detonations became less frequent until eventually there was just the odd explosion. It was then that calls broke one of these moments of silence, punctuated with whistles; they seemed to be coming from the direction of the "Religieuse". A few people, breaking away from the group, moves off in this direction, calling out in their turn. They didn't have to go far: walking with heavy tread, a man was approaching, cramped up in his flying suit and his inflatable life-jacket. He carried a lamp in his hand. Faced with all these strangers he remained silent, at the same time dazed and anxious....

Everything had happened so quickly that he was having trouble setting his mind back into order; the notion of time had abandoned him. Life on one of those bases in the south of England seemed at the one time so near and yet so far away.....from where for months now R.A.F. squadrons had regularly been departing to bomb strategic targets in Europe. All the British dominions were represented there, not counting Frenchmen, Belgians, Poles; he and his mates were Australians. He could see them all again, scarcely a few hours ago, when the name of his crew had appeared on the service board :- Mission of the 3rd February 1945, and then as they carried out practical details, and then the assembly time in the tactical room to receive their final orders.

The hours preceding the night mission were always trying times; rare were those who could find sleep. The time to go into action had come as a relief to them, but after the heavy plane had taken off with its dangerous cargo of bombs, it had still been necessary to circle for ages to allow all the aircraft to integrate into the plan of action. Coming on top of the risks of night flying was the fear of enemy reactions, fire from dreaded German flak or attack by night fighters. The radio silence imposed on all made the atmosphere on board even more tense.

The plane had been flying for more than an hour when one of the engines gave signs of a fault. Could it be accidental misfiring or the forerunner of complete failure? Muscles tensed as the whole crew was alerted... For a few moments every thing returned to normal, then suddenly a new alert and all at once the voice of the flight engineer rang out: "Right engine stopped"! It was a cruel blow, making it impossible to continue in those conditions. "Inform the leader that we are leaving the formation" ! said the commander, and the pilot banked away.

The heavy four-engine plane, its speed reduced and losing altitude, was flying back towards its base when a second engine started to splutter. The gravity of the situation escaped no one on board. The orders came bursting over the intercom : "Where are we?" asked the commander. "About 250 kilometres from the coast", answered the navigator. On this inky black-night it was impossible to dump the bombs in order to lighten the aircraft without the risk of wiping out a village or an entire district of a friendly town...

"We're losing altitude!" announced the pilot.

"Prepare to jump, open the exit door!", replied the commander.

"I can no longer control the plane, we're falling!" shouted the pilot.

"Jump...Go o o".

The wind slapped their faces, a sudden jerk on the shoulders and then silence.....very quickly broken by the din of a huge explosion that had shaken the air like a tornado.

The bomb aimer of the Lancaster MC 100 had jumped first, no doubt because of his position in the cabin, and his reflexes had saved him. Three of his companions, whose parachutes had not had time to open, crashed to the ground. The last three were unable to try anything; thrown out of the aircraft, they now lay mutilated and disfigured not far from the blaze.

Breaking the deep silence that had settled came a young voice* asking in English: "Who are you?" On hearing these words the aviator brightened up a little and there began a laborious conversation. His first words were to ask where he was, then he wanted to know the fate of his mates. The news that six bodies had been found filled him with dismay. Overwhelmed, he followed those who guided him towards the corpses. He quickly identified the commander, then two other victims, but refused to continue his gruesome task. Walking with his young escort back along the village road, the survivor briefly answered the questions she asked him. "Yes, he was an Australian, a little over 20 years old, and had been a student before enlisting. He had already taken part in other war operations but couldn't say what was the target of his latest mission." Emotion, coupled with the language barrier, had him say little, so he seemed relieved when Mr. & Mrs. Quinart offered him hospitality.**

After a short, refreshing sleep he scarcely had time to pour out his feelings, for two American military policemen, alerted during the night, came to pick him up and convey him back to Charlesville. Not long afterwards a U.S. truck came and picked up the bodies of the victims, which were not all intact.

By the light of day it was an awesome sight. Around the point of impact, remnants of the plane were as though pulverised. A propeller blade remained embedded in the road embankment, but in contrast one of the engines, a huge mass, was found at the top of the "Potence" hillside, almost 600 metres away. The shock wave caused by the explosion shattered a number of window-panes in the village, knocking in barn doors and lifting off a few roofs. By a quirk of fate, even though was found as far away as Neufmaison, the farm of la Vaux Gravier on the other hand, situated 1500 metres from the disaster, suffered not a scrap of damage.

Alas, this accident was to provoke yet another, two days later. Weakened by the effect of the blast, the chancel wall in the Thin church came toppling down during mass. The officiating priest and his choirboy were killed instantly. One tragedy followed another.

* This was Ms Nelly KELLER, primary school teacher at Thin.

** A few months later, in a letter to Ms Keller, the young man told her that he was leaving with his unit for the Far East.

Ms. Keller went to Australia in 2001 following her appearance in the TV film, and stayed with Chris. An article, taken from a French magazine. It was translated by the Australian Colonel who accompanied Chris and the TV Crew to Thin-le-Moutier and acted as interpreter.