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# THE WIPERS TIMES

Newsletter of The Royal British Legion Brussels Branch

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## New Year's Greetings

On behalf of the newsletter coordinators and Branch members, including Jean-François Husson, Alain Brogniez, and Branch Chair Dennis Abbott, who contributed no fewer than five articles to this January issue of The Wipers Times, may we wish all our readers the very best for 2026.

Despite the uncertainties of the present and the gloomy prospects, may the world be a friendlier and more peaceful place in the year ahead.

May each and every one of you enjoy many moments of joy and happiness.

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all*

*Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)*

In addition to the richly illustrated reports on the annual commemorations and events organised by the Brussels Branch, this issue includes great contributions by historian Dany Neudt about the Belgian Resistance during the German Occupation of Belgium and by David Lees and Ann Morley about the Standing with Giants installations in Normandy.

There are articles about war artists, poets and painters; excerpts from the Memoirs of George Beeston, born in Australia to a British father and Belgian mother, who was caught up by the horrors of war when Belgium was invaded in 1940; and part two of the highly entertaining childhood memories of Branch member Colin Puplett.

We trust you will enjoy reading this January issue of the Newsletter.

*Michael Whitburn & Scott Wilson, Newsletter coordinators*

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### Contributions

If you wish to make a suggestion or propose an article for the next ***Wipers Times***, please send an email to Michael Whitburn ([michael.whitburn@vub.be](mailto:michael.whitburn@vub.be)) and Scott Wilson ([scofranwil@hotmail.com](mailto:scofranwil@hotmail.com)).

### Website and social media

-  Bookmark our **website**: <https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/>
-  Join us on **Facebook** [Royal British Legion Brussels](#)
-  Follow us on **X** [@RoyalBrussels](#)
-  Follow us on **Bluesky Social** [@rblbrussels](#)
-  Watch our videos on **YouTube** [@royalbritishlegionbrussels](#)
-  See our photographs on **Instagram** [royalbritishlegion.bxl](#)

### Back issues

Back issues of the ***Wipers Times*** filled with news and stories relevant to our branch can be downloaded from the website.

## A word from the Chair



Dear friends,

Now I'm semi-retired, I have more time to enjoy reading books.

I don't know about you, but I'm a slow reader. This always seems to surprise people, especially if they know I've spent most of my career in journalism, tackling fast-moving stories and tight deadlines.

My other half Laura will devour at least five books in the time it takes me to get through one – and that's reading in her second language.

I was, in fact, always a rather slow writer, too (and still am).

I found it much easier to edit other people's words, which is probably why my first boss, John Tanner of the *North Wales Weekly News*, fairly early on switched me from reporting duties to the production desk. It probably helped as well that I could spell a bit.

I still prefer reading the news every day, especially when I can get my hands on a 'proper' printed newspaper, but I have more time now to indulge in books.

I know I will never get through all the fact and fiction stacked on our shelves, but that doesn't stop me acquiring more books than I can possibly read.

For Christmas, I asked the family for *M19* and *The White Lady* by Helen Fry. They duly arrived under the tree and both went straight to the top of my reading list. As I write this, I'm already halfway through *M19*, which tells the story of the secret operation responsible for supporting escape and evasion during the Second World War.



Helen pays ample tribute to the Belgian-led undercover escape lines which helped hundreds of Allied servicemen, mostly air crew, to make their way through France and Spain to Gibraltar and back home to Britain.

The helpers and guides took amazing risks. If caught, they frequently faced the death penalty or, at best, torture by the Gestapo and a one-way 'Nacht und Nebel' ticket to a concentration camp.

One of the most striking aspects of Helen's account is the remarkably high number of women involved in running or supporting the escape lines. Some of you will no doubt already be familiar with figures such as Dédée de Jongh, Elvire De Greef, Elsie Maréchal (a mother and daughter of the same name), and the Dumon sisters, Michou and Andrée, of the Comet Line.

But there were certainly many more involved too.

Sworn to secrecy for everyone's protection – even the men they were smuggling to safety were not aware of the true identities of those helping them in most cases – a complete list of their names will likely never be known.

We owe a huge debt to historians such as Helen for ensuring that the bravery of these quiet heroines is never forgotten.

Another excuse for my slow reading in recent weeks is that I've been busy editing the extraordinary memoir of the late George Beeston (*right*). The Australian-born son of a British father and Belgian mother, George was brought up in Charleroi and 19 when the German Army swept through Belgium in May 1940.



After enlisting in the French Foreign Legion, he was fortunate to avoid being shot as a suspected partisan. In December 1942, he was sent to work as a forced labourer for Siemens in Nuremberg, leaving his mother, brothers and young fiancée behind.

He suffered harsh treatment, witnessed horrific sights and was extremely lucky to survive. It's an incredible story and I'm pleased that the branch will soon be publishing it as an e-book.

This has long been the wish of our member Colin Puplett, who received the original manuscript from George shortly before he passed away in 2012. Another branch member, the late Simon Robbins, began editing the text but publication plans were put on hold indefinitely when contact was lost with his family.

