

MAJOR MANNOCK & THE LAVENTIE MYTH

by Chris Page

The two SE5as left St Omer at dawn. About twenty miles to the south-east they sighted an enemy two-seater. Far below a British Intelligence Officer witnessed the action: 'Two of our planes engaged one enemy plane which was brought down in flames. Immediately enemy plane was brought down one of our planes burst into flames by tracer bullets fired from Pacaut Wood ...'

Major Edward Mannock was shot down in flames south of Calonne-sur-la-Lys on 26 July 1918. He has no known grave. Yet you'd be forgiven for thinking he had. The 'facts' apparently point to Laventie Military Cemetery where Mannock lies as an Unknown British Airman. And on the basis of these 'facts' – actually a regurgitation of a theory rejected in 1923 – I fear that bountyhunters with DNA test tubes in one hand and shovels in the other are demanding a grotesque obscenity: exhuming a War Grave on the off-chance that it contains Mannock's remains.

What's happening here? Exactly when did puerile speculation take over from hard evidence? Whatever happened to respect for the dead? I have no doubt that DNA evidence can greatly assist in the identification of WWI Unknowns and I'd like to know how often the Ministry of Defence – whose responsibility such investigations now are – has sanctioned its use. But such use, in my view, should not be to eliminate lazy fantasies but to confirm a chain of real evidence. In the case of Major Mannock and Laventie Cemetery no evidence exists. That void has been filled by a myth which, by being repeated often enough, is now widely believed as truth.

Any discussion of this case will inevitably imply criticism of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) and of the present Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). None is intended. To blame the IWGC for lack of method in finding Mannock and the CWGC for allowing the case to fester into fantasy displays ignorance of the roles of both. It's also easy to look at this case in isolation and forget the priorities as well as the scale of the task that confronted those charged with finding and burying the dead. But the Laventie myth grew out of that chaos and to find it we must first look briefly at the IWGC's search for Mick Mannock's grave.

'THIS OFFICER'S GRAVE HAS NOT BEEN FOUND'

There were witnesses to the crash. Lt Inglis (Mannock's pupil that day and also brought down by groundfire) saw where his major fell. Other 85 Squadron pilots and Mannock's friend Ira Jones flew over the 'charred wreck' hours after the crash. On the ground, Edward Naulls saw the burning SE5a struggle north over the trees of Pacaut Wood, a British Intelligence Officer witnessed the crash as did a Sgt Johns. Later, J. Macgregor Salter claimed he crawled into No Man's Land that night and crudely buried Mannock.

But external evidence from eye-witnesses was not sought by the IWGC and so the crashsite was never established. Their inquiry was a paper inquiry only,

prompted in 1919 by a letter from Mannock's friend Jim Eyles and took until 1921 to unearth the only clue. The IWGC Berlin Office found a German Intelligence Report which included the message that Mannock had '... crashed in flames. Body recovered and buried at a point 300m north-west of la Pierre au Beure on the road to Pacaut'.

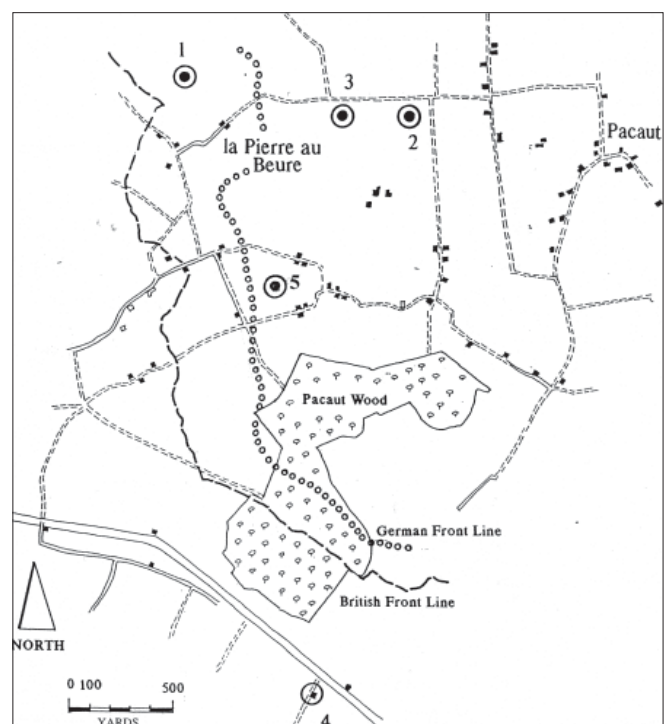
Had this information been available at the time the area was cleared of field graves, the search teams could have looked specifically for it. But at this time, with official searching over and reconstruction well underway the IWGC, having established that Mannock had no known grave, could only consult cemetery records in the hope that a body had been found at the location given and reburied as an Unknown.

