

TOM

A Life Saved ~ Lives Lost!

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The story of RAF Sergeant Tom Hutton's successful evasion after bailing out of his Lancaster bomber over Belgium in 1943.

by Goffinet McLaren

In the middle of the night you bail out of your stricken plane over Nazi occupied Europe. You don't know if you've landed in Germany, or somewhere else. A local farmer comes along. He does not know if you are a Nazi, posing as an Allied airman; You don't know if he is a member of the Resistance who might help you.

Later, hiding in a Resistor's safe-house, imagine your fear at the sound of Nazi jackboots marching outside the home. And feel the Resistor's fear for himself and his family that the dreaded black car will pull up to the front door and the Gestapo will step out to search for evaders.

How can you and your Resistor guide pretend to be unconcerned in a railway carriage as the silver-suited SS officers move along the aisle, checking traveler IDs, while you know that your papers are fake!



This was my father's story. Parts of the story are tragic, such as the hail of bullets that cut down one of the most famous agents in Britain's SOE, an agent who had personally helped my father escape. Parts of the story are even amusing, like the Resistor guide who dressed in a flamboyant outfit to attract the Germans' attention to himself, rather than to the two Allied evaders who were following in his wake.

Almost seventy years on, I finally learn the full story of The Village Priest who was so instrumental in my father's escape and why I am reminded of this priest every day of my life.

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The Village Priest

Tom's personal notes recounted the days following their arrival at the presbytery in Musson.

Len and I were amazed at how well informed the priest was about Nazi activities and he explained that he listened to the BBC every day. Unknown to us at the time, Georges was a very active leader in the Resistance Movement. He was also a charming person, about 35 years old, with a kind and friendly manner that belied his strength of character, his determination, and his fierce commitment to the Belgian Resistance. At the presbytery, venetian blinds covered the two large front windows with a huge "V" superimposed on each blind—"V" for victory!

Len and I were allocated accommodation in the cellar underneath the house, where living conditions were, indeed, primitive. The floors were cement and there was no light apart from two small windows, which overlooked the back garden. The windows were permanently covered over with cardboard to prevent unwanted eyes from seeing into the cellar. However, we were very grateful to have a roof over our heads and shelter from the elements.

A few days after our arrival at the presbytery, we were informed that a trusted friend, Madame Hilda Adam, planned to visit the next day. Madame Adam, we were told, also played an important role in underground activities. Upon her arrival, Len and I were delighted to learn that Hilda's parents were actually English and though she had lived in Belgium for many years, she

still maintained a Yorkshire accent. She was also perfectly fluent in French. Hilda was a little lady with black hair and big brown eyes. She was friendly, with a great British sense of humor that put Len and I totally at our ease.

Hilda, we discovered, was married to a timber merchant whose home and business was located in Virton, another small town near the Luxembourg border. Albert, her husband, was obliged to supply the Germans with timber, and German customers frequently visited the Adam's warehouse. Madame Adams did not discourage the German business, as she often gleaned valuable information about Nazi and Gestapo activities, inadvertently leaked by the clients. The information helped to keep her up to date with enemy troop movements.

Hilda brought with her a standard questionnaire to interrogate us and ensure that we were the bona fide evaders that we claimed to be. She needed to know our names, ranks and serial numbers; also our birthplace and home address and the number of the squadron to which we were attached.

Confirming the identification of aviators was not an easy task for the Resistance because some aviators felt that the questions asked were too personal and detailed; they feared that their answers might serve the German cause if information became available to the enemy. But Len and I did not have a problem answering any of the questions because we trusted our helpers implicitly.

In addition to our personal identification, our rank and our regimental number, the questions alluded to the type of airplane, the complement of the crew, the objective of our mission, and whether the mission had succeeded or not. This information was passed by radio to the Intelligence Service in London for confirmation.

Additional details on evader verification were provided by Belgian WWII researcher, Victor Schutters.

