



"SANDBAG"
WINCANTON AND DISTRICT
ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER
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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

Volume 8 Issue 4

Branch secretary Arthur Pickup 01963-32952

May
2011

Next branch meeting 20th June - 7 p.m.

A dream come true !

You may remember that when I first heard about the new housing development in Wincanton I approached the building company with the suggestion that the new



roads be named after our War Dead of the Second World War. To my delight they agreed and now that some of the roads are built I was very pleased to see some of the street names being put in place. The first is Crocker Way, which is a prominent road off the main through road which is Atkins Hill. Crocker Way is named after Victor Crocker RN who was killed in action on HMS Jaguar in 1942 and has no known grave but the sea. Atkins Hill is named after Harry Atkins RN., killed in action on HMS Glowworm who also has no known grave, his cousin Arthur Atkins of the Wiltshire Regiment killed at the Anzio Landings and William Atkins (not related to them) who was killed in North Africa with the East Surrey Regiment.

I was so thrilled to see the first two signs and believe our heroes will truly "never be forgotten".



Presentation to King Arthur's School.

Over the years Wincanton branch has enjoyed a very close relationship with King Arthur's School and to recognise this Arthur and I presented the school with a Certificate of Appreciation and plaque on 26th April. For many years now I have visited the school during Remembrance period and given them a talk on the significance of the poppy and the school observance of Remembrance is always magnificent. During the building of the new War Memorial the school were most supportive and took part in events around it. During the 60th anniversary commemoration of the "Old Faithful" crash the school took a major part and are always supportive of the values of the Legion. We are very proud of the school and are pleased to recognise them formally. We were most pleased that County Councillor Anna Groskop was able to attend the presentation.

Students of King Arthur's School with (L to R)

Cllr. Anna Groskop, Arthur,

Mrs. Emma Wilkes and Tony.



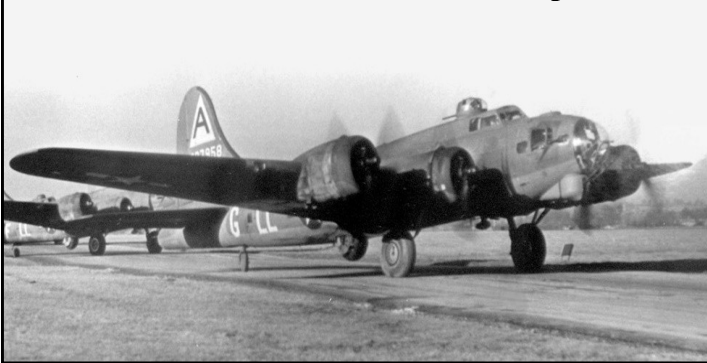
Stop press !

Our group has just returned from attending the Liberation Day commemoration in Pernes Lez Boulogne France. A full report will be in next Sandbag.

67th Anniversary of the crash of “Old Faithful” 25th June 2011

Most of us are familiar with the basic story of the crash of “Old Faithful” but many of us are not fully aware about how the memorial came about and indeed the background to that Sunday in 1944 when “Old Faithful” crashed.

Old Faithful 91st Bombardment Group USAAF



The B17 Flying Fortress was on a raid to Toulouse in the South of France from its base in Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, which was a diversion for the remainder of the squadron to drop arms and ammunition to the French Resistance. “Old Faithful” was flying in the lower lead position, probably the most dangerous location in the whole operation. The idea behind the raid, which was against the Luftwaffe airfield at Blagnac, was to draw away fire from the other bombers dropping the supplies. On the approach to the bomb run, “Old Faithful” was hit in the starboard inner engine and smoke trailed from

the aircraft causing the pilot to pull off in the direction of Spain. Whether the neutral Spanish refused to let it land or whether the pilot changed his mind is not known but the outcome was that “Old Faithful” then flew the 900 nautical miles back to England. As well as the one engine being out the aircraft was heavily damaged by anti aircraft fire. Limping across Lyme Bay another engine failed and the pilot declared a full emergency, choosing the former U.S. Base at Zeals as his emergency diversion point. The pilot was unaware that Zeals, by this time home of Mosquito aircraft of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, was actually on high ground—and the aircraft was losing height all the time. Over Sherborne people on the ground saw heavy equipment, such as machine guns and radios being jettisoned in a vain effort to lighten the plane. It then flew over what is now the Maddocks Pavilion sports complex on a course directly for the centre of Wincanton town. Witnesses say they saw the aircraft bank in response to the crew trying to steer it away from the town, but in doing so it blew up in ball of flames. Children rushed out of Sunday school and many people ran towards the flaming crash site which was directly at Snag Farm. This was then the property of Michael Watts’s farmer father, the milk hall was demolished and farm buildings badly damaged. The scene was one of indescribable horror, which I won’t repeat the awful descriptions witnesses gave me. All nine crew were killed outright, but in an ironic twist of fate the tenth crew member (B17 normal complement was 10) for some reason that day had not reported for duty and they flew without him. Late in the evening of 26th June a jeep arrived in Wincanton from “Old Faithful’s” base in Bassingbourn. Along with crash investigators was Joe Harlick, the squadron photographer. Joe visited Wincanton in 2004 and has given us a massive amount of detail of the tragedy including some of the photographs shown here. Joe told me how difficult it was finding Wincanton, as being just after D-Day, all signposts had been removed and the driver was very confused. The awful scene which greeted them stuck in Joe’s mind but he did not actually realise the aircraft was in fact “Old Faithful”.

