

Minster, august 16th 2013.

When I was a kid, my father, youngest brother of Jean de Selys Longchamps, used to take me to visit my grandmother.

Imagine a very old bent Lady, sitting all day long in a greenish armchair, wearing tinted glasses, among XIXth century style furniture.

But the scene is not yet complete. Close to her, as something she could not be separated from, there was a small glass case displaying various items: bullets fired from aircraft machine guns, a dog tag, a map of occupied territories, printed on a silk scarf, remnants of a funeral wreath.

All of this came from her third child, whose portrait, hanging on the wall, showed a rather handsome guy in a RAF blue uniform with a faraway look, Jean de Selys Longchamps, killed on his way back from a mission on August 16th 1943 and since then resting in peace, here in Minster, with his comrades at arms.

So far I suppose you have understood what an impression all of this made on the little boy I was.

Today it is very moving for me and for all my family to evoke my uncle's person 70 years after this terrible war in which, without England, victory would not have been achieved.

In this respect and on behalf of my family I would like to thank very warmly all the people, especially "*Mister Chris Van Heghe and Wings of Memory*" who took part in the organization of this celebration.

A lot has been said about Jean de Selys 's bravery. If, being ready to risk his life for something more worthy than one's life, means being a hero, then he was a hero.

But Jean was also like all of us, a man, an ordinary man who went through various feelings: fear, courage, pride, sadness, anxiety, even despair, faith, self-disregard ...

What a better tribute to him to listen to the thoughts he recorded in his personal diary?

March 7th 1941

First flight. I write in this diary three months later. My feelings? I was probably dead scared...

Later

We do not ask for a certificate of bravery. We do not ask for a certificate of patriotism. As soldiers we fulfill our duty, only our duty.

April 11th 1941 Good Friday

Why this evening? Maybe on this Good Friday do I have the foreboding that I will never again see the ones I love. Maybe also because today I see death without fear.

Death will be for me not an end I fear but, if it can catch me in flight or even better while fighting, the final step of a part of my life that I lived as I thought I should.

I write these words in order that Daddy and Mammy know that I have been lucky enough to end this life, of which my youngest years have been pretty worrying for them, as they would like me to finish it.

I lived for thirty years without caring about the duties I had to fulfill. Because of my education and by atavism I have learned not to do any harm. But I haven't done any good. The war forced me to think of others. I did the best I could.

To all who made me as I am today I give my life in order that they give to those who will follow me what I received from them.

May 31st 1941

29 years old. Second birthday in England. One year. This evening despite my will and my enthusiasm: morale as low as a running basset hound. Forced inactivity a week long now. Fog, rain, accidents, one after the other leave us with long days ... to hope. And then nothing. Flights cancelled. Awfully disappointing. My wings ...a mirage which I run after as a child and which people and things push back as soon as I think I have reached it.

March 9th 1942

Suddenly I see three black spots behind me and higher up. Spitfire? Enemy ?

They race towards me. No doubt, enemies. Three against one. My first fight . I am dead. Cold sweat. I wait till they approach and with desperation I turn towards them.

I look at them with horror. They are ominous.

Three wild beasts in wait for their prey. I pull on my stick. Instant black out.

My head ... between my knees...

January 20th 1943, over Brussels

Mes chers compatriotes,

Ce que j'ai voulu vous apporter en vous montrant dans le ciel clair de Bruxelles les cocardes britanniques c'est bien davantage un message d'espoir et un témoignage d'admiration pour votre courage qu'une preuve de notre force croissante.

Pilote de chasse belge, je vous apporte le salut des belges.

This hero was a man. Let us try to be heroes.

In September 1943, in Brussels, exactly the same day that my grandmother learnt of the death of Jean through the Swedish Embassy, she was relieved to meet again her youngest son, my father, Edé, who had just escaped from a prisoner of war camp in Germany.

Thank you. Je vous remercie. Ik dank U.

Ariel de Selys Longchamps