Certainly, the IWGC checked the records of the nearest cemeteries to the reported grave position but we can now only speculate how thorough their work was: were they were blinkered to seeking an Unknown Airman or any Unknown found in the message area? Did they spot the geographic riddle of the message: anywhere NW of la Pierre au Beure went away from any road to Pacaut? Field graves had been found about 200 yards north of la Pierre au Beure and were ruled out of the Mannock inquiry.

Sketch map based on Trench Map 36a SE1 and SE2 1:10000.

22 June 18. Key:

- 1) Approximate field grave position as stated in German message.*
- 2) 5:1 UBA and wreck.*
- 3) 8:1 Burnt-out wreck.*
- 4) Hate Farm the position of E. Naulls (2nd Essex Regiment) who saw Mannock's stricken SE5a glide north over the trees of Pacaut Wood beyond.*
- 5) The crashsite as noted by a British Intelligence Officer.*





Looking north to Hate Farm (centre) and the southern edge of Pacaut Wood today. Could a burning SE5a at tree-top height have reached 5:1 another 2800 yards further north?

These became a kind of marker, possibly indicating that they were the closest or only field graves found in the immediate message area.

Today, we cannot double-check the records: no Burial Returns survive for the closest cemeteries and very few for the area as a whole – this means there are no map references of field graves from which men were exhumed. No Field Grave Exhumation Reports (if such forms ever existed) survive either and other primary evidence has also been destroyed. Little wonder the case is full of riddles!

Having drawn a blank from the closest cemeteries to the reported field grave position, the IWGC widened the search. Officials from La Gorgue Area reported that an Unknown British Airman (UBA) had been exhumed from a field grave at map reference (36a Q22 a) 5:1 and reburied

Major Edward Mannock VC, DSO and 2 Bars, MC and Bar. Credited with 73 victories - the highest-scoring British ace – at Clairmarais (North) airfield with 74 Squadron in early summer 1918. IWM Q58662



at Laventie Cemetery. He had been identified as a British airman only by 'cross and wreck of plane' but this body, found about 1300 yards east of where the Germans said Mannock was buried, seemed an unlikely candidate.

Initially the IWGC greeted the UBA with enthusiasm. They speculated that if the German had meant 300m NE of la Pierre au Beure (instead of NW) this would spin Mannock's field grave closer to the UBA at 5:1 – although still 900yards short. Finally, the facts prevailed: not only was this body found 1300 yards east of the reported grave position and nowhere near la Pierre au Beure, the UBA had no date of death, his aircraft-type was unknown, his wreck was not burnt and, being in the middle of an orchard, was hardly 'on' any road to Pacaut. Nothing linked the UBA to Mannock. He was dismissed from the inquiry.

Two statements about this UBA need clarifying. Firstly, officials from La Gorgue Area said he was their 'only possible candidate'. But asking La Gorgue was a long shot anyway - they were unlikely to hold late-war bodies from the message area as their cemeteries were too far east. Secondly, it was suggested that the UBA's aircraft was 'the only British machine to fall in this area'. But no such records were kept! (That's why it was safe to chip the names of 1000 missing airmen on the Arras Memorial: no records meant no system and therefore no chance of identifying any of them!)

As if to prove that point the inquiry promptly discovered another aircraft: a burnt-out wreck at (36a Q21 b) 8:1, about 900 yards east of Mannock's reported field grave. Again, there was no date for this crash and local opinion (canvassed in 1923), differed as to the nationality of the aircraft. Although the IWGC suggested a 'connection' between this wreck and the wreckage where the UBA was found – which were 400 yards apart – none was established. They could have been two different crashes and both could have pre or post-dated Mannock's. The inquiry concluded: 'this officer's grave has not been found'.

