

## **Our visit - To the grave of Arthur 'Reg' Brown, at Venray War Cemetery**

**19<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

Stephen & Janet Roke

I had long wanted to visit the gravestone of Arthur 'Reg' Brown in Venray. Reg lost his life along with the Dodds' crew in PD319 on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1944, whilst making their run at bombing the steelworks at Duisburg, as part of Operation Hurricane.

I wrote a short book about Reg's relationship with my Mum, which I have donated to the 550 Squadron Museum, and this trip was to complete my research, as something I just had to do.

So on a beautiful sunny morning in April, my wife Janet and I met up with Theo Vervoort at our hotel for a coffee and a chat, before moving onto the Cemetery. Theo is not only the custodian of Reg's gravestone, but a historian who has painstakingly searched for information on all the gravestone names in the Venray Cemetery. Who would have thought there would be names of Black, White and Brown on a single crew list!

The day we attended the Cemetery did nothing aesthetically for the place, as the trees had been cut back, the grass removed, and all the flower beds removed as well. We had been told by Theo earlier that this would be the case, as we have been in email contact for several months. We stood on flat tilled soil, with our wellies in the car if it rained. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission was working to re-grass the whole cemetery and replace all the flower beds in time for the summer. Just to be there was very moving, talking to the lovely people who have given up their time, not only to meet us that morning, but to look after the graves as an ongoing dedication to the servicemen's memories.

On the day of our visit, three adopters of the PD319 crew graves gave up their morning to come and meet us at the Cemetery. It was a humbling experience. One adopter, Diede, is only thirteen years old and her school had given her permission to attend our small gathering. The school also have adopted a grave in the Cemetery.

'The local Dutch people are ensuring that their names are not forgotten'.

The Foundation for the Adoption of the War Graves, and what it does, is detailed from its own website.

On the outskirts of Venray, in a beautiful green environment, you will find the Commonwealth Military Cemetery of Honour, officially called "CWGC Venray War Cemetery", managed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

This Military Cemetery has a total of 692 soldiers and 1 civilian. They died between September 1944 and June 1945.

Most of the soldiers buried in Venray died during the Liberation Campaigns in Central and North Limburg, including many casualties of the battles near Overloon and Venray. Crew members of Allied planes that had crashed in the region also found their final resting place at Venray. After the Liberation, the

Allies continued their advance into Germany and soldiers who died there were regularly buried in Venray.

The soldiers came mainly from the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, but also one from Poland. The only citizen in the Cemetery was a British war correspondent from the Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser. Of the 693 graves, 30 belong to unidentified servicemen.

It was customary at the time to bury fallen soldiers and airmen in a field grave in the immediate vicinity of the place where they had died. This could be in an orchard, in the garden of a house, along the roadside or in people's yards. Sometimes, this happened with larger numbers in a temporary burial field. For example, in the centres of Kronenberg and in Helden, there were small burial fields. There was also a temporary British burial field on the borders of Maasbree and Baarlo, just to mention two villages at random. Incidentally, such small burial fields were found throughout Central and North Limburg.

After the war, the casualties were transferred from the temporary cemeteries and field graves in the region to "CWGC Venray War Cemetery". The United States did not want to leave their soldiers in 'enemy' German ground, so they were collected and transferred from Germany to Margraten and Henri Chapelle in Belgium amongst others. British soldiers who were killed in Germany were initially buried in the American cemetery in Margraten, but were later transferred to CWGC Venray War Cemetery, and others.

The aim of the Foundation for the Adoption of War Graves, set up in May 2020 by Mr Piet Snellen, is that soldiers buried in Venray continue to be commemorated and honoured, and that their graves continue to be visited and cared for, even now 75 years after the end of the Second World War, and into the future. Sadly Piet passed away in 2021, but the Foundation goes from strength to strength with all the 693 graves adopted by local people.

"As long as their names are spoken, or read, they will not be forgotten. We will remember them".

Having met some of these lovely people I was heartened to think that human nature is so powerful when directed in the proper way and service personnel must know they will be treated with great respect after the event where they lost their life and become part of the world history, we all learn about, and therefore not forgotten.

Though we were only visiting the gravestones of Reg Brown and the Dodds' crew of PD319, we left our wreath in safe keeping for all the fallen 550 Squadron, which will be placed on the cross when the Cemetery opens again.

Arno & Mariska Gommans look after the grave of F/O Henry Black – Bomb Aimer



Erwin Lups looks after the grave of Sgt Harold Lewis – Mid Upper Gunner



Theo van den Hoogen and his thirteen-year-old granddaughter Diede look after the grave of Sgt Albert Laidlaw – Rear Gunner



Theo Vervoort and his daughter Lieke look after the grave of P/O Arthur Reginald Brown – Flight Engineer



Those who were not able to come to meet us, look after the following:

**Sander Dijkink** looks after the grave of F/O Henry Dodds – Pilot

**Jose and Chrit van de Enkevort** look after the grave of F/Sgt Clarence Walter Beckingham (RAAF) – Wireless Operator

**Scot Mathieson** looks after the grave of F/O Douglas John Kenneth White – Navigator



CWGC Venray War Cemetery ... undergoing some work





Stephen and Janet Roke

