



"SANDBAG"
WINCANTON AND DISTRICT
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 Editor Tony Goddard 01963-824193

NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Branch secretary Arthur Pickup 01963-32952

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Next branch meeting 19th September 7 p.m.

Dorset Regiment Memorial on the Somme battlefield

On 7th May this year a new memorial to one of our local regiments was erected on the Somme battlefield. The unveiling ceremony was conducted by the Reverend Nick Wall Chaplain to the Dorset Regimental Association, in the presence of Mrs Anthony Pitt-Rivers, The Lord-Lieutenant of Dorset and General Sir John Wilsey President of the Regimental Association. The memorial commemorates the 4500 men of the Regiment who died during the Great War. The site of the memorial at the entrance to the Lonsdale Cemetery is appropriate because three battalions of the Dorsets fought nearby. The Memorial takes the form of a carved obelisk in Dorset stone from Portland. On one side of the column is the Dorset Regimental badge and on the reverse are the County arms of Dorset. Around the base are carved the Dorset Regiment First World War battle honours that are shown on the Regimental Colour, and an appropriate quotation from Thomas Hardy. I had the privilege to visit the site and I laid a cross on behalf of the branch. *Tony*



Patricia Hughes

I am sad to say Patricia Hughes passed away on 9th July aged 94. Many of us had a great affection for both her and her late husband Patrick. It was only a couple of years ago that Patricia and Patrick still took part in Poppy Appeal collections when both of them were well into their 90s. They were also regulars at Coffee Mornings and branch meetings until very recently. Patricia came from a military background, her father was an officer in the Royal Artillery who served in and survived the Great War. He then continued in the Regular Army after the war and much of Patricia's early life was spent in married quarters around the world. When the Second World War broke out Patricia gained a commission in the Women's Royal Naval Service and married Patrick in 1941 whilst he was serving in the Sherwood Foresters. Patrick then joined Military Intelligence and they later spent some time in India. She was a fine lady and she will be greatly missed.

Your cooperation please

I am receiving phone calls on Legion matters at very strange times and I would be grateful if you would only phone me on weekdays on Legion business between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. I do hope you understand that I am not a paid official and undertake Legion work voluntarily. If I am not home on a weekday I have an answer machine and I will get back to you. *Tony*

Blank booking form

Please use this form to book any event you wish to attend. If you don't want to cut the magazine additional copies of form available at meetings.
 Cut here

Trip to **Date**
Name **No: of tickets**
Signed **Chq/cash enclosed**

“The Great Escape”

Following our stated wish to pay respects to our Country's War Dead where ever possible, we were contacted by Doug Louth whom you may remember visited Kohima and enabled us to place a wreath at Wincanton soldier Tony Fraser's grave there. Doug and his wife Chris were visiting Poznan, Poland and agreed to placed wreaths at the graves of the RAF personnel involved in the “Great Escape”.

In the Spring of 1943, Sqdn Ldr. Roger Bushell RAF conceived a plan for a major escape from Stalag Luft III POW camp, which occurred the night of March 24–25, 1944. Bushell called a meeting of the Escape Committee and not only shocked those present with its scope, but injected into every man a passionate determination to put their every energy into the escape. The simultaneous digging of 3 tunnels would become an advantage if any one of them was discovered by the Germans, because the guards would scarcely imagine that another two could be well underway. The most radical aspect of the plan was not merely the scale of the construction, but the sheer number of men that Bushell intended to pass through these tunnels. Previous attempts had involved the escape of anything up to a dozen or twenty men, but Bushell was proposing to get in excess of 200 out, all of whom would be wearing civilian clothes and possessing a complete range of forged papers and escape equipment. Three tunnels named "Tom", "Dick" and "Harry" were started. More than 600 prisoners were involved in their construction. The tunnels were very deep — about 30 feet below the surface and were very small, only 2 feet square, though larger chambers were dug to house the air pump, a workshop, and staging posts along each tunnel. The sandy walls of the tunnels were shored up with pieces of wood scavenged from all over the camp. Many pieces of wooden furniture and bed slats were used and a variety of other materials was also scavenged. One such item was Klim cans; tin cans that had originally held powdered milk, supplied by the Red Cross for the prisoners. The metal in the cans could be fashioned into a variety of different tools and items such as scoops and candle holders. Candles were fashioned by skimming the fat off the top of soup served at the camp and putting it in tiny tin vessels. Wicks were made from old and worn clothing. The main use of the Klim tins, however, was in the construction of the extensive ventilation ducting in all three tunnels. As the tunnels grew longer, a number of technical innovations made the job easier and safer. One important issue was ensuring that the person digging had enough oxygen to breathe and keep his lamps lit. A pump was built to push fresh air along the ducting into the tunnels. The pumps were built of odd items including major bed pieces, hockey sticks, and knapsacks — as well as Klim tins. Later, electric lighting was installed and hooked into the camp's electrical grid. The tunnellers also installed small rail car systems for moving sand more quickly. The rails were key to moving an estimated 200 tons of sand in a twelve-month period they also reduced the time taken for tunnellers to reach the digging faces. With three tunnels, the prisoners needed places to dump sand. The usual method of disposing of sand was to discreetly scatter it on the surface. Small pouches made of old socks were attached inside the prisoners' trousers. As the prisoners walked around, the sand would scatter. Sometimes, the prisoners would dump sand into small gardens that they were allowed to tend. As one prisoner turned the soil, another would release sand while the two appeared to carry on a normal conversation. The prisoners wore greatcoats to conceal the bulges made by the socks and were referred to as "penguins" because of their supposed resemblance to the animal. More than 200 were recruited who were to make an estimated 25,000 trips. The Germans were aware that something major was going on, but all attempts to discover tunnels failed. Eventually, the prisoners felt they could no longer dump sand on the surface as the Germans became too efficient at catching prisoners using this method. After "Dick's" planned exit surface became covered by a camp expansion, the decision was made to start filling the tunnel up. As the tunnel's entrance was very well-hidden, "Dick" was also used as a storage room for a variety of items such as maps, postage stamps, forged travel permits, compasses, and clothing such as German uniforms and civilian suits. Surprisingly, a number of friendly guards co-operated in supplying railway timetables, maps, and the large number of official papers required to allow them to be forged. Some genuine civilian clothes were also obtained by bribing German staff with cigarettes, coffee or chocolate. These were used by escaping prisoners to travel away from the prison camp more easily, by train, if possible.

