

## A TALE OF SURVIVAL – THE REMARKABLE STORY OF 419198 FSGT BOB MOFFITT RAAF

ARTICLE BY ROBIN SHAW BASED ON PRIMARY RESEARCH BY JEAN-JACQUES LECOURT

*While there is no South Australian connection to this story that I'm aware of, it goes to show how mere rumours can lead to the uncovering of remarkable stories.*

During a visit to Northern France and Belgium in June 2023, I met with two French friends, both keen historians. Grégory Célerse is a professional historian, teacher and author with an encyclopaedic knowledge of French history specialising in the Resistance in WW2. I have known and corresponded with Greg for 10 years. Through Greg I met Jean-Jacques Lecourt, a retired railway employee and keen amateur historian specialising in WW2 and D-Day. He lives in the town of Boeschève, close to the Belgian border. It was Greg and Jean-Jacques who introduced me to the story of Bob Moffitt.

Jean-Jacques had heard rumours of allied airmen being sheltered in and around Boeschève during WW2. After speaking with elderly residents of the area, it was discovered that at least one USAAF and one RAF aircrew had been assisted by the French Resistance. Using archives in Vincennes and Lille, and through contact with the descendants of the local Resistance, Jean-Jacques identified the two airmen and researched Bob Moffitt's adventures. He wrote a short report which I have translated (thanks to Google), edited and inserted comments in italics. The basis for that report is a document that appears to have been written or dictated by Bob himself since it was originally written in the first person. This is what I have gleaned:

Robert Blackhall Moffitt was born in Melbourne on August 21, 1919. After Japan's declaration of war in December 1941, he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1942 at the age of 22. With the rank of navigator (Air Observer) (*sic*), he was sent to England in 1943, where he continued his training. In March 1944 he was posted to 460 Squadron RAAF at Binbrook in Lincolnshire as part of a Lancaster aircrew. (*Other records show that Moffitt was a Flight Sergeant navigator/bomb-aimer. The crew consisted of four Australians, two British and a Canadian*<sup>1</sup> – RCS, source [RAAF website](#)).

460 Squadron took part in raids deep into German-controlled territory. Leading up to, and subsequent to, the D-Day landings, the missions were at closer range and targeted factories, stations and depots in France and Belgium in an effort to paralyse the movements of German reinforcements and materiel.

On the night of 20 July 1944, the target was the railway yards at Kortrijk (Courtrai) in Belgium, a relatively short, low-altitude raid for more accurate bombing (*probably in an effort to save civilian lives as the Kortrijk yards were and still are adjacent to the town based on my own observations* - RCS). After bombing the yards, Bob's aircraft, (*Lancaster B III ND654 AR-R* – RCS) was caught in a searchlight and hit by a German night fighter. The crew bailed out into occupied territory (*at 0200 21/6/44* – RCS). The Lancaster crashed in the vicinity of Poelkapelle in Belgium (*see the map at the end of this article*).

Bob landed in a wheat field (*near Langemark, Belgium; see the map at the end of this article* – RCS), wrapped himself in his parachute and waited for dawn. He was worried about the rest of the crew, and later learned that only the mid-

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<sup>1</sup> According to [ozatwar](#), the full crew was:

Jopling R H RAAF	Pilot
Butler K G	Engineer
Moffitt, R B RAAF	Navigators
Cawley J C	Bomb-aimer
Annat D J RAAF	Wireless Operator
Mills P	Gunner
Rosseley L G RAAF	Gunner

upper gunner had been captured, having been betrayed by a Nazi collaborator in the Resistance. The gunner survived the war as a POW. Like Bob, the other crewmembers would be saved with the help of the Resistance. Since the mission was flown at a lower altitude than usual, Bob was in combat gear with shoes rather than flying boots, which later proved to be an advantage.

