



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Next branch meeting 21st October 7 p.m.

Our appreciation acknowledged

Now that Poppy Appeal 2012/13 has closed we have looked back on another excellent year and as mentioned last month £12,186 was raised. £400 of the total was raised by the Millers Inn at our first Armed Forces Day event. Arthur went along to the Millers and presented Dave Wiscombe with our Certificate of Appreciation.



Affiliation with Castle Cary Army Cadets

When the branch joined forces with Castle Cary branch it was realised that Castle Cary have a thriving Army Cadet Force unit and we decided to ask them if they wished to be affiliated with us (in other words be adopted by us).

I am very pleased to say that they do in fact want this and the official affiliation ceremony will take place after the October branch meeting on 21st October at 8 p.m. I am sure you know that we have two other cadet groups also affiliated to us which are Sexey's School Army Cadets and 2277 Squadron Air Training Corps., both of which work closely with us. We are greatly looking forward to our new cadet unit joining us and know that both organisations will benefit.

Branch AGM 4th November

The branch AGM is on 4th November and anyone interested in joining the branch committee please contact me. Would all the branch officers kindly confirm to me by 21st October if they wish to continue their roles. We are very pleased to have a full committee and all positions covered, which we hope to continue next year. We have had another successful year and we all go forward very positively into another year.

New Branch Standard

We are very pleased to say that our new branch standard has arrived and we are very satisfied with the quality. The new standard was purchased entirely from a bequest from the family of Ray "Ticky" Judd and a plaque will be attached to the staff in "Ticky's" memory. At the same time we purchased two new flag staffs - one for the new branch standard and the other to accommodate our new American flag, for use at "Old Faithful" ceremonies. The two staffs were paid for by donations from three branch members covering the £150 required. We are most grateful to all concerned.



Dennis Thomas

Dennis Thomas passed away on 14th August and branch members attended the funeral at Cucklington Church with David Bertie from Wincanton Silver Band playing Last Post at the graveside. Dennis was a very quiet, modest person and when he moved into Carrington House, Bill Rumbold and I visited him with a welcoming gift from the branch. Bill told me as others have, that Dennis was in the action at the Merville Battery on the morning of the D-Day Landings on 6th June 1944 and that he was a medic in the 9th Battalion The Parachute Regiment, having transferred from the Somerset Light Infantry. Coming from another generation than Dennis I glibly said to Dennis that I had just read the book on the epic action of the Paras at Merville and greatly respected what he had done. Dennis's reaction was totally unexpected to me, he broke down and became inconsolable, obviously remembering what must have been a very traumatic and awful experience for him. I obviously greatly regretted mentioning it and subsequently when we met again I did not remind him and he did not mention it. I always want to stick to fact and I have gleaned only a very small amount of information on this remarkable man.

What is known about Dennis and confirmed by him to friends was that he landed with the reinforcements in the action at Merville. Being a medic he landed by glider, not as the first wave did by parachute. He was most likely with the gliders that landed with the main body of the battalion around 1 a.m. on D-Day morning at what was known as Drop Zone (DZ) V between Merville and Varaville. As the glider landed Dennis once told of speaking to his comrade next to him and receiving no answer he prodded him - the soldier was dead shot through the canvas of the glider by ground fire or shrapnel. Dennis has not spoken much of the action so I believe out of respect I should record what he must have done and not make up anything dramatic (which it must have been). Here is the factual story of the epic action at the Merville Battery on D-Day morning :-



Horsa glider as used at the Merville Battery

The **Battle of Merville Gun Battery** occurred on 6 June 1944, as part of the Normandy Landings.

Allied intelligence believed the Merville Gun Battery was composed of heavy-calibre guns that could threaten the British landings at Sword Beach, only 8 miles (13 km) away.

The British 9th Parachute Battalion, part of the 6th Airborne Division, was given the objective of destroying the battery. However, when the battalion arrived over Normandy, their parachute descent was dispersed over a large area, so instead of over 600 men, only 150 with no heavy weapons or equipment arrived at the battalion assembly point. Regardless, they pressed home their attack and succeeded in capturing the battery, only to discover that the guns were old First World War vintage, without the range to trouble the landings. Using what explosives they had been able to recover, the surviving 75 men tried to disable the guns.

