



"SANDBAG"

WINCANTON AND DISTRICT ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER

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NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Next branch meeting AGM 19th October at 7 p.m. Memorial Hall

VJ Commemorations

As previously explained, August is traditionally a difficult month for holding events with so many members and supporters (including myself) away on holiday. August is also a month when all the affiliated cadet organisations have their summer camp so they too were not available, so Dawn Old organised events for the VJ commemorations under the umbrella of the Town Council. As I promised last month here is Dawn Old's overview of the events around the VJ Day commemorations. *Tony*



Sew & Sew winning window

Old's overview of the events around the VJ Day commemorations. *Tony*

“On Tuesday 11th August the Town Council ran two flag making workshops in the Town Hall for children and adults to come along and make flags to decorate the town for the VJ Weekend. The Children certainly embraced the workshop but it was also good to see the adults taking part and making their mark, even our very own Steve Lee made flags.

The flags were then used to decorate the Town Hall and other shops in the town. There were also flags hung from flag poles down through the town. There was a competition

between the shops for decorating their windows. This was judged by the Mayor and in first place was Sew & Sew, second place was Reed & Russell and in third place was Thomson Lettings.

On Friday 14th of August the Memorial Hall was decorated 1940's style for a celebration dance. There was a good few that took part in appropriate dress for that time period and the occasion as marked with a band called the Forces Sweethearts. A good evening was had by all including Maddie who started dancing at 8pm and didn't stop until gone midnight.

Saturday 15th August started with a more solemn procedure of bell ringing at the Church followed by the 11am silence and reading at the War Memorial. There was a second silence at 2pm along with a service of Thanksgiving. This was well attended. There was a cheque presentation to the Riders Branch of the RBL and a further collection during a substantial cream tea.

On Sunday there was a picnic at the recreation ground in aid of this years national Poppy Appeal.” *Dawn*



Thanksgiving service

Joe Fowler

It must be ten years ago now that I met a charming lady, Olive Tomkins, whilst writing the tribute book "Not Just Names" which told of those named on Wincanton Roll of Honour for the Second World War.

Mrs Tomkins said her brother who although was born and lived at Lawrence Hill, Wincanton, was not on the Roll of Honour. He is in fact on the War Memorial at Holton though. He was killed in action on 11th

September 1943 in Italy I and it now being almost 72 years ago to the day I felt it appropriate to tell his story again.

George Gilbert Fowler (known as Joe to his family and friends) was born at Lawrence Hill, Wincanton on 24th May 1922. He had one brother Ted, who was a Bevan Boy during the war (Bevin Boys were men sent to work in the coal mines instead of joining the military – they had no choice in the matter) and two sisters Olive (Marie) and Betty both of whom were in A.T.S. Anti Aircraft Regiments throughout the War. The family attended the Parish Church and sister Olive fondly remembers Joe and the other children going on regular treats by train to Burnham on Sea with the Sunday School which in those days was in North Street.

Upon being called up for the Army Joe originally joined the Somerset Light Infantry in late 1941 but remained with them only a matter of weeks. At the time many regiments were under strength and he was transferred to the 8th Bn. The Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment). The 8th Bn. of the Regiment was made up largely of soldiers who were originally in the TA and were at that time under training in Bury St. Edmonds.

On 25th January 1942 Joe was granted his last home leave and sent sister Olive a telegram at her ATS unit to see if she could meet him. It read " Am going on embarkation leave can you get home ?". Luckily she could and Olive met him at Templecombe railway station. Joe just had a few days at home and then was sent with the Regiment overseas, having been issued with tropical kit he knew he was in for a long sea journey. He was about to join the troopship HMS Orduna which was en-route to Bombay, India by way of the Cape of Good Hope.

On reaching Bombay the Fusiliers were then transported to Basra then on to Baghdad, Iraq. Joe was about to embark on a journey which took him throughout the Middle East seeing places he could only have dreamed of.

Because of the threat from Germany against the oil fields of Persia (now Iran) and Iraq a strong British force was being assembled to protect these. The Fusiliers underwent training in the Iraq Desert and remained at Kirkuk throughout 1942. By March 1943 the regiment was amongst many being detached to join the British forces in the Western Desert of North Africa. They traveled by road through Amman, Jordan, being early Spring it snowed heavily on the journey and the Battalion stopped for a day resting in Jerusalem where Joe and his comrades were allowed a day sightseeing. The convoy continued on through the Sinai Desert and crossed the Suez Canal into Egypt, they were joining up with the famed British 8th Army. Winter was turning into Spring by the time they reached the Western Desert and the troops were amazed to see flowers blooming in the desert. They were passing through places that had become household names in England from previous battles against the Italians and German Afrika Corps. Names like Sidi Barani, Hell Fire Pass and on into Cyrenaica until they ultimately reached Tobruk now scarred by the heavy fighting that had taken place there. Passing through Tripoli along the coast road and on into an amazing sight of the lush green plain of the foothills of the Atlas Mountains.