In the morning, Bob approached a nearby farmhouse. The farmer and his wife invited him in for breakfast and told him that he had landed in Flanders. He decided to walk in the direction he thought would take him to France. He followed waterways so as not to be seen. He was sheltered and fed by local farmers along the way. After about 80 miles he decided to approach another farmhouse and ask where he was. Bob was told that he had just crossed the border between Belgium and France. Once again, he was given food. He heard muffled voices inside that made him a little worried, so having finished the meal, he thanked the woman and left.

A few minutes after leaving, he was approached by an old man who said that he had been a French sailor during the First World War. He was in the house Bob had visited and he had heard what Bob had said. He had left the house to meet Bob alone. It was Bob's first encounter with the French Resistance. He was told not to go any further due to his unshaven appearance.



He was put in touch with the Boeschèpe resistance. After being interrogated in a barn by the Resistance, he was taken to the house of M. and Mme. Maurice Joie in Boeschèpe, (pictured left – photo source – Pennequin family via Jean-Jacques Lecourt). Maurice was part of the FFI (French Forces of the Interior, the Resistance), Voix du Nord group, Nieppe sector near Armentières. (I have an image of a post-war certificate dated 1949 attesting to Maurice's service with the FFI - RCS).

Bob was hidden by the Joie family for a week, awaiting confirmation of his identity from London to ensure that he was indeed an allied airman and not a German spy.

After the confirmation, everything went very quickly. Bob was taken to Bailleul to M. Z. Verheyde and then to M. and Mme. Sallome-Timmerman who had two daughters, Marie and Paulette. He was housed by the latter family until the area was liberated. In addition to Bob, there was also another man hidden in this house - Paulette's husband; Danièle Odievre, and their daughter Yolande. (Right – Bob Moffitt with M. and Mme. Sallome-Timmerman, Paulette and Yolande. Photo source Pennequin family via Jean-Jacques Lecourt). Danièle was an architect by profession and had brought his family back from Le Havre to Bailleul to escape being called up to work in the German war factories. Like Bob, he was wanted.



During the two months with M. and Mme. Sallomé, Bob took on a new identity: Jules Charles Robin, a 42-year-old Corsican. It was Miss Cécile Plouvier, a member of the Resistance, who lived in Méteren, who had provided the false papers.

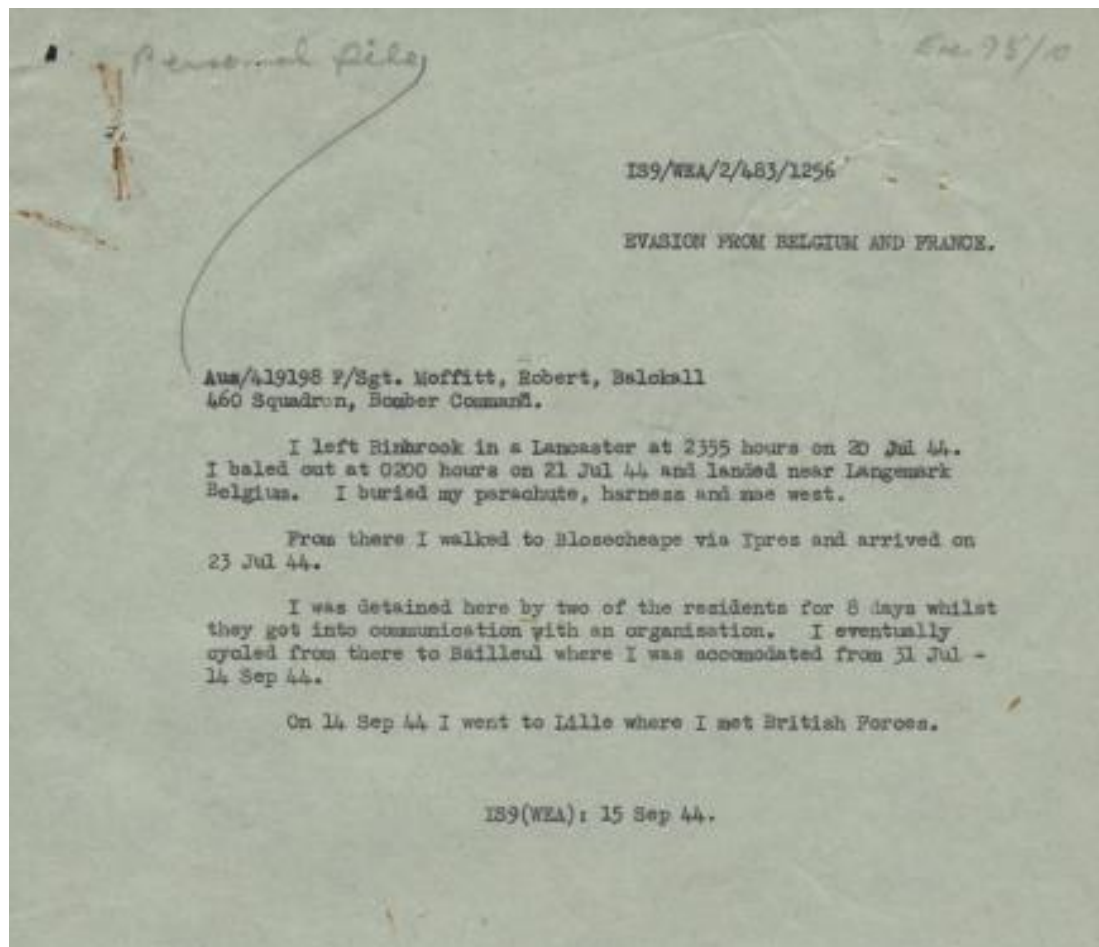
The report by Jean-Jaques ends here but there was more to discover about Bob Moffitt's experiences.