Once the paratroopers had withdrawn, two of the guns were put back into action by the Germans. Another attack the next day by British Commandos failed to recapture the battery, which remained under German control until 17 August, when the German Army started to withdraw from the area.

The Merville Battery was composed of four 6-foot-thick (1.8 m) steel-reinforced concrete gun casemates, built by the Todt Organisation. Each was designed to protect First World War-vintage Czech M.14/19 100 mm guns. Other buildings on the site included a command bunker, a building to accommodate the men, and ammunition magazines. During a visit on 6 March 1944, to inspect the defences, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel ordered the builders to work faster, and by May 1944, the last two casemates were completed. The battery was defended by a 20 mm anti-aircraft gun and several machine guns in 15 gun positions, all enclosed in an area 700 by 500 yards (640 by 460 m) surrounded by two barbed wire obstacles 15 feet (4.6 m) thick by 5 feet (1.5 m) high, which also acted as the exterior border for a 100-yard-deep (91 m) minefield.

Another obstacle was an anti-tank ditch covering any approach from the nearby coast. The commander of the battery was Oberleutnant Raimund Steiner, commanded 50 engineers and 80 artillerymen from the 1st Battery, Artillery Regiment 1716, part of the 716th Infantry Division.

Just after midnight on 6 June, the 9th Parachute Battalion's advance party landed with the brigade's pathfinders, and reached the battalion assembly area without any problems. While some men remained to mark out the company positions, the battalion's second in command, Major George Smith, and a reconnaissance party left to scout the battery. At the same time, Royal Air Force Lancaster bombers started their bombing run, which completely missed the battery, their bombs landing further to the south. The pathfinders in the meantime were having problems. Those who had arrived at the correct drop zone found their Eureka beacons had been damaged when they landed, and in the smoke and debris left over from the bombing, their marker lights could not be seen by the pilots of the transport aircraft. The main body of the 9th Parachute Battalion and their gliders were to land at drop zone 'V', located between the battery and Varaville from 1 a.m. However, the battalion was scattered, with a number of paratroopers landing a considerable distance from the designated drop zone. The officer commanding, Lieutenant-Colonel Otway, landed with the rest of his "stick" 400 yards (370 m) away from the drop zone at a farmhouse being used as a command post by a German battalion; after a brief fire-fight, they helped other scattered paratroopers, and reached the drop zone at 1 a.m. By 2:50 a.m., only 150 men had arrived at the battalion's assembly point with 20 Bangalore torpedoes and a machine gun. The mortars, anti-tank gun, mine detectors, jeeps, sappers and field ambulance section were all missing. Aware of the time constraints, Otway decided he could wait no longer, and the reduced battalion headed for the battery and joined up with Major Smith's reconnaissance party just outside the village of Gonneville Sur Merville. The reconnaissance party had cut a way through the barbed wire, and marked four routes through the minefield. Otway divided his men into four assault groups, and settled down to await the arrival of the three gliders.

In England, one of the gliders never left the ground, as its tow rope had snapped on taxiing. The other two gliders, unable to locate the battery, did not land where expected. On their run in, both gliders were hit by anti-aircraft fire. One landed around 2 miles (3.2 km) away, the other at the edge of the minefield. The troops from this glider became involved in a fire fight with German troops heading to reinforce the battery garrison. Otway launched the assault as soon as the first glider overshot the battery, ordering the explosives to be

One of the bunkers at Merville as it is today



detonated to form two paths through the outer perimeter through which the paratroopers attacked. The defenders were alerted by the explosions, and opened fire, inflicting heavy casualties; only four attackers survived to reach Casemate Four, which they disabled by firing into apertures and throwing grenades into air vents. The other casemates were cleared with fragmentation and white phosphorus grenades, as the crews had neglected to lock the doors leading into the battery. During the bombing raid, the battery's guns had been moved inside the casemates and the steel doors left open for ventilation. 22 Germans were killed and a similar number made prisoners of war during the battle. The rest of the garrison escaped undetected by hiding in the underground bunkers.

