Twitter Thread by Paul Collins

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I have always had a huge interest in the SSW and, like many of us, that stemmed from learning about family experiences. What follows is a thread on my great uncle's service. Sadly he passed away when I was young but thankfully he wrote down some of his wartime experiences.

Lt Keith Best served in 2 Troop of 591 squadron attached to 9th Parachute Battalion. 2 Troop formed part of the force that was to be dropped on the heavy gun battery at Merville. Unfortunately, things did not go to plan…

"When we got across the Channel there was a lot of flak and our pilot seemed to be taking evasive action…We began to get thrown about inside and then the red and a green lights came on in what seemed to be unusually quick succession and we were bundled out of the door…

As I found out later, instead of finding the drop zone near Varaville, the RAF put us down well east of the River Dives and ten or fifteen miles off target on higher ground near the village of St Pierre-Azzif. There was nothing I could do about getting to Merville on time.

A map showing the considerable distance between Saint-Pierre Azif (top right) and Merville.

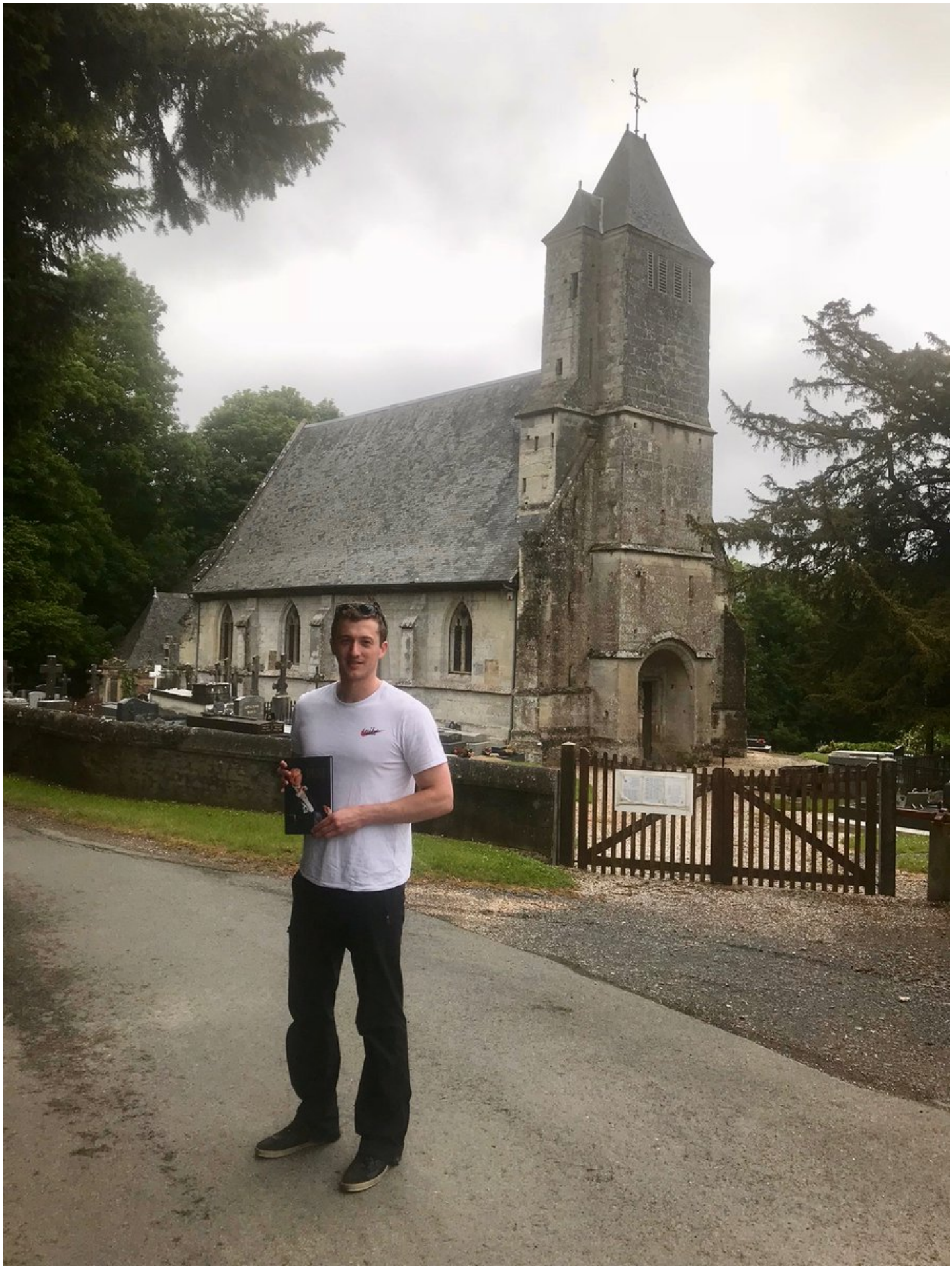


“At dawn I found myself in a farmyard watching a very old lady milking a cow. She looked me up and down, gave me a directional jerk of her head and carried on milking. Soon after I was joined by a local man who led me to the church of St Pierre-Azif and down into the crypt

where I found a collection of odds and sods from 9 Para and some of my sappers. There were some wounded and injured who were left concealed at the church. There were some who elected to get out of uniform and try their luck getting back in disguise (they were successful)

and the rest of us set off westwards. We travelled by night and lay up during daylight.”

A photo of me in 2018 outside the church.



“I cannot give you a blow by blow account of everything that happened during that time but there are some things that have stuck in my mind…We tended to be looking for ways to justify our roles as invaders and liberators. I soon pooped off my

stock of explosives on anything

hat seemed handy and we did our best to spread alarm and despondency among the enemy. Above all, I remember the unlimited hospitality and help we enjoyed from the Normans who put themselves at great risk by feeding and concealing us in daylight. There was one occasion where

I was buried in a hayloft, searched by German soldiers poking their rifles around in the hay. There was another occasion which left me with a funny feeling for some years and which although diminished, continues today. In our journey westwards we had to cross a main road

and there was single German sentry. I used my knife on him.

We slowly made progress westwards, past Glanville, Branville, Douville, heading towards the River Dives which we planned to cross opposite Varaville. One day, we laid up in a ditch on a farm west of Dozule

planning to cross the river that night. At dusk, there was a commotion in from of us and we saw the farmer, his wife and children walking towards us. Behind them followed a line of German troops. Behind us advanced another line who started shooting.

Keith spent the remainder of the war as a POW at Oflag 12B. He wrote extensively about his time there so I will do another thread soon. Hope you enjoyed.