Roger Bushell's grave





Sqdr.
Leader Roger
Bushell RAF

In September 1943 the entrance to "Tom" became the 98th tunnel to be discovered in the camp. Guards hiding in the woods watching the "penguins" noticed sand was being removed from the hut where Tom was located. Work on "Harry" ceased and did not resume until January 1944. "Harry" was finally ready in March 1944, but the American prisoners, some of whom had worked on the tunnel "Tom", had been moved to another compound seven months earlier. No American prisoners of war actually participated in the "great escape", with one possible exception, Flt Lt. E. G. Brettell RAF(VR) of 133 (Eagle) Squadron. Previously, this escape attempt had been planned for the summer as good weather was a large factor of success. However, in early 1944 the Gestapo had visited the camp and ordered increased efforts in detecting possible escape attempts. Bushell ordered the attempt be made as soon as the tunnel was ready. Of the 600 prisoners who had worked on the tunnels only 200 would be able to escape in their plan. The prisoners were separated into two groups, and had to wait about a week for a moonless night so that they could leave under the cover of complete darkness. Finally, on Friday, March 24, the escape attempt began and as night fell, those allocated a place in the tunnel moved to Hut 104. Despite these problems, 76 men crawled through the tunnel to initial freedom. Finally, at 4:55 a.m. on March 25, the 77th man was seen emerging from the tunnel by one of the guards. Those already in the trees began running while

New Zealander Sqdn Ldr. Leonard Henry Trent VC, who had just reached the tree line stood up and surrendered. The guards had no idea where the tunnel entrance was, so they began searching the huts, giving the men time to burn their fake papers. Hut 104 was one of the last huts searched and despite using dogs the guards were unable to find the entrance.

Following the escape, the Germans took an inventory of the camp and found out just how extensive the operation had been. 4,000 bed boards had gone missing, as well as the complete disappearance of 90 double bunk beds, 635 mattresses, 192 bed covers, 161 pillow cases, 52 20-man tables, 10 single tables, 34 chairs, 76 benches, 1,212 bed bolsters, 1,370 beading battens, 1219 knives, 478 spoons, 582 forks, 69 lamps, 246 water cans, 30 shovels, 1,000 feet of electric wire, 600 feet of rope, and 3424 towels. 1,700 blankets had been used, along with more than 1,400 Klim cans. The electric cable had been stolen after being left unattended by German workers; as they had not reported the theft, they were executed by the Gestapo. From then on each bed was supplied with only nine bed boards which were counted regularly by the guards. Of 76 escapees, 73 were captured. Hitler



Poznan Old Garrison Cemetery

initially wanted to have not only the escapees shot as an example, but also Commandant von Lindeiner, the architect who designed the camp, the camp's security officer and the guards on duty at the time. Göring and others argued against any executions as a violation of the Geneva Conventions. Hitler eventually relented and instead ordered Himmler to execute more than half of the escapees. Himmler passed the selection on to General Artur Nebe. Fifty were executed singly or in pairs. Roger Bushell, the leader of the escape, was shot by Gestapo official Emil Schulz just outside Saarbrücken, Germany.

