



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Next branch meeting 17th June 7 p.m.

One of our members at Baroness Thatcher's funeral



Not many Legion branches can claim that one of their members was in the Guard of Honour at St. Paul's Cathedral - but Wincanton branch can ! Paddy Fox, our resident Chelsea Pensioner, was in fact in a prominent position on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral along with other Pensioners at the funeral. He was also interviewed on the TV News. Baroness Thatcher's ashes will be laid to rest next to her husband Dennis who is also buried within the cemetery at the Royal Hospital Chelsea. It must have been quite a task too as Paddy had to remain in position for quite some time. Well done Paddy.

Festival of Remembrance 2013

It must be 3 years since we attended the Festival of Remembrance at the Albert Hall in London. I have been asked by a couple of members if we intend attending the event this year to which my frank reply was that it would strictly depend on a firm commitment and payment when the seats are booked. No cancellation could be considered and anyone cancelling must find alternative purchasers or lose the money and we would need at least 40 people. Seats go on sale on 2nd July and unlike other years a branch or member can only book 8 tickets This does not appear to be a problem as other branch officials (or members) can undertake to book 8 tickets until the full amount required is achieved.

The event takes place on Saturday 9th November and the afternoon performance commences at 2 p.m. Seats in the centre circle cost £18 each and side circle £15. There are other seats available and the stalls start at £25 each. We would have to charge £15 each for the coach as the cost of coach hire to London includes other charges which must be covered.

We would need to leave at 8.30 a.m. and would be home around 9 p.m. Please urgently contact me if you are interested as tickets are sold quickly once released. As usual the branch gets 4 tickets for the evening performance which will be released on 2nd July too.

Bath & West Show

Again this year the RBL County of Somerset will be having a stall at the Bath & West Show and they are looking for volunteers to help running it. The dates are 29th May until 1st June inclusive and members need not attend more than one day if they wish (more is possible). The advantage to members is that they only assist on a roster basis on the day and they do get time off to visit the Show attractions, they also get free admission passes to enable them to attend. If you are interested please contact Arthur or myself for further information.

Coffee Morning 25th May

Our next branch Coffee Morning is on Saturday 25th May at 10 a.m. in the Memorial Hall. If anyone has any raffle prizes I would be obliged to hear from you.

69th Anniversary of the crash of "Old Faithful"

The 69th anniversary of the crash of "Old Faithful" is on **25th June**. We will assemble at the memorial on Bayford Hill at 10.45 a.m. for wreath laying and prayers at 11 a.m. Please make every effort to attend.

Arctic Convoys Medal at last !

The Arctic convoys of World War II were oceangoing convoys which sailed from the United Kingdom, Iceland, and North America to northern ports in the Soviet Union - primarily Arkhangelsk (Archangel) and Murmansk, both in modern day Russia. There were 78 convoys between August 1941 and May 1945 (although there were two gaps with no sailings between July and September 1942, and March and November 1943), sailing via several seas of the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans.

About 1400 merchant ships delivered vital supplies to the Soviet Union under the Lend-Lease program, escorted by ships of the Royal Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, and the United States Navy. Eighty-five merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships (two cruisers, six destroyers, eight other escort ships) were lost. The Nazi German Kriegsmarine lost a number of vessels including one battleship, three destroyers and at least 30 U-boats as well as a large number of aircraft. More than 3000 men died serving on the convoys.



HMS Beagle

In February the government announced that at long last a special Arctic Convoys Medal would be struck and our member Bert Bentley received his recently. Bert learned morse in the Home Guard before receiving his call up papers in 1943 and with these skills he joined the Royal Navy where he qualified as telegraphist. He first saw active service during the Normandy Landings on HMS Beagle a "B Class" Escort Destroyer.