During his time in Flanders, Bob was not only sheltered by the Resistance; he fought with them, participating in a pitched 3-day battle to defend a bridge, the Ponte de Nieppe over the River Leie near Armentières, (right) so as to preserve it for the advancing Allies. Source – [RAF website](#)).

Surprisingly, no mention of the Nieppe action has surfaced in any of the material that describes Bob's experiences. But it seems likely that he did participate in the battle as the website quoted above drew its information from the Moffitt family.



The day after that battle ended, Nieppe was liberated by the Welsh Guards. Bob was back in Allied hands<sup>2</sup>, although His surprisingly brief report, now in the Australian War Memorial collection (see below), indicates that he met British forces in Lille, 30km south-east of Bailleul, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1944.



In contrast to the above cursory report, here's how Bob described his repatriation. Towards the end of two months with the Salomé family, Bob knew the Allied army had closed in on Bailleul and the German army was withdrawing. Once the Allies arrived at Bailleul Bob approached a colonel in the British forces to see how he could go back to England. He offered Bob a drive to Normandy on a truck as a guard for German prisoners. Mme. Salomé-Timmerman told Bob that she thought it was too dangerous and that he should stay one more night and go to Lille the next day.

The next day he cycled to Lille with Daniel. He met a British officer in charge of the repatriation of Allied soldiers. From Lille he went to Brussels by jeep in the company of some American soldiers. There he was grouped with other British and Australian airmen, all waiting to return to England. They were eventually transported there in a Dakota.



Bob Moffitt returned to Australia and was discharged from the RAAF in September 1945. Late in life he re-established contact with those who had helped him but due to age was unable to visit them before his death at 93 on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2013. He is pictured left with his wife Nellie, date unknown. (*Photo source – Pennequin family via Jean-Jacques Lecourt*). Members of Bob's family maintain the contact and have visited the area and met with the descendants of those brave Resistance fighters.

