



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Old Faithful ceremony 23rd June at 3 pm (assemble 2.45 pm)

Mike and Anne take their prize

As I mentioned earlier in the year Mike and Anne Rowlands won the 1st prize in the national Legion Magazine competition. The prize for the competition was a trip for 4 people to visit The Emma Bridgewater factory in Stoke. It involved a tour

around the factory, demonstrations of pottery making/painting, with an opportunity to paint their own pottery, lunch for 4, tea and Danish pastries and a lot of fun. They recently visited the factory and took their prize. As you can see in the photo Mike did "supervise" making of some pottery but I don't think Anne and Mike are claiming they actually made the mugs in the other photo. They did say that they had a great time. It is nice to know someone who wins competitions!



AGM 2019 & "Old Faithful"

As we go to press two things are happening soon, the AGM and "Old Faithful" are about to happen. As previously mentioned there are substantial committee changes taking place including the retirement of both Rita Jee and myself. There is so much to report at the moment that we will revert to a Sandbag monthly edition and full details will be in the July edition.

The "Old Faithful" anniversary is taking place on 23rd June assembling at 2.30 pm and the ceremony is 3 pm at the Memorial Hall War Memorial. Unfortunately as we go to press we have heard that 1 Regt. Army Air Corps will not be able to supply the Honour Guard due to operational commitments and have heard no more from the USAF Honour Guard, but a worthwhile commemoration is in place. *Tony*

"Old Faithful"

75th anniversary commemoration 23rd June

This year is the 75th anniversary of the crash of the American B17 Flying Fortress named "Old Faithful" which occurred on 25th June 1944. Every year since then Wincanton has shown its gratitude for the sacrifice made by the crew who gave their lives avoiding a catastrophic crash onto the town of Wincanton. It was a quiet Sunday afternoon on 25th June 1944 in the sleepy country town, children were at Sunday school and the Second World War seemed a distant happening when things suddenly changed into a scene of carnage and devastation of horrific proportions. Around 3 pm a low rumbling noise was heard and the whining aircraft engines very close to the High Street in Wincanton. People came out to look and an American bomber was flying very low in obvious distress. The aircraft was heading directly for the town centre, the pilot struggled with the controls and people could actually see the crew jettisoning heavy equipment to try to make the plane lighter. As the pilot 2nd Lt. Peter Mikonis attempted to bank the badly damaged aircraft it shuddered and blew up on the far edge of town over Snag Farm. All nine brave men onboard we instantly killed. People ran towards Bayford and the scene in front of them has been described as something out of hell, with fires burning and ammunition exploding. It was a situation too horrific to describe.

We are commemorating this heroic event on Sunday 25th June at 3 pm (assembly at 2.45 pm) and we will have representatives of the Military, Town Council, King Arthur's School and hopefully townspeople. After the ceremony, which is conducted by the Revd. Alison Handcock, we will retire to the Memorial Hall Sun Lounge for complimentary tea and cakes. We also hope for a small exhibition to be set up including artefacts from the aircraft. On the actual anniversary - 25th June at 3 pm we will have a very simple wreaths laying at the Bayford Hill memorial.

D - Day commemorated



Georgina laying the wreath with Tony

A group of branch members commemorated D - Day on 6th June at 11 a.m. with the laying of a special 75th anniversary wreath at the War Memorial by Georgina Old. Georgina's father served on D-Day in Royal Navy landing craft at Omaha Beach. His landing craft was sunk by enemy fire but he survived, albeit having lost most of his clothes. Georgina tells that then he was given an army uniform once he was ashore and was able to get back to a ship. It is not commonly known that it was mainly Royal Navy personnel piloting and commanding landing craft of all nations troops on D-Day. As well as our wreath we left the wreath previously placed at the memorial by John Keynes's family as we felt it very poignant it be left there as John served in the Normandy campaign and would have liked it there to honour his comrades.

Hero remembered

Although we laid our branch wreath on 6th June to commemorate D-Day I was at the War Memorial again with Jill Carswell for her to lay a wreath on 7th June for a very special reason. It was 75 years ago that day that an action occurred which was not only stunning in the bravery shown but the tenacity of those who took part. Most of us have heard of PLUTO (pipeline under the ocean) with regard to D-Day and the ingenious pipeline leading from England under the English Channel to Normandy. It enabled petrol to be supplied to the invading forces, but how many know of the act of extreme bravery it took in capturing the French end of the pipeline? Well Jill Carswell certainly does because her uncle, Captain Terence Cousins, of 47 Royal Marine Commando played a major part in capturing the small fishing port of Port en Bessin 12 miles from Gold Beach. If you go there, to this day his name is known, as well as a street named after him there are several memorials commemorating him and the action. Just ask in the tourist office about Captain Cousins as I did on my last visit and I was given a wealth of information.

