

A visit of "Ambassadors" of the War Veterans Association of Saint Rigomer des Bois to the II(AC) Squadron RAF in Marham, Norfolk

As reading the local gazette, "Le Petit Saint Rigomérois", four years ago, the whole story started. An article from the veterans association had caught my eye: it was about setting up a stele in memory of an RAF pilot whose plane had been shot by the German FLAK on 27th June 1944 in a place called "le Bas du Tertre" (Bottom of the Hill), in Saint Rigomer des Bois.

I was then far from thinking how much I would get involved in the history research... In December 2008, through an historian friend, I got precise information about that plane. I then learnt that the Mustang plane registered FR 902 in which the F/L William Anderson Black had met with death was attached to the 2nd Squadron of the RAF. After investigating on Internet¹ later on, I knew the essential of the history of the 2nd Squadron, called now II(AC)Squadron², a unit specialized in assisting the ground forces and in air photography since 1912.

A mail on the website of the squadron summing up the project of the council and of the association of Saint Rigomer did not remain without an answer for long.

What happened later on, we know, inhabitants of Saint Rigomer, all about it...

until last April...

One Tuesday noon, in the day mail, I found an envelope, bearing no special sign, but stamped in England; it contained a letter from the RAF.

The Wing Commander Tucker-Lowe wrote it.

Then, we read and read it again as it was hard to believe that we were invited to the celebration of the of the 100th anniversary to the official presentation of the "standard" of the II(AC) squadron situated in the military base of Marham (Norfolk).

As the invitation was addressed to M & Mrs, I took my wife into the adventure.

On May 11th 2012, 3 pm, we discovered the airfield of Marham, isolated in the Norfolk countryside.



After driving in the main street lined with house, a post office and a small supermarket, we arrived in front of the main entrance of the air force base, handing our invitation cards. We were then ushered in. The checking of our identity papers and car documents was a mere formality and the guardian on duty showed us the way to our "hotel"; we were then in the base with no bother.

¹ (www: wikipedia - raf.mode.uk. & twosqnassoc.co.uk)

² II(Army Cooperation) Squadron : descent 2 Squadron

We discovered a welcoming base. With the red bricks buildings with varnished wood, a few sport equipments scattered in a beautiful park, we could nearly forget we were on a military base but for the two war planes displayed each side of the main alley.

We had hardly settled in our bedroom reserved by Squadron Leader David Smith³ in charge of the organisation of the celebration, that it was about time to set for the display of the standard by the soldiers and officers of the II(AC) Squadron.

The VIPs who represented her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II, the authorities and high officers greeted one another before sitting down in the red seats in front of the show ground. We quietly walked to the seats set for the guests. We were the only French people among the military people in uniform and their families. After the military marches played by the band, came the decorations and the salute to the colours. The Wing commander Nike Tucker-Lowe, sword drawn, was congratulated by the Air Marshal The Lord Stirrup for his missions in Afghanistan and then renewed him his command. The ceremony ended by blessing of the new Standard by the RAF chaplain in chief, the Venerable Ray Pentland.



The guests gathered by affinity so were one moment alone when we saw our friends Clive and Diana Brooks⁴.

There was an official luncheon at the officers' mess presided over by Lord Stirrup. Then we will never be thankful enough to the warm welcome we had. After introduced to Wing Commander and his wife, we met Doug Reich, last veteran of the 2nd squadron, Ivor Harris and William Black's friend. We could not do without commentaries and explanations on William Black's story in our poor English but between friends there is no so such thing as a language barrier.

³ Squadron Leader David Smith represented the II(AC) Squadron during the ceremony to the memory of F/L William Black on May 9th, 2010.

⁴ Clive Brooks and his wife Diana came to St Rigomer des Bois in 2011.

We were given a seat at Major Garry Walker⁵'s table with French Capitaine Flageolet in mission for four years with the II(AC) Squadron and the crew of a Mirage 2000 who came for the purpose from the Nancy air base.

More than 300 guests sat in a huge, magnificent room, the walls of which adorned with paintings and watercolours showing plane scenes and souvenirs of 14-18 and 39-45 fights.

A band played a few jazz tunes, the atmosphere was warm and the meal generous, the dishes served with Claret then the bottle of brandy handed round the table as we drank toasts to the Queen, to France and his visitors.

The band played *God Save the Queen* and *la Marseillaise*. After that excellent meal, we ended up the evening with fireworks and a good point at the mess bar with our friends and the base commandant who speaks French. The day was long and we were tired; we thanked and greeted our hosts good night.

The Saturday morning was a free moment and captain Flageolet gave us two or three hints to visit the area. After riding about the country, we had lunch at Burnham Thorpe where Admiral Nelson was born. In spite of our quarrels, we owed him that visit. It was then time to go back to the base where an air show should take place at 2 pm.

We walked to the site to admire the row of swing-wing fighters Tornado GR4 of the II(AC) Squadron; the Mirage 2000 D from the Nancy base is in a place of honour. It is a fair, the guests walked freely around the planes and various display stalls.

The equipment of the flight logistics were displayed on a car park in front of a Tornado whose fin was adorned with a painting showing one of the first planes of the 2nd squadron of the Royal Flying Corps: a Royal Aircraft Factory biplane. And then, there was a surprise ! As side by side with a 21st century bomber, we saw the replica of that famous reconnaissance plane owned by the Squadron.



⁵ Major Garry Walker with his wife came to St Rigomer des Bois in september, 2012

We met our friends and the French pilots. Clive had set up a few tables under a tent where were displayed watercolours of the squadron fighters, which he paints and sells to the benefit of the association. There are artists among the pilots.



Presentation of a series of Clive Brooks's drawings

The show started with a few acrobatics of the Marham base patrol, followed by the flight of a Spitfire also belonging to the Squadron.



"Supermarine Spitfire 1944" 2Squadron



The air show

After this show, the pilot parked his plane on the tarmac near the Tornado, where we could, at ease, admire and touch that mythical plane.

Veteran Doug Reich, over 90 years old, wished to be at the show and Major Gary Walker organised an interview with Jill Bennet from BBC Norfolk.



*Two generations :
Major Gary Walker with Doug Reich*

Many thanks again to Capitaine Flageollet for his help with the language.

The day was ending, but another surprise still awaited us. Clive and Diana invited us to diner with their friends, former pilots of this squadron, in one of the restaurants of the area. A table was reserved in a lovely in where we spent pleasant moments and tasted the local special dishes until late in the night and we parted with regret and promised to meet again.



On Sunday morning, after visiting King's Lynn then Ely as we had to see its cathedral, we had to go back to France.

Once more, we thank all our friends for their warm welcome during the celebrations of the 100th anniversary. For two days, we had the opportunity to meet the pilots and the high officers without fuss. Their planes bear the motto "Second to none" and the coat of arms bearing the word "Hereward".



We will welcome them when they come and meditate before the stele of William Black on the Saint Rigomer square.

We hope we have shared a little of the pleasure we felt when visiting the II(A)C Squadron at Marham on 11th and 12th may 2012.⁶

Dominique Cosmao

ST Rigomer des Bois on March 5th, 2013

⁶ Thanks to Mrs Jego St Rigomer des Bois, for the translation of the text.