

Copied from 'The Baccy Shop' by Yvonne  
Nicholson.

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Our visit to Elancourt and Viroflay, FRANCE. 10 to 14th June 1994.

June 10 1994 was the 50th Anniversary of the fatal air crash in France when Pilot Officer Ronald Laing Nicholson lost his life, just four days after D-Day. Doug, his only brother, felt he must be there on that date. When we, Doug and I, finished our tour to Europe, in Paris on Friday 10th of June 1994 to travel to Versailles, then to Elancourt, it was the start of a wonderful experience. Before we left for overseas, I had made contact with the Mayors of Viroflay and Elancourt in an endeavour to find out where the crash had occurred and the crew buried. This led to an invitation to visit them both and an offer by the interpreter, and the Secretary to the Mayor of Viroflay to book accommodation for us. The secretary to the Mayor of Ellancourt sent us maps of the area and a copy of Ron's death certificate in French. We were most grateful for this as nothing was available to us in Australia. In Paris we boarded a train to Versailles. On arrival we made our way to the Hotel Paris, then we had to find the bus to take us to Elancourt, about a one hour trip from Versailles. We needed direction, but there was no Bus Terminal as we know it, and no French in our vocabulary, so we approached a young woman for help. She spoke some English and wrote some directions on a small piece of paper for us, the first line to show to the bus driver and the second line to the next. By this time it was getting late in the day. We eventually arrived at the Elancourt Parish Church, a very old Church in the Elancourt Village. A modern Elancourt has been built since the War. We recognised the wall around the Church yard, and the narrow road leading to the Church from some old photographs we had with us. The Church and Church-yard were locked so we approached a lady who was in her yard opposite and indicated that we wished to enter. We had with us a photograph of Ron and his Crew, a 1945 photograph of their grave in the Church-yard and a letter from the Elancourt City Council. The lady could not speak English but she understood us and was able to obtain a key to the Church and Church-yard. Doug spent quite a while on his own in the Church and at the Altar from which Ron and his crew had been buried. It was an emotional time for him. We then went into the grave-yard, which adjoins the Church, and spent quite some time there working out just where the grave would have been- it had been moved to Viroflay in 1952. After lining up the spires of the Crypt according to the photo, we decided where it would have been. At that moment from behind us, a large dark air-craft flew over the Church very low, and moved slowly off into the dusk, dipping its wing as it went. It was an eerie experience we shall never forget. May-be we do not know it all. I think that was one of the hardest days Doug had ever

experienced, but perhaps the most satisfying. We finally made our way back to Versailles arriving about 8p.m. By then we needed to find somewhere to eat and would you believe, in France we ate at McDonalds. The next day, Saturday, we had an audience with the Mayor of Viroflay. We travelled there by train and walked to the impressive Town Hall, to be met by Madame Gabrielle the secretary and interpreter to the Mayor of Viroflay. We were received by the Mayor who spoke of their thanks to the Australians and other Airmen, who delivered them from evil, and thanked in particular Ronald Nicholson from Australia. He presented Doug with an inscribed book on the history of Viroflay, a plaque, and then made him an honorary citizen of Viroflay. We were entertained as guests of the City of Viroflay by Gabrielle and Mr and Mrs Derek Harmen, an English couple who lived in Viroflay.

To Mr and Mrs Nicholson ;;

Australian citizens- Our friendship and our gratitude to their brother Ronald Nicholson, fallen on 10th June 1944 in our region. Hero of our liberty and deliverance, he rests for eternity in the earth of Viroflay, where we will always render honors to him as well as to his companions in remembrance and respect. Thanks to Australia and long live freedom.

Gerard Claus Marlin, Mayor of Viroflay.