47 RM Commando landed 12 miles from Gold Beach 420 strong and then infiltrated behind enemy lines to sneak up to Port en Bessin from the rear. The area was heavily fortified and defended by crack German troops of the 352 Infantry Division, part of whom wreaked havoc on the Americans a few miles away at Omaha Beach. During the landings 47 Commando lost a fifth of its strength, killed, wounded and lost and most of their heavy weapons including mortars and radios. On the morning of 7th July, they got safely through the outer defences of Gold Beach and supplemented their weapons with German Schmeisser and Spandau machine guns captured in firefights along the way. While clambering up the slopes of cliffs overlooking the port they were caught out by fire from two German gunboats in the harbour and suffered 11 killed 17 wounded (and one captured). They were in a desperate position when Captain Cousins found a solution, on a recon patrol he discovered an undefended zig zag path. In true commando style, yelling and screaming and firing from the hip, they charged the enemy bunkers. One of the commandos Bren-gunner Arthur Delap, recalled, "when the grenades went off in front of us it was terrible. I was concussed for a few seconds. Then I started firing again after that they waved white handkerchiefs and surrendered". Beside him was Captain Cousins laying dead after leading from the front in a full on frontal attack. Many of the commandos believed he should have won the Victoria Cross but he was awarded a Mentioned in Dispatches - probably because his heroism could not be verified by his superiors. The path is visible today, as are many of the old bunkers and trenches. Above the town at the site of the action is a justified memorial to 47 Commando and Captain Cousins.



Jill lays her wreath



An amazing story unfolded

In 2010 one of our members, Jean Pipe, asked me to help find the story of her father Lance Corporal Humbert Cox, who was a regular soldier. He was killed in action on 23rd May 1940. Jean had approached his regimental museum - The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry to try to find more information about the circumstances of his death. The response was rather vague and negative, as the DCLI were nowhere near where Jean's father was buried in the village of Pernes Lez Boulogne and his record did not help as he was only posted missing. His body was found near Boulogne and the Regiment were the rear guard at Dunkirk at least 50 miles away. The first thing I checked was what was happening on 23rd May 1940 (other than the Dunkirk evacuation) and to my utter amazement the puzzle started to fall into place. At the time of the Dunkirk evacuation other actions were obviously taking place nearby notably the defence of Calais where Churchill had ordered the garrison to hold on until the "last man" and not to surrender, this was to relieve the pressure on Dunkirk and divert the Germans onto the British garrison at Calais and keep as many Germans as possible distracted from Dunkirk. Calais did hold out for a long time and fighting was furious, but lacked support and planning was poor. Although Churchill ordered tanks we could ill afford to lose to be sent to Calais, when they arrived they were fully greased up for storage and it took so long to degrease that they were never effectively brought into action. Another sad episode was the sending of a fully "mechanised modern unit" - The Queen Victoria Rifles, (QVR) a London TA unit. They were modern for the time and were equipped with motor cycles and side cars with Bren guns mounted on the sidecar. Each soldier was equipped with a pistol too! The QVR were rushed to Calais before their equipment arrived and when it did the motor cycles were minus their Bren guns so that the soldiers were only armed with service pistols against German artillery and tanks. It is now we come to Boulogne a few miles away! In Boulogne the French garrison were bravely holding out and totally surrounded by the Germans. Led by brave officers they retreated to the old citadel which had high Napoleonic built walls and they came under what seemed like a medieval siege, with the Germans using ladders to try to break into the French defences. The French were also holding back the Germans from the port of Boulogne. Churchill decided to show solidarity with the French (remember the main part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were at Dunkirk surrounded and awaiting evacuation) and he decided to send British troops to help stiffen the French Army in Boulogne. On paper two battalions of the 20th Guards Brigade were available. They were amongst the finest troops Britain could muster at the time - comprising 2nd Bn. Irish Guards and 2nd Bn. Welsh Guards. But both battalions were under strength and in both cases were later asked to defend a perimeter far in excess of the force available. Humbert Cox was in Shorncliffe Barracks, near Dover on compassionate leave at this time and it is believed, to supplement the shortfalls in the Guards Division as a regular infantryman he would have been ordered to join those plugging the gaps in the Guards Division. Another soldier L/Cpl George Wilson, a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps was in France. His last letter to his mother said he was in "Nanes" in France, but I believe he misspelt where he was and it was probably Nantes (in his rush he missed the "T"). Nantes in the Loire is near an area known to have had large BEF supply bases at the time, especially in Brittany nearby. George was posted missing on 10th May, this was the day German forces invaded France. Records do not show where he was in his truck that day but with the confusion of the German invasion but it is not surprising. The Germans reached Abbeville on the English Channel on 20th May and the British counter attack at Arras was 21st May - George could have been anywhere in the chaos. Somehow George made his way to Boulogne probably in the hope of evacuation from there. Here is where Humbert and George are brought together forever because they are both buried side by side in that village near Boulogne. After my visit in 2010 an English family living in the village introduced me to the man whose father found the bodies - less than 2 miles from the Welsh Guards lines in St. Martin, Boulogne where heavy street fighting took place and is in fact where the Welsh Guards Cemetery is. He told me with great emotion that the bodies were buried with their steel helmet, greatcoat and rifle - "we did this out of respect" he said because they were brave fighting soldiers. In 2011 a group from Wincanton RBL, including Jean, were invited to Pernes Lez Boulogne and attended the Liberation Day ceremony paying respects at the graves and at the village memorial to the French War Dead. In conjunction with George Wilson's relatives and Jean's family Wincanton RBL are hoping to make another trip around the 80th anniversary of the soldiers deaths. At present it looks like 8th May 2020 and I am asking any members willing to join us all would they please come forward to enable planning. *Tony*