With the battery in their hands, but no sappers or explosives, the British gathered together what plastic explosives they had been issued for use with their Gammon bombs to try to destroy the guns. Just before 5 a.m., the battalion's survivors, just 75 men of the 150 who had set out, left the battery and headed for their secondary objective, the village of La Plein. The battalion, being too weak, only managed to liberate around half of the village, and had to await the arrival of the 1st Special Service Brigade later in the day to complete its capture. After the paratroopers departed the Germans reoccupied the battery position. but the Germans were unable to see Sword Beach from their command bunker, even though they were able to get two of the guns back in action, were unable to direct accurate fire onto the landings.

Poppy Appeal Launch 2013

October 26th is going to be a very big day for us for two reasons. At 7 p.m. in the Memorial Hall Wincanton Silver Band will be hosting an event for to launch our Poppy Appeal. A full programme has not been received yet but I will distribute it once it is received. In the morning we have a Coffee Morning starting at 10 a.m. Which coincides with a "Twice as Nice" sale in the main hall (not a Legion event) to which the public are invited to our tea/coffee bar. We also have the promise of an array of vintage military vehicles on display outside the hall and an exhibition inside. Again details will be advised once finalized.

Remembrance period

This year Remembrance Sunday falls on 10th November and the church service is at 3 p.m. (assembly at the Memorial Hall at 2.15 p.m.). The National Two Minutes Silence will be observed at the War Memorial, Memorial Hall on 11th November at 11 a.m. After which we will go to the Old Faithful Memorial on Bayford Hill to lay wreaths. Full details next month.

Coach trips next year

As we have a float to go into next year, it looks like coach trips will still be viable. I must keep within a rigid budget but am still able to find several places we have not been to for a while or at all and to keep the cost at £12. Amongst my ideas are Chichester, Bournemouth, Ilfracombe and Cardiff. I would appreciate anyone with suggestions for destinations let me know. I do appreciate the support of those making the trips and know that it is an enjoyable experience I would like to continue.

Evening at the Gurkha Tattoo

Although we did not have enough people to hire a coach a good size group attended the Tattoo featuring the Gurkha Rifles on 31st August at Hazelgrove School. Also at the event were the Wessex Highlanders and the Silver Bugles of the Somerset Army Cadet Force. A good evening was had by all.

Annual Dinner 4th October

Names are coming in very slowly this year for the Annual Dinner. Several people have said that they wished to attend but have not put their names down yet. We must give names and meal selections to the Olive Bowl by 27th September on which date we will close off the event. Please urgently contact myself or Arthur with your cheque for £16 and your meals selection and coach pick up information. To remind you, the menu is shown below :-

Choice of main course, either
Roast loin of Pork with a leek, Somerset cider & bacon sauce, or Roast Beef (cooked medium) with Yorkshire Pudding or Supreme of Chicken with a Wild Mushroom sauce. All served with roast potatoes and well cooked seasonal vegetables.

Choice of dessert, either
Raspberry cheesecake, or Lemon & Ginger Meringue Roulade or Classic Apple & Cinnamon Pie with Custard or Cheeseboard.

To finish
Coffee & mints

There will be coach pick up points at Springfield Road, Memorial Hall and South West Coaches garage

Bristol Festival of Remembrance 3rd November 7 p.m.

The main West of England Remembrance event is again at the Colston hall, Bristol this year. Tickets cost £10 and Arthur has a booking form if you need one. This year the Band of the Royal Regiment of Wales, The Military Wives Choir, The Royal Mail Choir and The Ship & Castle Theatre Company will be taking part.

Last coach trip of the season Paignton 21st September

We have had a good season of trips this year to several interesting places, the last trip of the year is to Paignton on 21st September. There are still seats available so urgently contact me if you have not booked and wish to go. Cost as always is £12 (under 16 years old £6) and we will be departing from the Memorial Hall at **8.30 a.m** to ensure we get a full day there. We will be home around 7 p.m.