On 21st June 2023, Greg, Jean-Jaques and I visited the house where Bob was sheltered by M. and Mme. Joie in Boeschèpe on the France-Belgium border, now occupied by M. Joël Pennequin, great nephew of the Joies who provided the old photos above. The photo below left shows the rear of the house (*photo source – Robin Shaw*). The window circled is the room where Bob was sheltered. The photo below right is, left to right, Joël, Jean-Jaques and Greg (*photo*

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<sup>2</sup> Source – [RAF website](#)

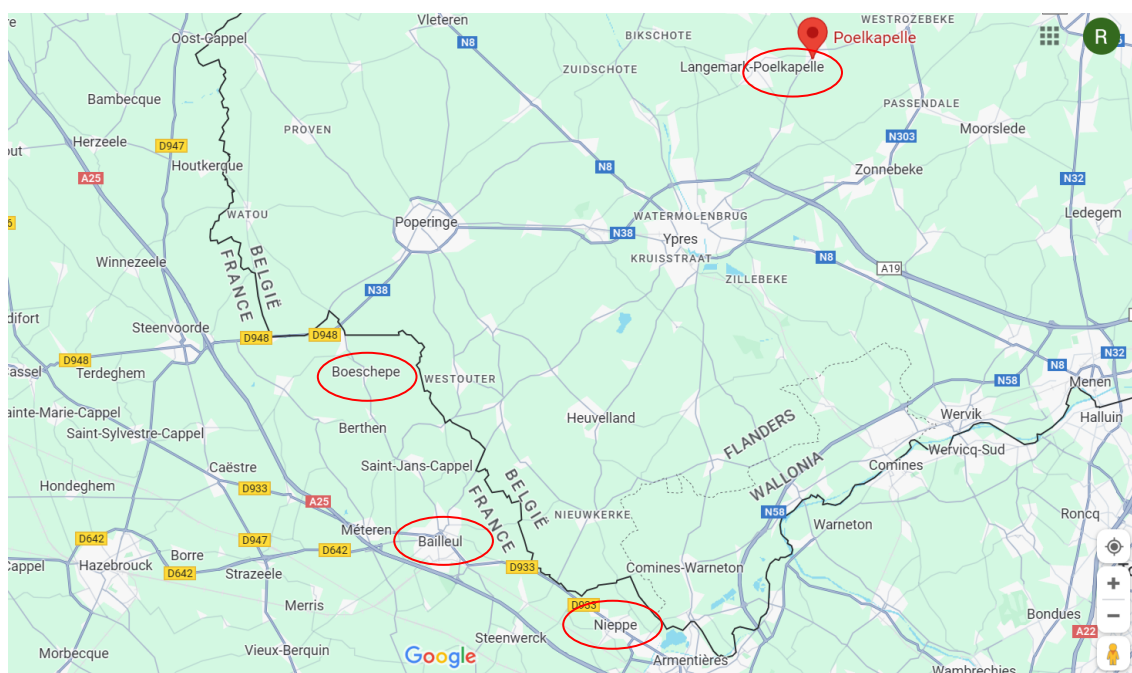


source – Robin Shaw). As an aside, the house is sited in what was No Man's Land in WW1 on the north side of the Ypres salient. It was destroyed by artillery and rebuilt in 1920. In the photo below left, to the left of the old door in the foreground, the original brickwork contrasts with the rebuilt section. Joël is continuously digging up bullets, shrapnel, bottles, clay tobacco pipes and all sorts of other leftovers from WW1. Live ordinance remains a hazard for farmers in the Flanders area.



The only remaining question is why Bob was not taken into the escape lines maintained by the FFI to get allied aircrew out of occupied Europe. The answer will never be known for sure, but it seems likely that with the Allies advancing from the Normandy beachhead, it was safer to keep him in hiding and wait for the liberating troops.

The map below of part of the French-Belgian border below shows where the Lancaster crashed at Poelkapelle (top right) and 4 other places mentioned in this article are circled. The target of the 20 July 1944 raid, Kortrijk (Courtrai), is about 40km east of Boeschepe. The area of this map is about 40km south-east of Dunkerque.



Kortrijk app. 20km

Lille app. 30km