

James Stellin (aged 22) was posted 'missing in action' on 19 August 1944. His parents subsequently heard through the International Red Cross that he had been killed and was buried in France. More than a year later his parents received this letter from C. Jacobs, who was active in the local Resistance.

30th March, 1946.

Sir

The Mayor of Saint Maclou- la-Briere, who was absent from the district the day of the terrible catastrophe which cost the life of your brave son, has been kind enough to forward the letter written to him by the Minister of France in NZ, enclosing a translation of your own letter, and requesting me to give you details of the information you seek. It is with a Frenchman's heart and as a great friend of our good allies that I have accepted this pious mission.

May I be allowed to say first that I deeply regret the delay in replying to you, knowing with what impatience you await the desired information. The delay was due to the fact that the letters were addressed to another village called St Maclou in the department of Eure. The following is an accurate account of the tragic facts:-

It was a great sorrow, that sunny morning of Saturday, 19th August, 1944, for everyone in our small village of 370 inhabitants and for the people of the surrounding hamlets to be present, helpless, at the superhuman efforts of your dear son, to prevent his plane which was in difficulties from crashing on the main group of buildings in the village. It was 10 o'clock in the morning when the sounds of an aircraft in difficulties first made us look up. The plane was about 1500 to 2000 feet up, and rapidly losing height. Suddenly, on realising the great destruction his plane would cause if it were to crash in the centre of the village, the pilot straightened up his plane with a vigorous and supreme effort, made a half-climb, then turning sharp left at an acute angle, it fell rapidly, crashing less than a mile away. Your brave son tried to use his parachute when the plane was too low, and he got caught up in the draught caused by the fall of the plane, so that his parachute failed to open out. He crashed into an apple tree and death was instantaneous. After standing there petrified with anguish during the rapid drama while in our hearts we were making fervent prayers that your son might be saved, with one impulse and despite the presence of the hated hun, and more particularly because of their presence, we hurried to the scene of the crash to render assistance to the airman, if that were possible, and snatch him from our enemies. But they got there just as quickly as well. Whereupon I led them off in another direction to give those who managed to get there first, amongst them was my son, a member of the underground resistance movement of our dear France – to remove the personal belongings of the pilot and establish his identity so that we could send these things to his family as soon as possible.

When I arrived on the scene with the Germans, the body which was lying on the ground was searched by these soldiers, who did not think it was necessary to uncover before the mortal remains of your son, who had just died the death of a hero on the Field of Honour. Our indignation reached its peak when the German officer dared to desecrate your son by turning his body over with his foot. We had to clutch our hands tightly not to shout out our scorn for those wretches, who took away the dinghy, the parachute and his identification papers on which I was able to read quickly and from behind them, and then jot down the following details:-

STELLIN, James Kingston, born 5/7/22, N.Z. 421785, F/S, E.R.

Together with the identification marks from the plane, my son and I were able to communicate with England immediately the loss of this valiant pilot and his plane.

Your son had three photos on him, and I was able to obtain one, which I had framed in the cross over his grave. Unfortunately, at present the dampness has got in behind the protecting glass and

has completely ruined the photo. When I asked the Germans what should be done with the body, they answered: "Do whatever you like with it." These were the words we had been waiting for anxiously. We wrapped your son up at once in a fine new sheet offered by the wife of the Mayor, and we moved him into the hall in the Mayor's office, where his pockets were examined very thoroughly, and an inventory of the various objects found was made by the Red Cross who were notified immediately. This inventory is kept at the Mayor's office. According to it, a gold signet ring with the initials J.S., a red silk square, and a tie-pin bearing the same initials were found. These various objects were handed over to the local president of the Red Cross (Madame de Chastenet), who forwarded them on to the Headquarters at Paris. When these formalities were over, the body of your son was draped with the big flag of our commune and covered with flowers. As a mother would have done, Madame Jacobs watched beside the body of your son during the afternoon, while I made preparation for the obsequies, and a collection was organised spontaneously in the village and surroundings. I ordered an oak coffin from our village wheelwright. He did the very best he could. At nine in the evening, my wife and I and a few village people were present when he was placed in the coffin. We wanted specially to assist in this ceremony to take the place of the mother and father, so far away, and ignorant for many months yet to come of the extent of this great misfortune. With all the fervour and understanding of our souls, our thoughts were with you, the poor sad parents, at this heart-breaking moment. Across the seas and continents since then we have never ceased thinking of your hearts, broken by so cruel and great a separation.

With him, in the coffin, we placed his pilot's equipment and the remains of his parachute.

All night long a guard of honour was kept up to watch over your dear James. Each one wanted to take part in paying homage to your hero, the victim of his duty and self-sacrifice.

Early next morning we placed the bier in state at the doors of the Mayor's office. The entire population, as well as a number of people from the surrounding countryside, and all our children filed past to bless this airman whom the whole commune had just adopted as their own. Everyone brought armfuls of flowers picked lovingly in the gardens, and left them with deep respect and infinite gratitude.

At 8 a.m., headed by the flag of the Ex-Servicemen's Association (although the Germans had forbidden the display of our national colours), the touching cortege, preceded by the Catholic clergy, moved on towards the Church. The French flag also covered the body of the one who had become dear to us all; the pall-bearers were Ex-Servicemen, who also formed a guard of honour; the civil authorities came next, followed by the local President of the Red Cross with the members of the Society, children from the schools, and then the entire population of the village and neighbouring countryside (about 1,200 in all).

Before reaching the church, which is surrounded by the cemetery, and thinking of you, I stopped the procession a moment to take the few photos which were forwarded to you earlier through Mr Dearing. In our ignorance as to your dear son's religion, and on the other hand wishing to pay full honour, we arranged to give him the finest funeral service in the Catholic religion. Please forgive us if we have committed any mistake, dear Sir and Madam, and remember only the purity of our intentions. In an atmosphere of devout attention and sorrowful tenderness your son was then buried in a place of honour in our small cemetery. Sir and dear Madam, you may rest assured that the sorrow of all was great and sincere. All day long very many people came to bow down before this grave which was opened up so prematurely. One of his brothers in arms, an American airman picked up and hidden by French people, came to the funeral of your dear son as a civilian.

Following a design of my son, I had a wooden cross and fence made, which I painted with your national colours, as shown in the attached sketch. Owing to the danger of reprisals, I had to get a farmer to hide it, but as soon as the first liberators – British soldiers – arrived, we brought it out of hiding and erected it. Since the first day of liberation I have invited many soldiers from the British

Army and from the Dominions, and American servicemen who pass through the village, to come and salute their comrade, whose grave is and ever will be our constant care.

The 19th August, 1945, we celebrated a memorial service, and we propose renewing it each year, if this is acceptable to you.

Do not thank us, Sir, for what has been done; we have only fulfilled our duty as Frenchmen. It is for us to express our gratitude for having brought into the world a son with so fine and virile a soul, and such stoic courage. For he saved us, and we shall bless him forever – him, his family and his beloved country. The hospitable land of France to which you agree to confide him, will be honoured forever, and keep him close to its bosom, like a Mother. The thoughts of the entire population of Saint Maclou-La-Briere are with you in your great trouble. The people go down on their knees to thank you for the great honour you have done them by enlarging the family circle, since you have kindly allowed us to keep that which you value most in the world.

You will receive a very warm welcome when you decide to undertake the pious journey you contemplate.

Kindly accept, Sir, my deepest sympathy.

Yours sincerely,

C. JACOBS

(signature)