

When people think of France during war time most think trenches during WWI, the landing beaches, large scale bombing raids by both the allies and Germany, ground battles and the occupation under Nazi rule. However, very few think those who, on the face of it led relatively normal lives but behind closed doors led a very secret, dangerous life. I am of course referring to members of De Gaulle's resistance groups.

One such hero is Magdelaine Huguette Verhague (née Lambert in Nevers in 1901). Known to all as Huguette she lived in relative comfort from birth until 1940 in the grounds of the Abbaye de Mortemer close to the village of Lisors in the heart of the forest of Lyons, Eure. During the great war of 1914-1918 Huguette became accustomed to being surrounded by the British army as it is believed there was possibly a prisoner of war camp in the grounds. During the later part of the war she struck up a friendship with a Scotsman James Richard Siage Sutherland also known as 'Duke' by mademoiselle Lambert. Between the two of them a friendship grew until his death in 1950. In 1945 Huguette wrote an incredible 16 page letter to her Duke which is now being kept in the archives in Inverness. This remarkable letter all written in almost perfect English gives the reader a detailed view of how life was like for her and the people who lived in this area in the shadow of the Swastika.

Very little is known about Huguette's clandestine life, in fact, no one outside the local resistance group the Cofrerie de Notre Dame knew of her secretive life until, **in 1949 102 squadron member Reginald Joyce, an airman that she had been hiding during the battle of Normandy returned to Lyons-La-Foret after four years of living in his beloved England to marry a young local girl Janine Colzy, who, on June 29th 1944 sat on the rooftop of her father's shop watching a Handley Paige Halifax fall out of the sky without realizing that her future husband was on board. To this day, I feel there is still a lot of Huguette's history that remains a mystery.**

In 1940 the Lambert family decided to sell the Abbaye de Mortemer and live in a small bungalow approximately 20 metres long by 5 metres wide situated on the outskirts of the Abbaye grounds. The house had a small henhouse with an attic.

It is known that in June 1940 Huguette was involved in helping a young British foot soldier Harry Surridge escape from the clutches of the German army. From 1940 to 1944 Huguette's life is shrouded in a veil of mystery. But then on June 9th 1940 a young British airman Phillip Hemmens from 49 squadron survived the dreadful crash of his 49 squadron Lancaster which killed all but one. Phillip became Huguette's first 'Bluebirds' to be brought to her for help. Later that month Huguette received American airman Theodore Baskette of the 457th Bomber group whose B17 was shot down near Fleury La Foret about 6 kilometers away from her house. Theodore and Phillip were then joined by another Bluebird Canadian born pilot Hugh Nixon. All three men were hidden in the attic of Huguette's family hen house, Hugh and Theodore then left to join the comet escape line. Phillip who was severely injured during the crash stayed with Huguette and was later **joined by 102 squadron airmen Reginald Joyce, Douglas Eagle, Ron Leverington and Don Lesley, all four were crewmates.**

During the time that she hid Ron, Don, Reginald and Douglas she states in her letter to her friend Duke that she was raided at least once by the SS under suspicion of harboring enemy airmen but due to her cunning wit and bravery her beloved airmen were never caught. A clever Alarm device was set up by Huguette with the help of her 'Bluebirds'. In her garden she had a washing line erected, the line went from a free standing pole to the wall of the henhouse, up the wall and through a hole into the attic and down again; At the end of the line in was a small tin with stones inside and every time Huguette saw the enemy approach she would hang washing causing the tin to rattle and if need be the men could escape through a hole in the wall of the attic that led out to the forest. Another clever idea that she had was that although the locals were asked by the enemy to keep their gates opened at all times she closed hers and if questioned she would say to the German officer that she was worried about being raided by the allies. She also had ten members of the Wehrmacht sleeping in her house whilst the Reginald and others were in her hen house.

Her bluebirds were later picked up by a red cross ambulance in her absence, the driver claimed to be a resister, he later confessed to be an agent working for the Gestapo. The men were handed to Gestapo headquarters on Avenue Foch, in Paris. They were later sent to

Buchenwald Concentration camp for execution only to be saved by orders believed to be given by Hermann Goring commanding officer of the Luftwaffe stating that all allied airmen held in Buchenwald were to be handed over, they were then marched to Stalag Luft III, they were later liberated by the Russians, then handed to the American forces. **All four 102 airmen survived, Phillip Hemmens died of Septicemia due too his wounds not being properly treated whilst he was in captivity.**

Upon speaking to locals who knew her I was told that on one occasion she was speaking to a German soldier who stood with their back to her front door and behind the front door stood one of her airmen, who it was, I still don't know. I have also been told on several occasions that when she heard that a plane had crashed during the day she believe it to be American and she would walk through the village singing 'Yanky Doodle Dandy' and if the plane crashed during the night she would sing 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', this was done to signal to anyone who knew what she was doing to bring out their airmen for her to take away.

Just after her Bluebirds left there was a failed attempt to overthrow a German unit based about half a kilometer away by local resistants, some were caught, had their feet boiled, their arms broken and were then shot approximately 100 meters awa from Huguette's house. At the time she was hiding one of the resistants that managed to get away.

In recent years I have had the honour of speaking to Ron Leverington and Don Lesley just before they passed away and the daughter of Reginald Joyce. All have nothing but fond memories of this incredible woman. Ron Leverington told me that whe his daughter was born she was to bare the name Huguette as her middle name as a mark of respect for what madame Verhague did.

After the war Huguette's bravery was recognised by Bomber Command and although I do not know if she was given a medal I have seen a copy of a citation given to her from the British government in honour of what she had done.

Huguette died in November 1961 penniless and blind.

In 1949 the Comité Du Souvenir de Mortemer was created, an organisation that I am proud to say I am a member of. Our aim is to keep the memories of what she did alive and to honour those resistants that were so brutally murdered not far from her house alive by way of an annual ceremony held on the first Sunday of September. During this ceremony we also honour the deported. **This year we were honoured to have Harry Bartlett, 102 squadron Association secretary**, David Bean chairman of the Royal British Legion Paris office attend our ceremony as well as the daughter of Reginald Joyce and the daughter of 49 squadron member Hillary Daniel Clark who was one of Phillip Hemmen's crewmates.

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