

## About Jacques-Olivier Clerc

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Photo of [Jacques-Olivier Clerc](#) from Helge W. Gram, seen in [a Swiss newspaper](#) from 5 December 1995.

Text at the picture: **Jacques-Olivier Clerc (1917-1944)** - Beside his studies in Lausanne he also became chairman of Belles-Lettres, the students' union.

 This article translated by Kirsten Klitgård refers to [Letters from an Airman, Jacques-Olivier Clerc](#).

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## Remember Jacques-Olivier Clerc

A Danish doctor reminds us of the death of this young man from Neuchâtel

There was no special date, no birthday, not even a new improbable feat, nothing foretold that we would suddenly talk of a young man from Neuchâtel who in 1942 had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force as a volunteer and who died on a mission in August 1944 in Danish waters near the coast, a sacrifice which might have remained as anonymous as millions of others. Almost half a century has passed; the wounds which took long to close up, have healed, but a Danish doctor has remembered and called the dormant memories to mind.

Dr Svend Erik Simonsen, who is now an ophthalmologist in Copenhagen, was only a child of twelve when a "Halifax" bomber crashed not far from the home of his parents near Odense. Many years passed, but the memories of the child were aroused when as a grown man he one day came across a book which told of Allied aeroplanes and others which had crashed over Denmark during the war, and of the places where the victims had been buried. Letters found on these airmen are also found in this book, among others some extracts from letters written by Jacques-Olivier Clerc, this young man from Neuchâtel for whom everything - his ideal of life for a start - predicted a glorious career. We don't know why but Mr. Simonsen dedicated himself to the memories of the deceased and the other airmen, and he has striven to find traces of them in both Canada and Switzerland. Such devotion is moving, but why not also say that it is surprising. Had the man perhaps found the example he missed as a child, in the airman with the crushed wings?

Jacques-Olivier was one of Charly Clerc's four sons. The father was then a teacher of languages and French literature at the I'EPFZ - L'École polytechnique fédérale de Zurich and a literary critic. Jacques-Olivier was twenty-two years old and a doctor of law and economics when he went to Canada. His brother Laurent had accompanied him to Cherbourg; the day after the declaration of war he disembarked over there, and he started work at the department of political economy at the University of Toronto and was to teach at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon later. But very soon the young professor only listens to his conscience, he sees so many of his students depart for the army that he himself feels obliged to volunteer, simultaneously hiding the truth from his parents as long as he can.

When J.-O. Clerc set out on a mission off Kiel where fourteen Halifax planes were to drop mines, the small squadron suddenly had to do without the promised escort of fighters, and his plane was shot down and shattered in the Little Belt, the arm of the sea separating Funen from Jutland. Only two survived of the whole crew, the Canadians Gill and Marchildon. The five victims were buried nearby, at the small Sønderby church where a plaque with their names is regularly decorated with flowers by anonymous hands.

Two of Jacques-Olivier's three brothers survived him. François, the eldest, who became a professor of criminal law and vice-chancellor of the University of Neuchâtel, has retired to Saint-Blaise, while Laurent, who became a vicar in Nice and at Firminy, and then at La Chaux-de-Fonds and at Malleray-Bévillard, today lives in Neuchâtel and still acts as locum tenens in the parish of Dombresson. In 1946 Laurent Clerc and his father set out and met at the mortal remains of Jacques-Olivier; he returned there with his wife in 1964.

The event, as we know, took place forty-seven years ago in the height of summer. Even if it is elusive and perishable material, the present deserves that it be revived, especially since it was inspired by and imbued with mental greatness. In our societies where laxness competes with loss of memory, any lesson is good, and this one is worth considering.

Cl.-P. Ch.

See next page with **extracts from letters** from Jacques-Olivier Clerc:



## Of other green prairies

"...I have just told the university of S..., that the green prairies no longer risk seeing me again. After fourteen months of all kinds of demarches I have just been allowed to join the army". This is in May 1942, and J.-O. Clerc confirms to Laurent that he has made up his mind.

**"We are four sons (...) It is fair that one of us takes part in the struggle. I have lived largely for myself. Now it is high time to do something for others."**

J.-O. Clerc knows that he ought to set a good example: **"...I think that I may venture to say that intellectually and as a person I have exerted a certain influence on my students. Their affection, their signs of friendship prove it. But today I can no longer preach freedom from the lecturn (...) and do nothing to defend it, preach on the obligations of the élite - and then remain among the shirkers".**

When in October 1943 he serves as an officer in England, he tells his parents that he has volunteered and asks them to forgive him that he has lied to them and let them believe that he served belligerent Canada at the price control of Ottawa.

In June 1944 he writes to them: **"... More and more I feel the truth in the words of the British soldier: "We fight for the infants, for the ordinary citizens, and for the small nations"(\*)**.

And then there was an intense cold like the one which seized the poor Little Match-Girl, for Andersen was born not far away, at Odense.

Cl.-P. Ch

(\*) Extracts from an offprint of **"Cahiers protestants"** (Protestant pamphlets), January-February 1945.