

FOREWORD

From the banks of the Somme to the banks of the Seine in June 1940 there were a lot of dead soldiers in fields and ditches, woods and orchards, in houses and cafés, bourgeois villas, terraced houses, chateaux, farmhouses and barns – some burned out shells others untouched apart from the desecration of violent death. Many men were buried within moments of their death by comrades who shovelled the earth over them and stuck a marker, an upright rifle or a slab of wood, to indicate that this man should be properly buried later; when somebody has the time. Others lay where they fell with nobody left to bury them.

Some of these men were later reburied with proper and due ceremony; many still provide a surprise to people strolling in the woods or ploughing a field when a skull shows up like a large pebble or a finger bone shows in the grass. In the fields and hedgerows on Normandy lanes stone crosses mark the spot where some were buried, many now covered with moss and no longer legible, others still have bunches of flowers, which turn brown over time, placed regularly in commemoration.

Eight men died in Criquebeuf-sur-Seine, like thousands of others from the 4th of June to the 17th in that final onslaught before the French surrendered. Except that five of these men need not have died. The graves of all these men who died in Criquebeuf stood side by side in the village cemetery in 1947. In the archives of the Mairie of Criquebeuf-sur-Seine was a bundle of what had been paper but was now no more than a small, brown, earth-stained tablet with all the pages stuck firmly together. Only the top page, written in pencil, was legible, it read:

“My dear wife

I am writing this to you but I don't know where I can post it. We have

been cut off from our lot for four days now. Don't worry about me though, I have got plenty of fags and we have got food from the abandoned shops and houses. I put down snares and catch rabbits..."

This letter, which has been lost from the archives in the years since then, turned out to have been the last written by Harry Polson to his wife Emily.

The letter from a British soldier, then unknown to me, haunted me over the years then, forty years later, chance brought me back to Rouen and the village of Criquebeuf-sur-Seine in June almost on the anniversary of their death and I found that the graves had been transferred to military cemeteries.

In the cemetery of Saint Sever in Rouen the three British men, Val Thomas, Jack Speight and Harry Polson, rest next to one another, the dates on their gravestones are wrong – implausible if not impossible. Killed between the 2nd and the 7th of June when the Germans were 100 kilometres away. The three French soldiers and the Senegalese soldier are now buried next to one another in the French Military Cemetery in Fleury-les-Aubrys. The dates on their graves are even more bizarre than those on the graves of the British. Robert Lacoche – 16th June, Sékou Diouf – 22nd June. Pierre Prunier? His grave is the family vault under sunnier skies in Saint Laurent-sur-Saone. He was awarded the Military Medal and the Croix de Guerre for his part in the action. The date on the document of the awards is correct – the 13th June 1940. The other correct date is that of Roger Breton from Rouen, forty-four years old and a saddler by trade called up into an army supply company. Roger had been stationed in Pont-de-l'Arche until the 9th when the fighting started. He was badly wounded in the withdrawal from that town and died on the retreat, buried by his comrades on the crossroads of Criquebeuf he was the only one to die and be buried on that day. The other bodies lay uncovered on the ground for three months before they were buried. Why?

On the 9th of June 1940 nobody, apart from Roger Breton, died in Criquebeuf; not even peacefully in bed. Lots of soldiers passed through the village moving westward in lorries and on foot. For four days five men, three British, one French and a Senegalese, could have

walked to the west where they would have caught up with the other retreating regiments. Plenty of other men did. They, or fate, chose that they stay.

Why, when they had received the order to retreat did they choose to stay? Is there any clue in the lives of the men, from childhood to adult, which might explain their common end? What is attempted here is to bring meaning to the lives and deaths of very ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances.

When I started I did not intend to write more than a short description of how the bodies were found and buried. As I wrote I came across more and more witnesses and people interested in finding out the details of this insignificant battle and the men who took part and died. With the help of these people I found that I was piecing together the last hours and minutes of their lives with amazing accuracy as to times and places. One of the most significant finds was the war diary of the German unit which overcame the men and paid tribute to their fierce resistance.

A small team of researchers came into being who continually provided me with the fruits of their searches into the archives of the French military and vague hypotheses became confirmed as fact. Over the years I have tracked down all the families of the men and I have used all the facts in various archives and memories from those who knew them. The war diaries of the regiments and companies, English, French and German have been compared, together with personal notes and reminiscences of soldiers from all the nations who were present at that time.

Of all the men who were listed in the archives of the Mairie of Criquebeuf only the families of Roger Breton and the unknown soldier who was charged with blowing the bridge have proved impossible to trace.