This conclusion was firm enough to rule out other IWGC options. Had 'reasonable certainty' existed concerning the Laventie UBA the headstone could have been given Mannock's name with the prefix 'Believed To Be'. If reasonable doubt existed they could have exhumed the Laventie grave and sought further identification – a not uncommon occurrence in military cemeteries post-war. For example, (and unconnected to the Mannock inquiry) in June 1921 at nearby Vieille-Chapelle Military Cemetery, three unknown airmen were exhumed for this purpose. Despite gaining details of height, clothing and

colour of hair and eyes – and despite knowing the date of death of at least one of them – these airmen remain unknown.

So, in 1924, the IWGC wrote a final letter to Mannock's increasingly impatient friend Jim Eyles. In attempting to justify five years of failure they mentioned the German message, the burnt-out wreck (8:1) and the UBA and his wreck (5:1). And there lay the seeds of the Laventie myth. There's a temptation to interpret those as the only 'clues' and if you believe that the IWGC couldn't have found vin rouge in an estaminet you create a challenge: link the three clues – something the IWGC 'failed' to do – and you 'solve' the mystery!

THE MYTH IS BORN

The first public player of this doomed challenge was James Dudgeon in his biography *Mick* in 1981. He solved the mystery by also changing the 300 metres from NW to NE which apparently put the field grave so close to the burnt-out wreck at 8:1 that they became one and the same! (Actually it was 500 yards out!) But how did Mannock become the UBA found a further 400 yards east? No problem! Mannock either jumped at 5:1 or was pulled from the wreck at 8:1 and taken to 5:1 for burial! Wow! Bonus points to Mr Dudgeon for using all three clues!

Hang on: what about the wreckage at 5:1 that helped identify the unknown airman found there as British? No mention. According to Mr Dudgeon the 8:1 burnt-out wreck was 'the only British machine to fall in this area'. This, as we've seen, is untrue as is the jumping theory as it demands an E-W flightpath when Mannock's S-N flightpath has never been disputed.

Mr Dudgeon didn't say Mannock was in the Laventie grave – he didn't have to. Within weeks Mannock pilgrims were saying it for him: messages in the cemetery visitors book confirmed their belief that Mannock was the UBA. Astonishingly, a theory thrown out in 1923 because no evidence existed was now, after some reinvention, being

Grave of the Unknown British Airman at Laventie. Denied a name by inertia now an imposter for eternity as belief in his false identity grows.



'Mick' Mannock. 'Things are getting a bit intense lately and I don't know how long my nerves will last out. I am rather old now, as airmen go, for fighting. Still, one hopes for the best.' IWM Q73408

accepted as fact. The myth was born.

I also played the doomed game in the 1990 video *Where They Flew & Where They Fell*. We put the three clues into the public domain for the first time on a trench map to correct the inaccuracies of Mr Dudgeon's sketch map. We speculated on the position of la Pierre au Beure, remained neutral about the Laventie UBA but suggested 8:1 was Mannock's crashsite. And the facts didn't get in the way of a good story when *The Sunday Telegraph* 'solved' the mystery in 1993. They magically combined all the 'clues' into the same location and vacuously fast-tracked us to Laventie where a Mannock relative was shown laying a wreath on the grave of the Unknown British Airman.

And so on. Most authors since 1981 have followed in Mr Dudgeon's footsteps on the low road to Laventie and so, over time, the myth has grown into 'fact'. But the blind have led the blind. This continues at Laventie Military Cemetery where pilgrims only see the UBA's grave, but if they explored the plot that contains it with eyes and minds open they might 'see' something else.

LAVENTIE MILITARY CEMETERY

Laventie Cemetery was begun in June 1916 with (what is now) Plot 2. This contains about 190 men buried in chronological order by their dates of death in June and July 1916. The cemetery expanded into (now) Plot 3 and burials continued until April 1918 when the area fell to the Germans.



Looking west. Hate Farm extreme left, Bassée Canal in centre and in the distance (right) Pacaut Wood.