It was in July 1944 and HMS Beagle, under the command of Lt. Cdr. C.D.T. Williams RN, was assigned to an escort group with convoys to Russia and through the harsh northern winter of 1944 Bert completed several tours of duty back and forth to Russia. On one of his first trips he experienced the reality of the journey to Russia when his ship was torpedoed and dive bombed by German land based aircraft from Norway, luckily though the ship was not hit. It was a grim experience with sub zero temperatures and everything freezing up. As a telegraphist his location in the radio room on the ship was directly under the twin 4.7 inch guns and it was very difficult reading the morse whilst the ship was at action stations and the guns firing. In those days the head sets were made of hard Bakelite and very uncomfortable. Bert continued on the Russian Convoys throughout the winter of 1944/45 and one of the most successful voyages was that of Convoy JW62 during the November and December which sailed from the Clyde destined for the Kola Inlet. The Convoy Escort consisted of 2 Escort Carriers and 21 Escort Vessels covered by the Cruiser Bellona and 10 Destroyers, including the Beagle. The Convoy consisted of 30 Freighters 17 U Boats were known to be operating off the Kola Inlet but no ships were lost. In the far northern waters sometimes the sea was quite calm and often could be seen the "Arctic Smoke " a vapour which rises from the surface of the sea because of the temperature differential between the sea and the cold arctic air above. But on the return journey escorting Convoy RA82 it was quite different, one of the Escorts HMS Cassandra was hit by a torpedo from a U-Boat – U365, which was the only U-Boat to make contact. Cassandra was badly damaged but U365 was subsequently sunk by aircraft from the Carrier HMS Compañia. HMS Beagle upon arrival at Loch Ewe was detached for repairs and in February 1945 was redeployed to the Western Approaches. Bert remembers there was not much gratitude shown by the Russians for the extreme efforts and sacrifices of the Royal Navy. In fact during those winter months he never set foot ashore in Russia and the British ships had to be moored alongside oilers, refuelled and replenished with fresh water and then turned around to the run the gauntlet of the Germans on their return.

In March 1945 upon return to Plymouth Command and during this period because the threat of air attack from French airfields had receded convoys were then travelling through the English Channel. During April HMS Bulldog participated in the Blockade of Biscay and then on 7th May came the German surrender. HMS Beagle along with HMS Bulldog had the distinction of liberating the Channel Islands, the only part of Britain to have been occupied by Nazi Germany during the war. At first the very strong German garrison refused to surrender until they had direct orders from Berlin and a stand off occurred until on 9th May 1945. Guernsey was liberated first but the main German garrison was on Jersey. Then on the morning of 9th May HMS Beagle arrived off St. Aubin's Bay with Brig. General A.E. Snow on board accompanied by several large landing craft full of troops. The entire German garrison then surrendered and the Union Flag was unfurled again over the islands. The British garrison was in place and the Germans left in the same landing craft as prisoners of war. HMS Beagle then returned to Dartmouth where the ship paid off and was transferred to the reserve fleet until it was scrapped. Bert was then given a well deserved home leave. We are all pleased, I know, that Bert has now received his well deserved Arctic Convoys Medal so I asked Bert if he would bring the medal with him to the April branch meeting for us all to see, which he did.



Respects paid in France

It was two years ago almost to the day that several branch members including Jean Pipe and her son visited the village of Pernes Lez Boulogne to attend French Liberation Day which is on 8th May every year. Jean's father L/Cpl Humbert Cox was killed in action during the Defence of Boulogne in May 1940 along with another soldier L/Cpl George Wilson and are buried in the small village cemetery at Pernes Lez Boulogne. Our branch have gained a special relationship with the village and on my travels in France I try to call in and leave a fresh wreath for not only the two British soldiers but also a wreath for the village's own War

Memorial when possible. In the village is a British family, the Southwood's and they along with their two sons regularly ensure the graves are tidy and in a good condition. As Liberation Day this year was just two weeks away during my recent visit it seemed most appropriate to make a detour and leave fresh wreaths with the Southwood family. I was also in the Somme Region and Picardy and having removed the wreaths from the parish church last November which were replaced with fresh wreaths on Remembrance Sunday, instead of burning the old wreaths which were in good condition I took these with me and placed them on our soldiers from Wincanton's graves and memorials in France. As five of our soldiers are named on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme I laid a wreath there and also placed a wreath at the cemetery where many of the 8th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry are buried who fell on the 1st July 1916. In this cemetery is Pte. Walter Humphreys, a son of Wincanton and as he was a choir boy in our church I left one of the wreaths at his grave, which seemed most appropriate.