After the meal we all walked to the Viroflay Communal Cemetery. We found the graves in a special section of the Cemetery, very well cared for by the War Graves Commission. Ron and his six crew members were buried side by side, their graves marked separately by a white tombstone, and set in flower beds. There are 69 airmen, including 40 from the U.K. 15 Canadians, 16 Australians and three from N.Z. buried there, also five Army persons from the U.K. The Cemetery is situated amongst large leafy trees- a very peaceful setting. We spent quite some time there, and were then taken back to the home of Mr. and Mrs Harmen for afternoon tea. Later they drove us to areas of the Palace of Versailles, to the home of Marie Antoinette and to places tourists do not always see. On Sunday we left the Hotel before 7.30 a.m. to catch the only bus that would take us to Elancourt Village, to attend the service at the austere old Church. The first bus took us part of our way. We crossed the road to catch the 2nd bus, only to find after waiting some considerable time, that there was not one. A young woman told us we would have to go to the railway station to ring for a Taxi, and that we would need a phone card, which we did not have. She gave us her card but did not want payment for it. We set off in the direction of the station, then came across a man walking his dog, we asked him the way. He was a little cautious at first, but after we showed him the photos and tried to tell him where we wanted to go, he said 'Come with me'. We walked along some pretty lanes, he then said 'Wait' and

disappeared into his house. His wife, still in her dressing gown, came out to greet us, shaking our hands and showing much excitement. He opened his garage door and said he would like to take us and seemed pleased to do it for us. We were very grateful to him. We were early for the Church Service, but found we were able to go into the Churchyard, where we spent a wonderful hour or so, maybe with Ron too. When we heard someone arrive at the Church, we made our way in. Fortunately the couple Yves and Marie Therese Tate, who were preparing the Church for the Service, spoke English. They made us very welcome, gave us the front pew, and introduced us to the Priest. It was, I think a Catholic Church, not Roman Catholic. The Church Service was in French, but Yves addressed the congregation in French and then in English for our benefit. He repeated what the Priest had explained to them about Ron and us. None of the Parishioners had known of the burial at the Church 50 years ago, but were very interested. After the Service the Priest greeted us again and gave Doug a beautiful bowl of flowers and thanked us in French. The congregation came to us, shook our hands and kept talking to us, but unfortunately we did not know what they were saying. Yves said they all wanted to take us to their homes for a meal, but he said he had already invited us. As we were leaving, the lady who had let us into the Church Friday, and her husband, were standing at the gate waiting for us. We went to them, they threw their arms around us and actually cried. They were thankful for the Airmen who gave their lives 'to deliver us from evil'. Yves and Marie took us to their lovely home for lunch. Their daughter who was usually away at College, was at home. We all walked to their shopping centre and later at home Marie Therese prepared the meal. After lunch they decided to contact the man who they thought might have known where the crash was. He was a lad at the time and remembered riding his bike to the accident scene. They drove us around Elancourt, eventually locating the crash site, before taking us to the Viroflay cemetery, where Doug put the flowers from the Church on Ron's grave. We took some photos and Yves took some too. He later sent them to us. They were better photos than mine. They then drove us back to the Hotel Paris in Verseilles. This was another truly unbelieveable day. The next day, Monday 13th June, the date of Ron's burial we had an audience with the Mayor of Elancourt, so we had to find our way to Elancourt Town Centre. We arrived early, only to find Marie Therese there too. Our appointment was not until 4.30 p.m so Marie drove us into the countryside, then to her home for afternoon tea. We asked her to join us as we knew the Mayor spoke very little English. He too thanked those who gave their lives to deliver us from evil, and was most grateful to us for visiting. Marie then took us back to the Hotel Paris. We shall never forget the hospitality shown to us in those four days, by the people of Elancourt and Viroflay. We flew back to London on Tuesday 14th from Orley Airport after a taxi trip from

Versailles, quite an experience with bumper to bumper traffic. We felt sad but quite satisfied leaving Ron in a beautiful countryside, amongst friends, who will stand by his grave and remember at the Memorial service, held at the Viroflay New Communal Cemetery on the 8th May each year.

