



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

Editor Tony Goddard 01963-824193



NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

Volume 12 Issue 3

Branch secretary Arthur Pickup 01963-32952

May
2015

Next branch meeting 15th June at 7 p.m. in Millers Inn followed by social evening

Last branch meeting

All our plans for a joint Military/Legion social evening did not fully materialise because of two reasons. The large NATO exercise in Scotland took place during that period rather unexpectedly and most members of the Commando Helicopter Force took part. Prior to that we had indications that we could have expected several sailors and marines from the CHF attending. Secondly the Army Air Corps were still returning from Easter leave and the timing of the event was difficult for them. That being said we did have a successful evening because several members who do not normally attend branch meetings came, as did representatives of both the CHF and AAC. We had some very meaningful interaction and most importantly pledges of support for our Armed Forces Day event on 27th June. Also after that evening I had contact from others in the AAC who told me they would form a team for the Skittles Evening on 18th May Legion members vs Military - we already have enough for a team. Hopefully in the coming months we can continue our contacts with our military friends.

Poppy Appeal working group

Since Arthur resigned in the winter I have been occupied forming a working group to take over the task. I am pleased to announce an excellent group of people have come forward for this purpose. They are :- Mollie Carr, Julie Eddington, Sandra Goddard, Sandra Hansford, Teresa Harper, Christine Rose, and Joanne Sweeting. As required by Legion rules one person must be official Poppy Appeal Organiser and signatory. Sandra Goddard has volunteered and Sandra Hansford the Deputy.

Frank Coffin



Our dear friend and staunch branch member Frank Coffin passed away on 26th March and several branch members attended the packed St. Michael's Church at Penselwood for his funeral. Although wishing to join the RAF when he was old enough, Frank was working on the local farms as a lad and he was required to continue as a reserve occupation. He did however join the local Home Guard. Frank was brought up and lived most of his life in Penselwood and after Frank and Elaine married they had a tied cottage in the village. Upon leaving farming Frank trained in the skills of making chair covers and chair upholstery. He was a keen sportsman and also went gliding as a hobby. Our thoughts and prayers go out to Elaine at this time and I know that he will be sadly missed not only in the branch but in the community.

Festival of Remembrance 2015—7th November

Every year the branch is allocated four tickets to the event, please let me know by 1st July if you wish to be considered for the tickets.

A year of many poignant anniversaries

This year seems to be full of poignant anniversaries, we have just celebrated VE Day and commemorated the 100th anniversary of Gallipoli but a very significant anniversary is this month which I do not think we should we should overlook. It is the 75th anniversary of the Evacuation of Dunkirk, an event which had the outcome have been different we would not have life as we know it today.



The Dunkirk evacuation, code-named Operation Dynamo, also known as the Miracle of Dunkirk, was the evacuation of Allied soldiers from the beaches and harbour of Dunkirk, France, between 27 May and 4 June 1940. The operation was decided upon when large numbers of British, French, and Belgian troops were cut off and surrounded by the German army during the Battle of France in the Second World War. In a speech to the House of Commons, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the events in France "a colossal military disaster", saying that "the whole root and core and brain of the British Army" had been stranded at Dunkirk and seemed about to perish or be captured. In his *We shall fight on the beaches* speech on 4 June, he hailed their rescue as a "miracle of deliverance".

After Nazi Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, marking the beginning of the Second World War, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was sent to aid in the defence of France. Germany invaded Belgium and the Netherlands on 10 May 1940, and three of their Panzer corps attacked France through the Ardennes and rapidly drove to the English Channel. By 21 May, the German forces had trapped the BEF, the remains of the Belgian forces, and three French armies in an area along the northern coast of France. Commander of the BEF General John Vereker, 6th Viscount Gort, immediately saw that evacuation across the

Channel was the best course of action, and began planning a withdrawal to Dunkirk, the closest location with good port facilities. On 22 May 1940, a Halt Order was issued by the German High Command, with Adolf Hitler's approval. This gave the trapped Allied forces time to construct defensive works and pull back large numbers of troops toward Dunkirk, to fight the Battle of Dunkirk. From 28–31 May 1940, in the Siege of Lille, the remaining 40,000 men of the once-formidable French First Army fought a delaying action against seven German divisions, including three armoured divisions.



