

Montgermont

Their aircraft crashed here, on Sunday 9th July 1944

Montgermont remembered yesterday, in its own way, the 70th anniversary of the Allied landing by paying tribute to the three airmen who died in an aircraft crash just one month later...

Photo: *Schoolchildren and the picture of the three airmen. "They were barely older than you".*

Guy Hardy was waiting to have his hair cut. **"On Sundays, a traveling hairdresser used to come to Montgermont"**. Jean Juette and Gaston Simon had gone out fishing. **"We heard the aircrafts coming, four or five of them, flying from Rennes on their way back to England"**. Then they saw **"FLAK shells aimed towards the planes and one of them was hit"**. A few seconds later, with its left wing folded back, the aircraft **"already unstable, went into a spin"**, having been shot down by a German anti-aircraft unit, based at Maison-Blanche.

It impacted **"no more than 200 meters from us...We were scared as we saw it coming towards us"** Guy Hardy continued. However, when witnesses arrived at the crash site, **"closely followed by the Germans"**, they realized that **"nothing could be done"**. Richard Armstrong, Franck Assaro and William Hill, the three American crew members, all about twenty years old, had **"died instantly"**.

"The people of Montgermont made their coffins and organized a religious funeral service" which was attended by many locals. **"They were more than a hundred beautiful floral tributes"**.

"Look at their smiles"

The bodies of the three young men were temporarily buried in the churchyard, **"before being transferred to St-James Cemetery, then repatriated to the United States after the war"** the mayor, Brigitte Le Men, stated at the Remembrance ceremony.

Schoolchildren were present. **"Look at the picture of these three airmen smiling and enjoying life"**. The ceremony was also attended by French veterans and a guard of honor from the 2nd Régiment du Matériel based at Bruz, Officials, Town councilors and the townspeople of Montgermont. More than twenty relatives, including nephews, nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces of Franck Assaro and William Hill, traveled from the States specifically for the event...

"We want to thank you for all that has been done to honor the memory of these men; we will be eternally grateful to you" one relative emotionally declared.

Madeleine Hardy, from Montgermont, was ten years old in 1944. **"I still remember the three crosses in the churchyard, and the graves covered in flowers"**.

Yesterday, at a poignant and beautiful sunlit ceremony, Jeanne-Françoise Hardy observed that everyone was **"full of gratitude to these very young men who had come to fight in a country which they did not know, and for a cause which was not their own"**.

"Yesterday, they did not know each other..."

Photo: *Full of emotion, the Americans, with hands on hearts during the National Anthem, paying their respects to the three airmen who died on 9th July 1944.*

In 1994, the fiftieth anniversary of the Liberation, **“we missed the opportunity to do something”** some voices expressed regretfully. This was rectified ten years later in 2004 when a stele was erected on the crash site behind the Duchesse Anne complex. **“Townspeople had remembered that day”**. Witnesses had been rounded up but **“no steps were taken to trace the bereaved families”** according to Christine Hardy-Paré and Marianne Pichot, who were town councilors at that time.

Later on, relevant documents were discovered, **“we contacted the American Archives but without success”**. Then Michel Guy, from Montgermont, introduced the two women to a family carrying out similar research. On this occasion results were forthcoming. In 2005, the three families were located: in New Jersey, Illinois and California. **“The Internet proved to be a great help”** Christine Hardy-Paré admits with a smile.

Communications were initiated, to which two of the families responded. In turn, they traveled to Montgermont in 2006 and 2007 and some local people paid return visits. **“We met again in Paris and even, by chance, in Rome”**. Friendships were established and strengthened over time. However, it was only last Thursday evening, in Montgermont, that the Assaro and Hill families got to know each other, **“they had never met before”**.

A significant number of them traveled for this ceremony, including more than twenty nephews and nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces.