

Translation from French of an extract from M Coilliot's book

The night of the 11th-12th April 1944

Achiet-le-Petit

The loss of an English bomber

Returning from a raid on the rail yards at Aulnoye, the Lancaster heavy bomber BE-LL836 from 550 Squadron of the RAF, based at North Killingholme, passed at low altitude over the village of Achiet-le Petit, and exploded on hitting the ground near Logeast Wood (about 2.5 Kms from the village).

Several shattered fragments of the plane were strewn over the fields. Countless pieces of debris were scattered over an area of more than 200 m around the site. Found amongst them were the bodies of the 7 crew members. All were killed. 3 bodies seemed to be intact, 3 were reduced to ashes, the last was crushed in a field of lucerne, his body driven 30 cms into the ground. The debris was still burning when the villagers arrived. Some German soldiers prevented the curious from approaching. During this time, the mayor received a visit from some German officers, who ordered him to have a pit dug, to bury the 7 airmen as quickly as possible. M Valle, astonished by the haste the officers were demanding, refused to proceed on such terms: coffins were needed. After long drawn out discussions, the officers accepted his proposal and on their departure the mayor ordered the 7 coffins from the Military Burials Service in Arras. There was nothing left to do but await their delivery.

Shortly afterwards, the 7 bodies were taken back to the village and laid in the little community offices (known in the village as the Police Station or Fire Office). Volunteers laid them out on sacks and canvas on the ground. On the arrival of the very basic crates, the remains were placed in them. The door of the office was closed. They had to wait.

The following day, Wednesday 13th April, a farm trailer was taken to this makeshift mortuary, the coffins were loaded on to it and carried to the parish church for the funeral service, conducted by the priest of Bihucourt.

Set down in the choir, these airmen received the funeral they deserved. A considerable congregation took part, and even 3 German NCOs and soldiers were seen there. At the end of the ceremony, the coffins were reloaded on to the trailer and drawn away to the village cemetery by 2 horses.

No speeches, no outward show of excessive patriotism, were to be seen. It was simply a group of people gathered together to lay to rest 7 boys, full of life, who happened to die in this village.