On the first day of the evacuation, only 7,669 men were evacuated, but by the end of the eighth day, a total of 338,226 soldiers had been rescued by a hastily assembled fleet of over 800 boats. Many of the troops were able to embark from the harbour's protective mole onto 39 British destroyers and other large ships, while others had to wade out from the beaches, waiting for hours in the shoulder-deep water. Some were ferried from the beaches to the larger ships by the famous little ships of Dunkirk, a flotilla of hundreds of merchant marine boats, fishing boats, pleasure craft, and lifeboats called into service for the emergency. The BEF lost 68,000 soldiers during the French campaign and had to abandon nearly all of their tanks, vehicles, and other equipment. In his speech to the House of Commons on 4 June, Churchill reminded the country that "we must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations." The events at Dunkirk remain a prominent memory in the United Kingdom.

St. Andrew's Church, Mells

It never ceases to amaze me that we have such prominent people who are associated with our local area. One such person I stumbled upon was Siegfried Sassoon who is buried in St. Andrew's Church, Mells, which is not far from Bruton and Frome. Sassoon's life was often shrouded in controversy and indeed he was a very unusual person, it is not right of me to pass any opinions on his life or his poetry but I would like just to highlight briefly parts of his military career during the Great War.

He was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers, as second lieutenant on 29 May 1915. On 1 November his younger brother Hamo was killed in the Gallipoli Campaign, and in the same month Siegfried was sent to the 1st Battalion in France. Sassoon's periods of duty on the Western

Front were marked by exceptionally brave actions, including the single-handed capture of a German trench in the Hindenburg Line. Armed with grenades, he scattered sixty German soldiers: "He went over with bombs in daylight, under covering fire from a couple of rifles, and scared away the occupants" A pointless feat, since instead of signalling for reinforcements, he sat down in the German trench and began reading a book of poems which he had brought with him. When he went back he did not even report. Colonel Stockwell, then in command, raged at him. The attack on Mametz Wood had been delayed for two hours because British patrols were still reported to be out. "British patrols" were Siegfried and his book of poems. "I'd have got you a D.S.O., if you'd only shown more sense," stormed Stockwell.

Sassoon's bravery was inspiring to the extent that soldiers of his company said that they felt confident only when they were accompanied by him. He often went out on night-raids and bombing patrols and demonstrated ruthless efficiency as a company commander. Deepening depression at the horror and misery the soldiers were forced to endure produced in Sassoon a paradoxically manic courage, and he was nicknamed "Mad Jack" by his men for his near-suicidal exploits.

On 27 July 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross; "For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination all the killed and wounded were brought in." Despite his decorations and reputation, in 1917 Sassoon decided to make a stand against the conduct of the war. One of the reasons for his violent anti-war feeling was the death of his friend David Cuthbert Thomas, who appears as "Dick Tiltwood" in the Sherston trilogy. Sassoon would spend years trying to overcome his grief. At the end of a spell of convalescent leave, Sassoon declined to return to duty; instead, encouraged by pacifist friends he sent a letter to his commanding officer entitled *Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration*. Forwarded to the press and read out in the House of Commons by a sympathetic member of parliament, the letter was seen by some as treasonous ("I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority") or at best as condemning the war government's motives ("I believe that the war upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest"). Rather than court martial Sassoon, the Under-Secretary of State for War, Ian Macpherson, decided that he was unfit for service and had him sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh, where he was officially treated for "shell shock". At Craiglockhart, Sassoon met Wilfred Owen, a fellow poet who would eventually exceed him in fame. It was thanks to Sassoon that Owen persevered in his ambition to write better poetry. A manuscript copy of Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* containing Sassoon's handwritten amendments survives as testimony to the extent of his influence and is currently on display at London's Imperial War Museum. Both men returned to active service in France, but Owen was killed in 1918. Sassoon, despite all this, was promoted to lieutenant, and having spent some time in Palestine, eventually returned to the Front. On 13 July 1918, Sassoon was almost immediately wounded again—by friendly fire when he was shot in the head by a fellow British soldier who had mistaken him for a German near Arras, France. As a result, he spent the remainder of the war in Britain. Siegfried Sassoon died in 1967 a week before his eighty-first birthday. He had made it known that when he died he wished to be buried in the church yard at Mells, Somerset, close to the grave of Father Ronald Knox. Knox had been a Roman Catholic priest who preached at the church in Mells and who helped Sassoon to convert to Roman Catholicism.



