



"SANDBAG"
WINCANTON AND DISTRICT
ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER
 Editor Tony Goddard 01963-824193

NEWS FROM THE BRANCH

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Branch secretary Steve Lee 01963-34374

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2019

Next meeting Coffee Morning 18th May

"Old Faithful" Flying Fortress 75th anniversary

We have just heard that the Funk family, who are relatives of the pilot of "Old Faithful" are unable to make it this year. Over many years they have attended several commemorations and we are sad they cannot come. I have promised to send them lots of photos. Also I have not heard any more from the navigator's family so I assume they cannot come either.

There are still loose ends which still need tying up but our basic plans are taking shape.

The Honour Guard is set up and Wincanton Silver Band will be in attendance. Wincanton Youth Theatre Group will be there too.

Timings are :- assemble 2.30 pm at the Memorial Hall for the ceremony at 3 pm on 23rd June. We have booked the Sun Lounge of the hall and will be offering tea, coffee and cakes afterwards.

We have also been given the opportunity to use the grounds and facilities of the Dolphin Inn afterwards and we hope to do something there too.

A Sandbag will be published in June, in time for full details of all the June event.

2019 AGM

The AGM this year is on 17th June at 7 pm in the Stables of the Dolphin Inn. It is important that we elect a committee for the year 2019/2020 and it would be appreciated if members could attend. As I mentioned last year, I will be retiring as chairman at the AGM and we need to elect committee members at that meeting. Although I will stand down as chairman I will still be active in the branch and will assist the incoming chairman and continue to write Sandbag. Those wishing to seek re-election or others wishing to be elected to the committee should send notification to Steve Lee our secretary together with two seconders in writing by 10th June.

John Keynes

I am very sorry to have to report that John Keynes, one of our last surviving veterans of the Normandy Campaign died on 3rd April. John is held in very high regard and respect in the branch and is indeed a very sad loss. John was a very modest person and never spoke much



of his achievements and rarely if ever spoke of his active service during the Second World War. Ten years ago I did have a long chat with John and he did allow me to write the story of his exploits for Sandbag at that time. As we have many members who have joined in that 10 years and others who have asked me to share John's story again, I have decided to show John's story in the next pages. When John's wife Ruth died several years ago John decided to commission and pay for a display cabinet in the Parish Church for the Roll of Honour of the Second World War, which I had just written. John's family tell me it was his wish to provide a matching cabinet for the Roll of Honour of the First World War and they are coordinating this with the church. Our committee have decided to have the book of the First World War bound in a hard cover in time for the arrival of the cabinet. They also decided that as the original book of the Second World War was printed on ordinary paper it has suffered damp damage and we will have the book rebound and printed on a type of paper that will not suffer the same fate. This will be our branch commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the First World War and the books will be inscribed to this effect for posterity, complimenting the Roll of Honour with the story of those named on it.

John Keynes

Many of us attended John Keynes's memorial service on 15th April, the church was packed and it was very fitting to hear the wonderful tributes to John. Amongst John's many activities it was mentioned that he was very active in Wincanton Red Cross as well as Wincanton RBL over the years and there was a very poignant display (photo right) depicting this. I was very honoured to be asked by the family if I would supply the copy of Sandbag which was published in 2008 telling John's story I compiled after that "long chat" I had with him. When I read it again I realised that many members probably had not read that Sandbag and I think it is a good idea to give them the opportunity.



John Keynes enlisted in 1943 at the age of 17 years being assigned to the General Service intake he found himself at Colchester Barracks home of the West Country regiments. He then went on to Deepcut with the Royal Artillery and clearly remembers the old wooden huts at the time. After basic training John was posted to 110th Light Anti Aircraft Regiment Royal Artillery. Prior to D-Day the regiment were stationed at West Ham Stadium where John was able to see first hand the German flying bombs landing on London which was quite a frightening experience. His unit then moved on to Folkestone and on D-Day +17 (23rd June) along with units of the 43rd Wessex Division landed in Normandy, having been delayed by the awful weather. The Wessex Division had lots of West Country soldiers and old TA men predominantly from the Dorchester area. The division had been stationed in Kent for some time.

Having dug in the Wessex Division held a bridgehead across the River Odon and rapidly became surrounded on three sides by German Panzer units. The bridgehead shrunk to little more than the banks of the river and barely one mile wide. They were ordered to break out and capture Hill 112 which was the highest point of a ridge South West of Caen comprised of several villages undulating countryside and dense woods. It was remarked that "whoever controlled Hill 112 would control Normandy".