Joe did not remember the town name was Wincanton.

As early as September 1944 an appeal was launched to erect a memorial to those crewmembers who died by the Chairman of Wincanton Parish Council, Mr. W.H. Budgen, The Rector of Wincanton, Rev. W.E. Hodgson and Mr. Spencer of the Chamber of Commerce. By the end of September the fund stood at £75, a good sum in those days. On 19th October 1944 a public meeting was held in the North Street school room to decide when the appeal should close and by then had raised £124.5s.3d. At the meeting it was decided that a memorial plaque be mounted at Bayford as near to the crash site as possible. It would be almost 10 years until the memorial was actually erected.



The Memorial which stands on Bayford Hill was finally in place for unveiling on American Independence Day 1954 just over 10 years after the crash. In those days we still had American bases around the country and there was an Air Force base at Shaftesbury and there were substantial British military establishments in the area enabling strong military representation at the unveiling ceremony. In 1954 the A303 was still the main road to the West Country before the bypass was built and even though it was a Sunday afternoon closure of the road caused major disruption. Crowds of townspeople lined the pavements on Bayford Hill, many of whom actually witnessed the tragic event. Mr. Harold Budgen who was chairman of the organising committee and Mr. R. Cary chairman of the Parish Council along with the then Rector, the Rev. P.A. Allan officiated over the unveiling. The commander of Shaftesbury U.S.A.F. Base and an honour guard represented the United States and trumpeters from 1st. Royal Dragoons sounded Last Post and Reveille with the British Army being represented by a detachment from the Royal

THE WESTERN GAZETTE, FRIDAY, JULY 9, 1954

MEMORIAL TO AMERICAN AIRMEN



Major Herman Haygood, officer commanding the U.S.A.F. Base at Shaftesbury (on left) on Sunday—American Independence Day—unveiled this plaque set in a wall on Bayford Hill by the people of Wincanton in memory of the nine members of the crew of a Flying Fortress which crashed in flames nearby while returning from an operational sortie shortly after D-Day. With Major Haygood is his Padre, 1st Lt. P. O. Higgins, the Rector of Wincanton (the Rev. P. A. Allan), Mr. R. Cary (chairman of Wincanton Parish Council) and Mr. Harold Budgen (chairman of the organising committee).

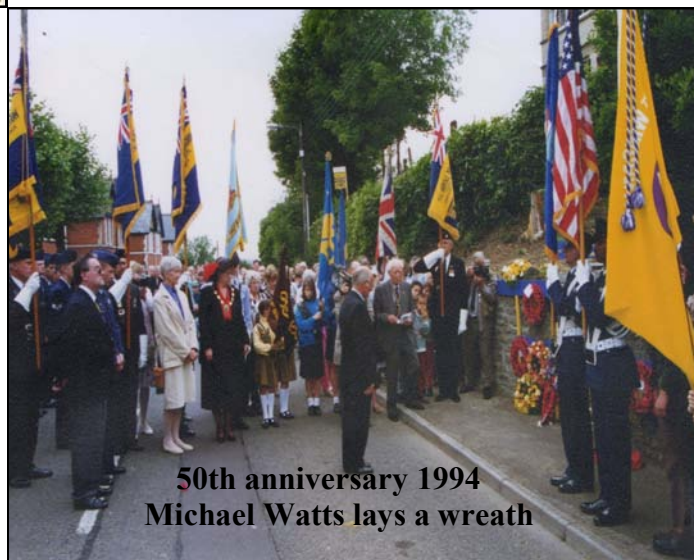
Army Service Corps based at Houndstone Camp Yeovil. The memorial was set in the same site as it is today and Mrs. Alice Day who lived in “Highlands” Bayford granted a deed in perpetuity to the town granting ownership of the wall in which the memorial stands.

