

SPEECH Regis Doucy – Cercle du Souvenir – Bachy

Inauguration of the Walk: In Monique's Footsteps

Madame Henriette Hanotte,
Families of American & British Airmen,
The Mayor, The Burgomaster of Rumes, The Mayors of
Ladies & Gentlemen - Elected Members of the Council
Vice Presidents of the Communes of Pévèle Carembaut
The Director of the Tournai Development & Intercommunal Agency
The President of Ligne Comète Line - Remembrance Association
The Presidents of Veterans Associations
Ladies & Gentlemen - Friends

Dear Henriette Hanotte, we come to inaugurate this Trans-frontier walk which we have named: "In Monique's footsteps" - and which you declared open by cutting the ribbon in the colours of our two countries.

This walk, you made many, many times between Rumes & Bachy. Although living in Rumes, you attended the Girls Primary School here, in Bachy. At that time, children went to school on foot or by bicycle, often using short-cuts.

Your best friend at that time was Marie Houdart, whose parents were also active in the Resistance, and played an important role for you during the war. You were as much Bachy-oise as Rume-oise!

Afterwards you continued your secondary studies at the School of Notre Dame in Tournai, but that did not prevent you following violin lessons with Mr Narguet, Professor of Music in Bachy. So you were just as well known in Bachy as in Rumes, riding around on your bicycle with a violin case on the back. The Customs Men were quite used to seeing you crossing & re-crossing the frontier....

Then came 1939. You were 19 years old. British troops were stationed in Bachy. War was declared. Pillboxes, an anti-tank trench and barbed-wire barricades were erected along the frontier, now closed. King George VI visited the troops on December 6, 1939 and you watched his revue of the infantry troops.

Your parents managed a Customs Agency in the hotel facing Rumes Railway Station - both fierce patriots. Your father, courageous veteran of the 1914-18 War was staunchly supported by your brave mother. You & your brother George were raised to love Country, the Fatherland, and with a sense of honour and duty. Your parents often invited British soldiers to share meals with you - the soldiers always maintained excellent contact with the civilian population.

On May 10, 1940, the Wehrmacht invaded neutral Belgium, and French & British Infantries were ordered to support the Belgian Army. These were eighteen fatal days for our country. More than 300,000 French & British soldiers were evacuated from the Beaches of Duinkerck, back across the Channel to Britain.

On May 23, 1940, two British soldiers, previously stationed in Bachy, returned from the Belgian front and refusing to become prisoners, asked your parents to escort them to Lille so they could return to Britain. And it was you, Henriette, who took on the responsibility for this mission! That was the beginning of your Resistance to the Enemy...

The children of Bachy School want to sing the song of the partisans for you & your parents, and take you back 75 years to your time with Margot, who embraces you

Paris fell to the German Army on June 14, 1940.

In 1941, The Comet Evasion Line was created in Brussels by Andrée De Jongh. This Evasion Line hid evading airmen trapped in occupied territory, escorting them across the French-Belgian border and the two Lines of Demarcation, across the Pyrenees to Gibraltar, & finally the UK. This is how a British officer came to the Hanotte family one day and asked their help escorting Allied airmen, trapped in Belgium, to cross the border to Lille & Paris - an act punishable by death. Your mission as a secret agent and guide began. Your first Code Name was Marie - then Monique.

In total, you escorted 145 airmen: 50 from Bachy, 45 from Hertain and 40 from Mons - with all the difficulties this dangerous work involved.

I imagine dawn: your preparations for departure, a British or American airman, not much older than you, dressed in borrowed work clothes, your mother making sure you do not forget everybody's false identity papers, work permits, and sandwiches wrapped in butter paper. And finally, your grandmother's last words: "Be careful, and come home quickly!"

You leave Rumes, first following the railway line towards Bachy, then criss-crossed fields, passing close to Louis Lecocq's farm, before crossing the frontier undetected, as Custom's Agents, Albéric Houdart & Maurice Bricout, always warned you about their movements in advance.

When you arrive on the main Bachy road, at "Petit Canard", you catch the bus, always full to bursting with workmen travelling to Lille. I imagine their curiosity about your male companion: "Another one!". At Lille Station, you have to avoid German patrols, buy separate tickets from different counters, to avoid suspicion that you are travelling together, in the event of arrest. You buy a copy of the pro-German newspaper: "Signal", so the airman can hide his face on the train, and pretend to be asleep during any alarming situations.

On the station platform, German soldiers & train Controllers are waiting to check all passengers. Now you have to find a compartment where you place your airman next to the window, as far away from the door as possible. Trains were always crowded, especially in 3rd class, and corridors full of people & baggage.

And of course a train journey could last for many hours. Passenger controls were systematic at Amiens, passengers required to show ID cards and work permits, as well as train tickets - not only to the Controller, but also to the German soldier accompanying him. This was a dangerous time, and extreme care & preparation was always taken to ensure everybody knew what they had to do. Sometimes the train remained stationary for many hours, increasing tension: would there be a stricter control, or perhaps the train was delayed to allow a military convoy to pass?

Upon arrival at the North Station in Paris, great discretion was needed to pass your "parcel" to the next guide, who continued the journey onto Spain.

Then, you returned home, sometimes carrying documents from British Secret Services, to take to the senior agent in Brussels. Usually, your father left your bicycle in Bachy so you could quickly return home, where everybody was anxiously waiting for you.

This is just a quick description of your work - just a sketch of your valuable work as a Comet Line guide. Your work ended in 1944, on the orders of the British Services, following your denunciation by the traitor and collaborator Dezitter. You were saved by a stroke of luck: a very late train, impatient Germans left the station, not wanting to wait, the non-arrival of the next guide - and the arrest of the Parisian agents. In September 1944, you reached Britain using the same route as your airmen, including a tiring 8-hour trek across the Spanish mountains.

So, to symbolize crossing the frontier with your airmen, I asked Jacques Vanbutsèle to make an drawing, which he will present to you now.

Renowned Colombophile, M Jean Baert, will also release a pigeon in your honour, and in homage of the Allied Airmen who fought for our liberty.

Before handing over to Mme Brigitte D'Oultremont, President of the Comet Line Remembrance Association, I would like to thank the following people for their involvement in this project: Philippe Delcourt, Mayor of Bachy; Michel Casterman, Burgomaster of Rumes; Nicolas Plouvier, Director of the Tournai Intercommunale & Development Agency; and Valerie Granjean - responsible for the walk; Amélie Leclerc, Louis Lecocq, Jacki Naud, Bernard Leclerc, Edouard Renière, Henri Werbrouck, Jacques Vanbutsèle - and all the members of the Remembrance Circle; the musicians of the Royal Fanfare of Rumes, as well as Municipal Harmonie of Mouchin; the members of the Military Transport Association: "Hell on Wheels" from Taintignies, and, all those who helped, from near & far, to make this day of memories & gratitude, a great success.

I thank you for your attention.