Trips off to a good start

Our first trip of the year was on Saturday 27th April and was very well supported. The weather held out for us and after nearly two hours at the Sidmouth Donkey Sanctuary we continued on into Sidmouth. Feedback from those present was very positive and there was substantial interest in the next trip to Bucklars Hard on 18th May.



June trip sounds a good one !

Our trip on **22nd June** to Dunster & Minehead is really shaping up well. We will leave Wincanton Memorial Hall at 9 a.m. and should get to Dunster around 11 a.m. Those who wish to can stay at Dunster after a coffee break or they can go straight on to Minehead. One option is that they may wish may take the steam train from Dunster to Minehead and re-join the coach there or if they wish to stay all day at Dunster we could pick them up on the way back. The cost of a single ticket on the train from Dunster to Minehead is for adults under 60 - £4, £3.60 for seniors and children £2 . It may be that many of us may wish to do this but we can we can make a decision on the coach as the coach will position itself finally in Minehead. As the coach will go through Dunster on the return journey a full day in Dunster is also possible. Cost is £12 adults and £6 juniors.

July 20th — Gloucester

The trip to Gloucester on 20th July is now available to book. Departure is 8.30 a.m. and with a stop on the way we should arrive in Gloucester around 11.15 a.m.— 11.30 a.m. Drop off points available are either Gloucester Quays shopping area or the main square by the Waterways Museum . Cost £12 each (half price for juniors).

Army Benevolent Fund events !

I have just heard of three ABF (Army Benevolent Fund) summer events which sound really interesting. On Saturday 31st August Hazelgrove School, Sparkford are hosting The Band of the Brigade of Gurkhas. The gardens are open for viewing and picnics are welcome for the event which starts at 7 p.m. (gates open for picnics at 5 p.m.) As well as the Gurkha Rifles there will also be the Silver Bugles of the Somerset Cadet Force and the Pipes & Drums of the Wessex Highlanders. At the end of the evening there will be a "Spectacular Firework Display". Entrance is £15 per adult and child £6. Then on Saturday 14th September there is a Military Tattoo at Taunton Racecourse which will include the original Military Wives Choir, Military Bands arena events and static displays. Finally The Band and Bugles of The Rifles will Sound Retreat on the Castle Green Taunton on 21st September the timings are yet to be set but it will be early evening. This event is totally free but admission is by ticket (donations on the evening). I intend going and if we can get enough we could hire a mini bus—let me know what you think ?

Marchwood Military Port Open Day 6th July

Our member Lt. Col. Colin Thomas who is OC 165 Port Regiment RLC (V) is in the process of obtaining invitations for a group of our members to visit Marchwood Military Port for the Open Day on 6th July. Col. Thomas is due to give an overview of the event at the branch meeting on 20th May and full details will be in Sandbag next month. Please let me know if you are interested in principle as there is not much time to organise after the June meeting.

Armed Forces Day 29th June

Our big summer event takes place at the Miller's Arms Wincanton on Armed Forces Day, 29th June. Full details will be in the June Sandbag and local press but please note the date. There will be lots going on throughout the whole day and evening.

Unique offer of gratitude

To celebrate Armed Forces Day, Crown Carveries are offering all serving military personnel and veterans a free carvery meal or breakfast between 24th and 29th June. For details and voucher visit Crown Carveries website, nearest Crown Carvery is Southampton or Bristol. Veterans must be wearing the lapel badge and serving military personnel must show ID along with the voucher.