Let's look at Plot 3. This houses about 150 exclusively 1916 and 1917 deaths. From Row A Grave 1 (September 1916) to Row F Grave 24 (April 1917) the men are again buried – with few exceptions – by dates of death. The last row, Row F, is entirely chronological:

25 Feb 17 to 28 April 17. The Unknown Airman (Grave 12) is halfway along this row: if not a 1917 casualty then certainly, I suggest, a 1917 burial. The UBA must have been at Laventie to be buried at the same time as the others in Row F. These bodies were in situ before the Germans took Laventie and stayed in situ when burials resumed in September 1918 after the British reclaimed the area. There are no indications of mass post-war reorganisation and exhumations and reburials affecting Plots 2 and 3.

It stretches the imagination to believe the strict chronology of Row F would have left one grave unoccupied and waiting, as it were, until 1920 when some researchers believe the UBA was buried there. But if one grave was left unoccupied – in such anticipation – why not the last grave of the last row? But the last grave of the last row was not the last of this batch of 1917 burials which had to be continued elsewhere.

In 1917 there was logic in taking a body from 5:1 to Laventie for burial but why take a body seven miles there in 1920 when other cemeteries were much closer and far from full? Few, if any, late-war bodies from the Mannock crash area went as far east as Laventie. Even

Bassée Canal just north of Hate Farm looking towards Pacaut Wood. The British also seemed confused by the position of la Pierre au Beure. A photograph of Tommies bathing in this canal was captioned as being 'at la Pierre au Beure' even though the so-called 'village' is 3050 yards to the north.



Vieille-Chapelle, only three miles from the crash area, houses few such bodies.

And why wasn't one of the late or post-war bodies – of many entering Laventie cemetery from September 1918 – not buried in this grave apparently invitingly vacant since spring 1917? All late and post-war burials at Laventie, when you apply basic cemetery geography, are where you expect to find them: clustered in a different plot (Mannock's friend McElroy, KIA 31 July 18, is among them). Why isn't the UBA, apparently found in 1920, with them?

Let's tackle this phantom 1920 exhumation. The date 15 March 20 is beneath a signature on a Burial Return form for the UBA sub-headed: Concentration of Graves (Exhumation and Reburials). This is not a Field Grave Exhumation Report. We might assume Burial Returns were compiled contemporaneously with reburials but nothing confirms this. Indeed, evidence suggests these forms served as a survey on which final listings were based. Other Laventie records indicate burials ceased long before March 1920. Everything about Laventie cemetery and its records suggest that the UBA exhumed from 5:1 was buried there over a year before Mannock was killed.

So why didn't La Gorgue Area know this when they submitted this UBA as their 'only possible candidate' in the 1920s? Maybe that question should stand as a comment on the quality of the five-year inquiry. My guess, having trawled through the few cemetery records not yet destroyed, suggests the low priority that identification seemed to have. What you notice from the records is that the currency of elimination, dates, are missing: dates of field grave exhumation and of reburial. It seems possible – and symptomatic of a system that ensured Unknowns stayed unknown – that such dates, although originally recorded, were soon discarded. I suggest La Gorgue's search criteria was based solely on where the body was found because the key elimination tool, the date it was found, was not available to them.

Despite all of this, the Laventie myth is as strongly believed as ever and has even journeyed full circle to become semi-official. Over the years the stock CWGC reply to Mannock/Laventie enquirers is that there are several candidates for the grave. True. But by implying – even unconsciously – that Mannock is one of them they reverse the decision of their predecessors, ignore evidence in their own files and reinforce the myth. This feeds the fantasies of those wanting to dig up an already abused airman when there are no grounds, evidential or moral, for doing so.

ALL POINTS SOUTH

After more than twenty years of 'solving the mystery' of Mick Mannock's final resting place by contriving him into a grave unconnected to him, maybe it's time for some fresh thinking based on real facts. In the late 1980s Mannock researcher Les Cook unearthed a British 12th Infantry Brigade Intelligence Summary of the area for the relevant 24 hour period. One of the items briefly, but accurately, described the aerial action involving Mannock and Inglis and the subsequent crash, which could only have been Mannock's, was pinpointed by a map reference. This, the first genuine clue to emerge since the German message was found in 1921, placed the crash much further south and comprehensively broke all connections with the earlier wrecks and, by extension, the unknown airman found at 5:1. Most importantly it corroborated, for the very first time, other testimonies like that of Private Naulls.