The Gestapo carried out an investigation into the escape and, whilst the investigation uncovered no significant new information, the camp Kommandant, von Lindeiner-Wildau, was removed and threatened with court martial. Having feigned mental illness to avoid imprisonment, he was wounded by Russian troops advancing toward Berlin while acting as 2nd in command of an infantry unit. He later surrendered to advancing British forces as the war ended was imprisoned for two years and testified during the British SIB investigation concerning the Stalag Luft III murders. Originally one of Göring's personal staff, after being refused retirement Von Lindeiner had been posted as Sagan Camp Kommandant. He had followed the Geneva Accords concerning the treatment of POWs and had won the respect of the senior prisoners. Von Lindeiner was released from prison in 1947 and died in 1963 at the age of 82.

PTO

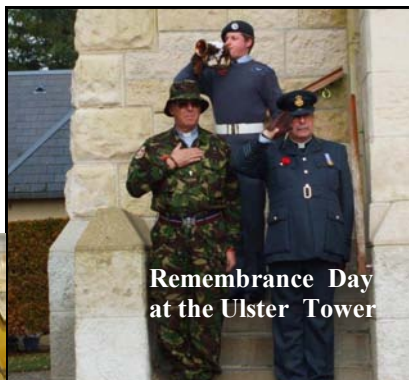
CONT: On 6 April 1944, the new camp *Kommandant*, Oberstleutnant Erich Cordes, informed the Senior British Officer that he had received an official communication from the German High Command stating that 41 of the escapees had been shot while resisting arrest. Cordes was later replaced by Oberst Franz Braune. Braune was appalled that so many escapees had been killed, and allowed the prisoners who remained at the camp to build a memorial, to which he also contributed. It still stands today. General Arthur Nebe, who is believed to have selected the airmen to be shot, was later executed for his involvement in the July 20 plot to kill Hitler. When the British government learned of the deaths, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden promised that, at the end of the war, those responsible would be brought to exemplary justice. When the war ended, a large manhunt was carried out by the Royal Air Force's investigative branch. Several Gestapo officers responsible for the executions of the escapees were executed or imprisoned. After the War the cremated remains of the murdered airmen were recovered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and were buried at the Poznan Old Garrison Cemetery which Doug and Chris visited.



Our branch tribute left at Poznan

Another good home found

When the branch visited the Somme a few years ago we visited the Ulster Tower, which commemorates the 36th (Ulster) Division who served with exceptional valour there in 1916. I remarked to the curator that I owned a bugle which I was told was carried by one of the regiments from Ulster who served on the Somme on 1st July 1916. In fact research has proved it was indeed carried by the Royal Irish Fusiliers and I was told it would be a most treasured item if I donated it to the Ulster Tower, this I did two years ago. Since then the battered old bugle has been lovingly cleaned and is again in working order. The curator is retiring and I have asked him to take personal possession of it and ensure it is returned to Ulster and placed in a safe position there. He has told me that last November the bugle was played on Remembrance Day at the Ulster Tower and last winter it was played in City Hall Belfast. By the Queen's Bugler. I know it is in safe hands !



Branch annual dinner 14th October

The premier event of the year is rapidly approaching and I can now tell you we have booked the Sparkford Inn, Sparkford for the annual dinner on **14th October**. Their good reputation in the area is well known and I am very excited they are able to accommodate us all. We will be having our usual two course meal (main and dessert) and for the first time we will have a carvery meal. I have also included transport to the Inn from Wincanton and return afterwards in the price of £16 as well as including the port for the "Loyal Toast" and tea/coffee afterwards. You will find an application form inside this Sandbag and I would be obliged if you could complete and return to me along with a cheque (to Wincanton RBL) a.s.a.p. I am in the process of organizing a guest speaker and will advise you the final details shortly. Dress code for men is the same as previous years, in that, those who wish may come in black tie, lounge suit or blazer and the ladies in evening wear or smart casual if they wish.

Dates for your diary

20th August. Lulworth Cove & Swanage. Cost £10.
24th September Exmouth with a stop at Honiton for the Saturday market. Cost £10.
23rd October Taunton for County Poppy Appeal Launch, full details next month, but will include parade and events by 40 Commando Royal Marines, cost £10.
5th November Bristol, afternoon in central Bristol then on to Colston Hall for the Festival of Remembrance. Cost for coach £10 and entrance to Colston Hall £10.
19th December Ottery Garden Centre at Ottery St Mary. Poinsettia trail, behind the scenes and Christmas lunch. Coach costs £10, again, full details next month.