Ceremony in 1984



In 1984 a major commemoration took place on Sunday 24th June and the road was closed. A very large crowd turned up to hear the Chairman of the Town Council, Mr. Leslie Tucker give the welcome and prayers were led by the Rector, Rev. A.T. Hughes and the United States Air Force sent representatives. The anniversary was then continued to observed ever since and in 1994 - the 50th anniversary - a large event took place, this time David Cave who was organising it managed to contact Mrs. Ann Funk the sister of the pilot, (Peter Mikonis) and she visited Wincanton and laid a wreath. This anniversary fell on a Saturday and

although it was estimated around 300 people would attend the ceremony about 900 people lined the street and fourteen wreaths were laid. A full USAF Honour Guard was present and the Mayor, Sue Paddock, led the service of commemoration given by the new Rector, the Rev. Bill Pugh who served in the RNVR during the war. While the plans for the event were being made an aviation historian, Rex Poulton, came forward advising that he had in fact written a book on Old Faithful and many unknown facts came to light. As a branch we always observe 25th June with wreath laying and prayers but in 2004 the then Mayor of Wincanton, David Marsh asked me to organise the 60th anniversary.



50th anniversary 1994
Michael Watts lays a wreath

Cont: We handled this as a branch event and although County Standards were present David Hill, our then secretary, took command as Parade Marshal. The turnout was exceptional and well over one thousand people attended the event. As well as Mrs Funk coming over again we were very pleased that Joe & Jenny Harlick took part and were pleased to have the United States Air Attache from London attending as well as the USAF Honour Guard from RAF Fairford and the RAF contingent from RAF Lyneham. We were especially privileged too as Sir John Severn the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Somerset was the Queen's representative and the Sherriff of Somerset also graced us with his presence. As we all know on 25th June this year a new brass plaque along with the actual propeller from "Old Faithful" will be erected at the crash site on Snag Farm and Mr & Mrs Ostroumoff have invited the branch to tea after the unveiling at 3 p.m. The propeller was held in trust at the Town Museum but Michael Watts, who owns it, has donated it to the new memorial. Please do not forget to give your name to me if you wish to attend as there is very limited space at the farm. I am very pleased to say that Lt. Peter Mikonis's sister Ann Funk will be coming over from the U.S.A. to attend the unveiling.

June events

11th June. Poppy Party. Cost £5
Memorial Hall 7.30 p.m. This will include a fish & chips supper and entertainment from John Gudge singing Country Music. Refreshments and beer/wine available for a small donation.

18th June. Trip to Bournemouth.
Depart Memorial Hall at 9 a.m. and return at 6 p.m. with time for a full day in Bournemouth. Cost £10.

25th June. "Old Faithful" new memorial unveiling at Snag Farm. Assemble 2.45 p.m. and unveiling at 3 p.m. The new memorial takes the form of plaque with the original aircraft propeller from "Old Faithful" incorporating part of the memorial. There will be a special evensong service at Stoke Trister next day (Sunday 26th June). Names are required due to the restricted area of the farm. Please let me know as soon as possible if you wish to come. Tea and biscuits will be available afterwards courtesy of the farm owners the Ostroumoff family. In addition to the new memorial unveiling we will assemble as always at the Memorial on Bayford Hill to place wreaths and say prayers. This will take place at 11 a.m. The sister of the pilot, 2nd Lt. Peter Mikonis, Mrs. Ann Funk, will be taking part, having travelled from the United States. Maximum attendance would be appreciated as a mark of respect.



**2004 Parade
With Percy, Ron
& Paddy leading**

Veterans Day 19th June

At the April branch meeting several members asked if we would be attending the Veterans Day Parade as a branch in Weymouth on 19th June. I do not believe there would be enough people to justify arranging coach or minibus but if you are interested please let me know.

Diary date

Otter Nurseries have confirmed our Poinsettia Trail and pre Christmas lunch at Ottery St. Mary as 19th December, nearer the time I will give full details but please make a note in your diary as this will be a popular trip.

Brian needs help

So far Brian Sweet has raised over £3000 for the "troops sweets" by selling books. He is having eye surgery soon and will not be able to drive. Jim Currie has arranged to have the books stored in the High Street but what Brian will need is some help moving the books to his stall on the corner of Carrington Way some Fridays. If you can help please call Brian on 01963-31856.

**Poole trip great fun -
including the coach breaking down !**

We had nearly a full coach load of members for the trip to Poole on 16th April. The weather was excellent and feedback was that everyone enjoyed themselves, we even had an unexpected coach breakdown which did not spoil the day.