L/Cpl Humbert Cox

Families Day at RNAS Yeovilton 29th May

Our good friends at 1 Regt. Army Air Corps invited the branch to have a stall in their area of the Families Day at RNAS Yeovilton on 29th May. Although the weather was not fantastic the visit turned out to be very productive. Present were Dave Roberts, Andy Chilton, Tony Goddard and Steve Lee along with Steve's daughter Isabelle. We decided to donate any money we received to the branch Poppy Appeal and brought with us Poppy merchandise and raised just under £50. We also mentioned it to Somerset Riders Branch and they brought a group to be next to us too.

Our link with RNAS Yeovilton are very strong and members are well aware that we are officially adopted by the Commando Helicopter Force (CHF) and they by us. It will be remembered that in the February/March edition of Sandbag we had an article in the "Looking Back" column in which we referred the official "adoption" of us and CHF back in July 2007 when CHF were on active service in Afghanistan. Links with CHF have been very strong over the years and this has not been forgotten by both parties.

At our stall on Families Day we were approached by Chief Petty Officer Freddy Davis who was deployed with 845 Naval Air Squadron on board the new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth which was then on a tour of duty in America. Freddy headed the Poppy Appeal on board the ship and it was decided that half be donated to Portsmouth RBL Poppy Appeal and half to CHF adopted RBL branch Wincanton. We are in the process of furthering our ties with CHF and the CHF PRO Maj (Retd) Lee



HMS Queen Elizabeth entering Portsmouth in 2017
(photo by Graham Lawrence)

Bower came to our stall coincidentally at the same time as Freddy was about to hand over the proceeds for Poppy Appeal so I leave it to Lee's report below to explain :-

"Whilst preparing to deploy with 845 NAS on HMS Queen Elizabeth last year, Chief Petty Officer Freddy Davis was unaware of what others were planning to do for the annual 'Royal British Legion (RBL) Poppy Appeal'. So in order to raise funds for the Appeal whilst they were away he sourced merchandise to sell to raise money. As the driving force and de facto Commando Helicopter Force lead, he planned to join forces with the ship's appeal to help with ships integration. With this in mind, and the backing of the Squadron Freddy liaised with the ship's chain of command and volunteered to take charge of the poppy appeal on the carrier. Helped by his Squadron and a couple of the ship's company, Freddy canvassed the ship's company, flying squadrons, embarked forces and F35 Lightning Integrated Test Force (ITF) in order to raise money and spread awareness on board. With large numbers of American service personnel onboard it became a good talking point and allowed experiences to be shared. The money raised through donations and merchandise sales reached £2900 and US coinage – the latter has yet to be exchanged for sterling. It was split so that the ship could pass £1400 to the Poppy Appeal via the RBL in Portsmouth and Freddy could present the CHF slice to the Poppy Appeal through RBL Wincanton, CHF's aligned RBL Branch. At the recent RNAS Yeovilton and CHF's Families Day Freddy handed over £1368 sterling and a large amount of American coinage to RBL Wincanton Branch. It was an amazing effort by Freddy, the ship's company, US personnel and 845 A Flt to raise the amount they did. "



Freddy with Dave and Tony

Indeed thanks most sincerely on behalf of Poppy Appeal and Wincanton RBL Branch to Freddy and all at CHF. We are looking forward to continuing of close relationship with CHF in the future.