Passchendaele Tree



Planting the Passchendaele tree

In 2010 David Mills and I made one of our many visits to Passchendaele near Ypres in Belgian Flanders. On the gentle slope of Passchendaele Ridge is the Tyne Cot British Cemetery (so named after the original buildings of the village which before the many bombardments resembled the cottages overlooking the River Tyne). Behind the cemetery are now young oak trees which were planted in the last 20 years. As we have one soldier on the wall of the missing at Passchendaele and fifteen more from Wincanton buried or commemorated in the Ypres Salient area I thought it would be appropriate if I tried to grow an oak tree from the acorns which were laying on the ground - ground which is soaked in British blood. One acorn grew and the sapling from this was planted on 18th April During our Coffee Morning. Members gathered around to mark the planting. One of our members, Ann Trott, said she was so moved by the significance of the sapling that she wrote a poem (below).

I was an acorn at Passchendaele
Upon a hill not in a vale
An English man took me back home
In 2010 now I have grown.

I'm planted here at Memorial hall
Where I can thrive & grow quite tall
Just now I am a little oak
So I need now a real good soak

The war was won at massive cost
of oh so !! many good lives lost
Grown from the blood of many men
I'm planted here so think of them

Armed Forces Day 27th June

It sounds like our Armed Forces Day event on 27th June will be much bigger this year so we have decided to book the Memorial Hall. Both the Army Air Corps and the Commando Helicopter Force have promised to support us with personnel and items of interest which means that our intended venue, the Millers Inn grounds might be too small. We intend having exhibits from the military, marquees, a licensed bar and barbecue. The Wincanton Silver Band have agreed to play for us in the afternoon and we will have items for the children including a bouncy castle and face painting. Inside the hall will be stalls and demonstrations. We also intend running our very popular book stall and a Poppy Appeal stall with children's items. Please contact me if you have any books for the sale. All proceeds will go to Poppy Appeal 2015.

Forthcoming trips

Our popular trip to Dawlish on **30th May** still has seats available so please contact me as soon as possible if you wish to attend. Departure is at 8.30 a.m. from the Memorial Hall and the cost is £12 adults £6 children. Our June trip has now been arranged and will be to Lynmouth and Lynton on **20th June** — costs the same as usual and departure again at 8.30 a.m.

Sandbag sent by post

As I mention every year, the cost of sending Sandbag by mail continually goes up and we do need those on the mailing list to send us the postage. Most have already done so but if you are on the mailing list and have forgotten would you please be kind enough to send me a cheque for £6 made out to Wincanton RBL.
Thanks Tony

Special invitation from our Affiliated Cadets

On Tuesday 26th May our affiliated cadets of Yeovil Sea Cadets & Royal Marine Cadets are holding their Royal Navy Parade at the Fleet Air Arm Museum RNAS Yeovilton from 7 p.m. until 9.30 p.m. All our members are invited to this splendid evening which will be well worth going. Please advise Arthur if you wish to attend.