They had reached their final destination an assembly area at Sidi Bon Ali, Morocco on 22nd April. Ahead of them dug in were the German Afrika Corps, a battle hardened force of seasoned veterans who had fought long and hard and were a very formidable enemy. It was decided not to attempt a frontal attack on them and Joe's regiment along with others of the 56th Division moved around to join up with the 1st British Army battling its way to Tunis from the west. They found themselves quickly going into action within days against both the Germans and Italians, heavy fighting ensued. The 8th Royal Fusiliers supported by tanks of the 40th Royal Tank Regt., advanced across the bed of Wadi (River) Rherbi under a smoke screen but as soon they emerged



Joe as a boy

came under heavy fire. The Fusiliers scrambled up the slopes, Joe being amongst them, went through a mine-field and taking an enormous amount of casualties captured the German position at the top, the Major leading the assault was awarded the DSO. This and other actions were gradually wearing down the Germans and finally on 12th May 1943 they surrendered totally in North Africa. North Africa now being firmly in Allied hands, the invasion of Europe was being planned and Winston Churchill had long advocated an attack on what he described as the “soft underbelly of Europe” – Italy. Unfortunately he was not proved right and the Italian campaign was to be long, hard and very difficult. On 10th July 1943 the Allies landed on the beaches of Sicily, an island south of the Italian mainland. Opposition was not as heavy as expected and by August 1943 the Germans and Italians had been driven out of Sicily. Joe remained in North Africa with the 8th Fusiliers who were being held back for the invasion of Italy proper. On 8th September 1943 the Italian government finally capitulated and surrendered to the Allies, completely separately from Germany. The Italians then changed sides to the Allied cause and the Germans who were already well established in Italy occupied the country and continued to fight. By this time the Allies had already assembled an invasion force to attack the Italian mainland and were at sea when news of the Italian surrender came through. Salerno in the Bay of Naples was



Joe, pictured probably whilst in Kirkuk

the intended point of landing and the invasion was under the command of American General Mark Clark . The Fusiliers left Tripoli on 5th September and were at sea three days, the Battalion assaulted the beaches at 3.30 a.m. on 9th September and advanced 1 ½ miles inland to their objectives under intense fire. They were taking heavy casualties from German tanks and artillery and of the 730 Fusiliers that landed 76 were killed in the first day alone.

On 10th September the Battalion dug in around a farmhouse and spent the whole day bogged down. At 7.30 p.m. during the evening of 11th September the Fusiliers were attacked by tanks and infantry. At around 9 p.m. they counter attacked but by the end of the day 33 lay dead, amongst them was Joe Fowler, he was 21 years old.



Private George Gilbert Fowler is commemorated on the Cassino Memorial, Italy, panel 5

The tribute book to our War Dead of the First World War

It has been seven years in the making but now finally I have decided to close off the book about those shown on the Parish Church Roll of Honour of the First World War. I am now awaiting grants and sponsorship and hope to have the book available for Poppy Appeal Launch in October. As all the proceeds will go to Poppy Appeal 2015/16 the branch approved a donation (which included several specific donations from members) towards the book printing costs and a local arts grant has been requested, the local business community have also been contacted and I am hopeful of getting funding .

It has been a challenging quest because in the one hundred years since the Great War lots has happened not only with technology but also the fact that 2/3rds of First World War army records were destroyed during bombing in the Blitz in the Second World War. It has been an amazing experience for me as now I feel I “know” some of people mentioned and also some quite startling stories have emerged which I do not believe would have been known had not this book been put together. Many photographs of them have emerged and many family members have been in touch and together we have learnt a little more about these brave soldiers and sailors.

Book launch will be in October to coincide with Poppy Appeal and I will keep the cost of the book low to enable people in the town to buy a copy. *Tony*

Poppy Appeal 2015

This year we have two major events to launch Poppy Appeal 2015. The first will be our Coffee Morning on **24th October** and to coincide with the launch of the tribute book - which I have decided to call “More than just names” - the Roll of Honour of Wincanton of the Great War”. There will be an exhibition showing extra research items relevant to the book and the Great War.

We will also be having our ever popular book sale so if you have any books that we can sell please either bring them along or let us know in advance.

On **28th October** we will be having an evening of music of the 60s, 70s and 80s at the Unicorn Inn at Bayford, thanks to our good friend and supporter Richard Cummings. There will be more details in the October Sandbag but please make a note of the date in your diary. I will be arranging transport for those who require it.

Saturday **7th November** is the Badger Ales Race Day at Wincanton Racecourse. We will be having our affiliated cadet groups in attendance but as it is such a big event we do need some of our members to attend too. If we can get a rota worked out it would then be possible after the collecting slots to take in the atmosphere and not make the day a “chore”. Please let Sandra know if you can attend.

If you would like to sell poppies this year but are not on our existing list of sellers, please contact Sandra.

Annual branch dinner

I am very sorry to have to say that the branch Annual Dinner at the Memorial Hall on 9th October has had to be cancelled due lack of support. The caterers had advised me that it would only be viable if a minimum of 40 people were attending and at the time of me cancelling the event we only had 22 people booked. Those 22 people were keen (and a handful of others came forward later) to hold an event so I sought a “plan B”. I asked Dave Winscombe the licensee of the Millers Inn if he would be willing to hold a smaller dinner in the function room at the Millers Inn on the same night and time , he has agreed. The menu is slightly different but I am sure it will be good, I have contacted all those on the final list of 32 to make a new choice and the cost now will be £15 instead of £20. We will also have music after a short presentation from Lt. David Houghton RN.

AGM 19th October

Lots has been happening over the last year and I do feel I would like to discuss the future of the branch at the AGM. We also have the election of a committee and any outstanding nominations and confirmation of existing committee members should be submitted by 1st October. The AGM is in the Memorial Hall at 7 p.m. on 19th October.

Last trip of the year Teignmouth 19th September

There are still seats available for the trip to Teignmouth on Saturday 19th September which departs from the Memorial Hall at 8.30 a.m. tickets cost £12 as usual.