The Germans knew this and had defended it well with seasoned troops from the 9th & 10th Panzer Division with supporting Tiger and Panther tanks. The Germans clung on desperately and when they were driven off they counter attacked at once to regain possession. Between 29th June and 23rd July the hill changed hands many times and thousands of Allied and German troops were killed or wounded. The 43rd Division alone lost more than 2000 men in the first 36 hours of Operation Jupiter to regain Hill 112 and John sadly remembers the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry who set out with 800 men and only 38 returned unscathed. The attack which began on 10th July did finally dislodge the Germans but there was much bitter hand fighting in the waist high corn fields. Several SS troops manning concealed machine guns refused to surrender but the hill was finally taken.

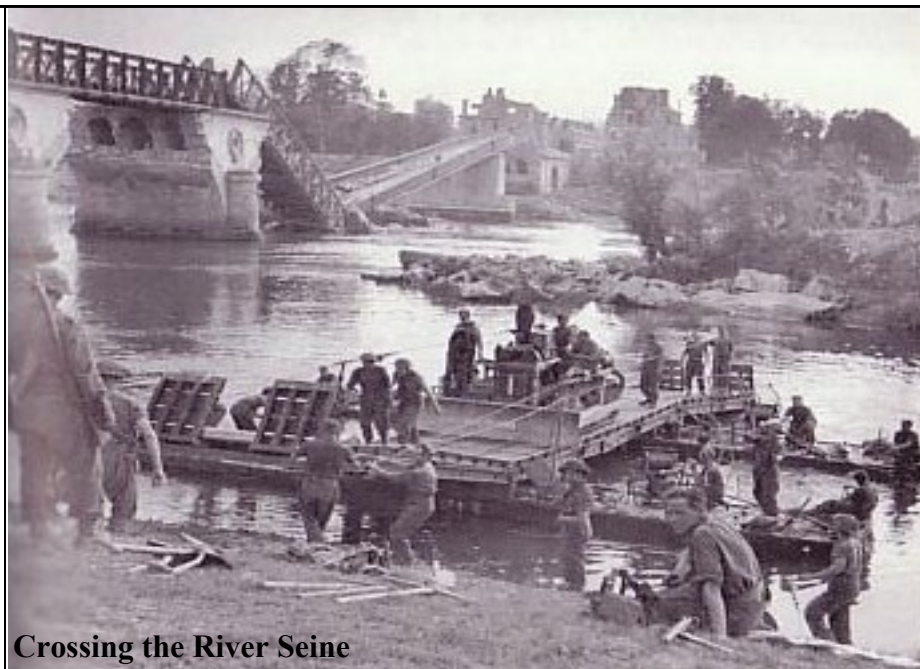
Having moved on from Hill 112 the next obstacle was the River Seine and the guns of John's unit accompanied by the 4th Bn. The Wiltshire Regiment assembled near the town of Vernon on the Seine. John remembered how unreal it was and so peaceful as they were located in a garden over looking the Seine and the birds were singing. The Wilts were sent in to clear the town and at 1845 hours a massive barrage of smoke shells was unleashed and the whole scene changed with the valley completely shrouded in smoke.



John in 1944

Supporting units needed anti aircraft support and artillery units had to be rapidly deployed as the Luftwaffe were very active. The bridges over the Seine had been blown by the Germans and Royal Engineers had erected a bridge on boats under cover of smoke. John remembered the strange feeling of travelling over the bridge in their vehicle towing the guns and bobbing up and down. They moved on away from the bridge and took up positions awaiting the expected air attacks, which came in very low, sometimes the gunners were unable to lower the guns low enough.

After crossing the Seine and moving through Belgium John's unit found itself attached to XXX Corps and by



Crossing the River Seine

this time it is the airborne assault at Arnhem - XXX Corps, commanded by General Sir Brian Horrocks, was spearhead on 17th September 1944 by the Guards Armoured Division. They would follow the narrow stretch of road in the direction of Eindhoven and Arnhem with the idea of linking up with the paratroopers at the bridges over the Rhine. The progress was painfully slow as the Germans constantly harassed the British, often attempting to block the road. We all know what happened at Arnhem and sadly XXX Corps could not get there quick enough with the resulting difficulties experienced by the paratroops. One of the incidents John recalled was reaching Nijmegen where the gunners were billeted in an abandoned house which had a supply of pickled pork it was a great change from army rations. He also remembered seeing another house nearby which was occupied by it's owner and every time shelling brought down some slates from the roof the Dutchman would be up on the roof replacing slates. It was also at Nijmegen where the unit found a German supply train fully loaded so it was black bread, sauerkraut and sausages for a while after that which was also a high spot (except for the sauerkraut he said !). In the winter of 1944 John crossed the German border at Brunsum near Maastricht along with American troops, the weather was awful, pouring rain and the conditions were very muddy and bleak. The unit returned to Brunsum and the commander called an informal troop parade when new clean uniforms were issued. The commander said he had an unpleasant task to perform and that was to select one man from the troop to transfer to the infantry. He knew of no other way to select that person so he said he would pick the youngest soldier – yes it was John ! The good news was that John would get home leave in time for Christmas 1944 and he said at that time of the war when he got home he did not have to buy any beers until he returned to the front line.