The first time I walked on Butter Lane, the east to west track just above the 8:1 and 5:1 sites, I looked south and could barely see Pacaut Wood in the distance. How, I wondered, could the stricken and burning aircraft that Private Naulls saw at tree-top height gliding north over Pacaut Wood ever have reached Butter Lane? The Intelligence Summary's map reference confirms that it didn't. The aircraft's glide ended about 400 yards north of Pacaut Wood – still at least 900 yards short of Butter Lane. This pinpoint, from an officer upon whose map-reading skills lives depended, is compelling.

If this evidence rules out the other two wrecks, where does it leave the German message – the only 'clue' still marooned 1200 yards away. Is there a convincing scenario to explain why Mannock's body was hauled 1200 yards further north for burial when it could have been buried by the Germans precisely where they found it – safely within or very near their own lines? Maybe it's also time to take a fresh look at the German message.

Not only did it give an incorrect date (by two days) of Mannock's crash, the report containing the message was dated fifteen days later – a time when the ground had fallen to the British and the report's author was retreating. Further, from the first emergence of the message, it was obvious that its geography was nonsense: anywhere NW of la Pierre au Beure (the two buildings thought to be the village) went away from any road to Pacaut. The German who buried Mannock, it might be argued, didn't know his Pacaut from his elbow.

But close study of contemporary trench maps and aerial photographs shows that, as a starting point for the 300 metres, the village of la Pierre au Beure was militarily – and therefore geographically – impossible: it was in No Man's Land and any point NW of it went towards British lines – a burial position as bizarre as it is unlikely. It may be wiser to question the position of la Pierre au Beure because it was (and is) an area not a village.

Tinkering with parts of the message only repeats the errors of the past by ignoring the geography of that past. As the 300 metres starting point could not possibly have been the 'village because it was out of bounds, the question should be at what point in this area did the German who buried Mannock believe la Pierre au Beure to be? Find that and the message may make sense. The reality is that the crashsite is a fixed point but la Pierre au Beure, as the German message illustrates, is certainly not.

SUMMARY

Is it possible that search teams found Mannock's remains in the field grave, didn't recognise him as an airman and reburied him in a nearby War Grave cemetery as an Unknown Soldier or Officer. Against this is the fact that, as personal effects believed to have come from the body (and later returned to the Mannock family) showed little sign of fire damage, it must be likely that the remains, particularly the flying clothes, were not so destroyed by fire as to cause such a basic error in identification of service. (It is not known whether Mannock's body was buried with identification on it). But if the field grave was found and Mannock's remains reburied in a nearby cemetery as an Unknown British Soldier/Officer, the chances of proving it are remote. As stated, documents giving locations of field graves of men reburied in the closest and most likeliest cemeteries have been destroyed. Just as likely, perhaps, is that Mannock shared the sad fate of hundreds of thousands of others – possibly as many as one third of those who fell on the Western Front – and his remains were never found and he still lies where the Germans buried him.




According to the British Intelligence Officer, Mannock crashed in flames in this field about 400 yards north of Pacaut Wood. This area was 'quiet' by Western Front standards: some conventional trenches were regularly interspersed with defensive shell holes. The area fell to the British, with little resistance, between 8 and 10 August 1918.

Everyone wants Mick Mannock to have a known resting place. We need to believe he wasn't abandoned forever unknown beneath a foreign field. Perhaps that's why the Laventie myth was so easy to embrace. But out in those windy flatlands today, now no longer scarred by the Great War, there is still integrity and hope: genuine researchers sifting genuine evidence. I suggest we let them do their work.

In the meantime, let's all say it together: Major Mannock is missing. He has no known grave.

Acknowledgements

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Mannock's identity discs formerly on display at the RAF Museum. There is no surviving evidence to confirm that these came from the body. Fibre discs of this kind were replaced in mid 1917 with a metallic version capable of withstanding moisture so Mannock may have been wearing the new type when he died.