Another way to confirm that an airman was genuine was to

ask him to write something. The way the British form letters and numbers is quite different to the German style. For example, Germans cross the number 7; the British do not. The detailed investigation was essential since one mistake on the part of the Resistance would not only destroy the escape line but could lead to the torture and death for hundreds of men, women and children. Once the identification was confirmed, the production of forged identity documents could start. A photograph had to be taken to produce a false identity card, passport and a counterfeit working permit.

Tom's notes continued:

While hiding in the presbytery, Len and I saw for ourselves how courageous the members of the Resistance Movement were in their anti-Nazi activities. Each evening, three nuns from the nearby convent, Sisters Eleonor, Henri, and Bernadette arrived with food. Dressed in their full black habits, they slipped down the back street and through a hidden door at the back of the garden. Members of the Resistance would also flit through the back walled-in garden to meet in the presbytery in secret. And some of the Resistance just liked to chat with us and exchange pleasantries. We grew to enjoy the nuns and the visits of the Resistance Members as life hidden in the presbytery was monotonous. For ten days we were exposed to nothing outside the four walls of the basement except for a trip to the kitchen in the afternoons and evenings.

Yet, every day, we were reminded of the danger into which we had put our hosts with the ritual of Nazi drills which the soldiers practiced in the square opposite the presbytery. Each afternoon, we could hear the Thud! Thud! Thud! of Nazi jackboots striking the ground. It was a reverberating sound that set our nerves on fire and sent prickles down our spines. We soon grew to learn that boredom was much preferable compared to the possibility of a black car driving up to the presbytery. The terror of the Gestapo dressed in their long black coats arriving to arrest the entire household was often too much to bear. On any given

day or night, the dreaded knock could come to the door.

During our stay with the priest, we learned that Georges was born in 1905 on a farm at Namoussart, near Neufchâteau. During his youth, he yearned to become a priest, and in 1927 he set off to Bastogne Seminary in a cart, pulled by an old grey donkey, with his school case lying on a seat beside him. In 1931, Georges was ordained and he had been totally contented serving his congregation in Musson—until the Nazi occupation.

After ten long days with the priest, everything was ready for our next move. That day a short, stout man, dressed in a loud, yellowish colored checked suit arrived at the presbytery to accompany us by train from Musson to the small village of Sprimont, near Liège. It was difficult saying goodbye to l'abbé Georges. He was the sort of character whose genuine goodness really touched one's heart. We expressed our hope to meet again one day when the darned war was over and Hitler was in his rightful place. Little did we know what lay ahead!

We then walked with our guide about a half mile to the Musson railway station. We followed him through winding uphill streets, keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the checkered suit! The station in Musson was little more than a platform with an old wooden building which served as the ticket office.

The guide's flamboyant attire was designed to draw attention to him rather than us two men, and thankfully the journey to Sprimont passed without incident.

(see map on next page)

[Unknown to Tom, at this time a little boy named Pierre, who lived in Musson, walked past the presbytery every day on his way to and from his home. He was seven years old. He did not know about the resistance activities of the priest or the presence of the two aviators. But he was most intrigued with the war. "My passion during the war was to look at the sky and watch the vapors from the four-engined American bombers going to or

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returning from bombing missions in Germany," Pierre recalled some years later.]



Some steps in Tom's evasion route in Belgium

Hilda ADAM-RATCLIFFE

Virton, Belgium (1895-1981)



A visit to Hilda Adam's grave in Virton, Belgium.

Hilda ADAM lived in Virton, Belgium, a few miles from Musson. She joined the Belgian Resistance shortly after its formation and collaborated with Father Georges Goffinet as an interrogator of Allied troops who were seeking shelter. Hilda was the first person to interrogate my father and Serg. Rudkin. Hilda escaped Nazi arrest, and when I was ten years old, I met Madame Adam in Virton, Belgium.

Awards presented to Hilda Adam

- Certificate of Gratitude from the United States of America
- Certificate of Gratitude from the British Commonwealth of Nations
- Certificate of Recognition from la Croix Rouge de Belgique
- Certificate of Honour from Royaume de Belgique
- Certificate of Recognition from the Union Nationale de la Presse Clandesti
- Recognition plaque from A.C.P.G. Belgium