John underwent six weeks of infantry training and then was asked which infantry regiment he would prefer. Having made friends with a Scot who had also been sent for infantry training both had hoped for transfer to appropriate local regiments. The Scot preferred the Seaforth Highlanders and John opted for the Dorset Regiment. Posting duly came through and John was to be transferred to the Royal Scots Fusiliers (11th Battalion) and the Scot to the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry ! By the time John joined his new regiment who were in Holland the war was drawing to a close and everyone was being very careful to survive. He was in Holland at the time of the final German surrender in May 1945. As the German troops came in to surrender word went out in the Fusiliers asking for anyone with experience in handling horses. John admitted that he was able to ride a horse and now says his finest hour was being given command of a German horse transport unit. The Germans surrendered and John sat at the head of the column, rifle in hand, directing the Germans to their prison encampment. The German's horses were then given to the Dutch people to use on the farms. At one time John was assigned to form part of the honour guard once the Dutch Royal Family were returned to their homeland. He remembers wearing his Trews and Tam O'Shanta and the honour guard being complimented on their smart turn out. After the German surrender the Royal Scots Fusiliers became part of the Army of Occupation and John saw himself in Ludenscheid in the Ruhr. What he found most awesome was the destruction caused in the Ruhr by Allied bombing, he remembers totally devastated towns and truly awful sights. John was demobbed in April 1946.

Mobility scooter & riser chair

The Branch have received a very kind offer of a used Mobility Scooter and Electric Riser Chair, both in very good condition. If they would be of help to any members or anyone associated with the Royal British Legion then please call Rosemary on 01935 476086'.

Monthly coach trips

For a long time now I have been trying to continue the regular monthly trips but unfortunately this is not working out. Each month there is a crisis of numbers and most months we have ended up making a loss. The shortfall being made up from social funds acquired over the last few years. Costs of coach hire has increased greatly and even using the CAT Bus we end up making a loss, therefore sadly I must discontinue regularly holding a monthly trip. We can do trips on an ad-hoc basis if there is declared support beforehand (a CAT Bus has 16 seats). The trip to Exeter made a substantial loss and this situation cannot continue. We do have around £200 in the social kitty and can be used in future.

Armed Forces Day in Salisbury 29th June

We will definitely be holding the branch trip to Salisbury on 29th June for the national Armed Forces Day event. I have reserved two CAT buses and we can use both or just one. Basic details have just been released and we will probably leave around 8 am (possibly earlier once complete details are known) to ensure we get a good place there. The Armed Forces Military Parade in the city centre starts at 10 am and lasts about 45 minutes. Cost of transport to Salisbury will be £14 per person. There are events all through the afternoon and once we get a clear picture we will send out further firm information.

D-Day commemorations in Dorchester 6th June

Dorchester will be commemorating the 75th anniversary of D-Day 6th June with an event outside The Keep at 10.30 am. Parking is likely to be difficult so it would be very advisable to be there early.

Branch donation to Dunkirk Memorial House

Last year the committee approved a donation of £500 to be given to Dunkirk Memorial House. Dunkirk Memorial House in Taunton is one of The Royal British Legion's Care Homes, with a specialist Dementia care wing. Like every one of the Legion's Care Homes, it is exclusive to ex-Service people and their dependents. Dunkirk Memorial House can accommodate up to 60 people requiring nursing and personal care. All rooms have en-suite facilities. There is round-the-clock care from a team of experienced, registered nurses and dedicated care assistants.

The specialist dementia care wing, Dunkirk Mews was opened in 2015 and provides 24 hour dedicated personal care for people living with dementia. It has 30 single bedrooms, all with en suite / shower facilities. The Mews has three wings of 10 bedrooms leading into a central hub area. Each wing has its own lounge, dining room and bathroom. The central hub has a café, hairdresser and an activity area.

As we go to print we are trying to arrange a date to deliver the cheque and it is hoped we can arrange transport for members who wish to come. We believe it is important more people know about the valuable work Dunkirk House do.



Fovant Badges Memorial Service 2019

The Fovant Badges Memorial Service 2019 is on 7th July and commences at 2.45 pm

Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club

May breakfast is 25th May in the Stables of the Dolphin Inn at 9.45 am. Cost £6.95
Then every last Saturday of the month.