However, with the help of a German historian, I managed to track down George's son John last November. He helped fill in a few gaps and authorised publication. So, fingers crossed, this rare historical testimony and remarkable account of survival against the odds will finally see the light of day. You will find a first excerpt from George's book in this newsletter.

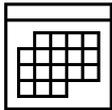
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The Brussels Battles and Book Club, run by our member William Bache and his daughter Christina, has published its calendar of events for the year ahead. They include a battlefield tour to France and talks on books about the Belgian agents who parachuted into occupied Europe during WW2 and the Belgian SAS. Helen Fry is among the authors invited to present their books. I have incorporated the agenda into our RBL branch online calendar, which naturally also includes details of all our commemorations and planned events. If you'd like us to include an event, please contact [Brussels.Chair@rbl.community](mailto:Brussels.Chair@rbl.community).

As always, my sincere thanks to everyone who has contributed to the latest edition of The Wipers Times, our must-read branch newsletter put together by Michael Whitburn and Scott Wilson.

All the best for 2026,  
Dennis, [Brussels.Chair@rbl.community](mailto:Brussels.Chair@rbl.community)

## Dates for the diary



Check the calendar on the website for new and changed events.

<https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/calendar/>

### February

**6 February** **First Friday of the Month** social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren

**13 February** **Book talk: La Guerre Secrete des Agents Parachutistes 1940-45.** Presentation by Olivier d'Olné (in EN). Fraternelle des Agents Parachutistes (Rue du Châtelain 46, 1050 Ixelles)

### March

**6 March** **First Friday of the Month** social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren

**13 March** **Book talk: The 5th (Belgian) SAS in World War Two.** Presentation by Marc Vindevogel. Fraternelle des Agents Parachutistes (Rue du Châtelain 46, 1050 Ixelles)

### April

**15 April** **Book talk: MI9: A History of the Secret Service for Escape and Evasion in World War Two.** Presentation by author Helen Fry. Club Prince Albert, Rue des Petits Carmes 20, 1000 Brussels

### May

**3 May** **British Day commemorations, Hotton:** Mass (9.45am) RBL service at CWGC cemetery (11.30am), followed by lunch and a ceremony at the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division memorial in La Roche-en-Ardenne

**24 May** **Memorial Day Field Trip:** Ardennes American Cemetery, Neuville-en-Condroz, Neupré



The 5th (Belgian) SAS in the Second World War *book that will be the subject of the book talk on 13 March.* Photo taken by François Lemaire during the Pegasus Walk at Bure on 4 January.

## Poppy Appeal launch

*Author: Dennis Abbott*

The three RBL branches in Belgium (Brussels, Ypres and Antwerp) teamed up with the UK Embassy for the launch of the 2025 Poppy Appeal on 23 October 2025. More than 150 guests attended the reception at the British Ambassador's official residence in rue Ducale/Hertogsstraat.

Our huge thanks to Ambassador Anne Sherriff and Defence Attaché Group Captain John Dickson, aka 'JD', for hosting the event in the elegant surroundings of the former Hôtel de Croÿ.



After a welcome speech, the Ambassador invited the three branch Chairs, Patrick Buerms (Ypres), Sid Wilkins (Antwerp) and Dennis Abbott (Brussels) to help cut a cake which was specially commissioned for the occasion and decorated with red poppies.

Two Chelsea Pensioners, former Coldstream Guards Norman Bareham and Tony Fox, resplendent in their iconic scarlet tunics, joined the group for photographs, as well as an immaculate Standard Bearer party: Ian Newbitt (Parade Marshal), Steven Van Krunckelsven, Frans Frison, Freddy Roiseux, Franky Wheaton and Faith Wittevrongel.



A splendid theatrical cast (Graham Andrews, Oliver Gray, Paul Meller, Tracie Ryan, Catriona White and Charles White) presented 'Lest We Forget', a topical selection of tunes and sketches written by Tracie, a member of the Brussels British Community Association (BBCA). It

was a fabulous performance.

The 'action' then moved upstairs to the first floor where Antwerp RBL branch Secretary Inge Hödl read In Flanders Fields, the poignant World War I poem written by Canadian doctor Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae in 1915. The Military Wives Choir also performed several pieces, singing beautifully, as ever.

Volunteers from the three RBL branches, as well as 1st Brussels British Scouts and the Sonian Explorers (who created 100 hand-made poppy brooches), sold heaps of goodies, helping to raise €630 for the RBL in just two hours.

The Embassy looked after us brilliantly, providing the guests with ample refreshments and traditional British fish and chips.

Special thanks to David Bizley, Brussels branch Poppy Appeal Coordinator, Giuliano Epis, Executive Assistant to the Defence Attaché, and to Martin Banks of The Bulletin for producing a cracking report on the launch: <https://shorturl.at/BzYus>.

The only question is how we top that in 2026?!



## Jackie Farbridge

*Author: Michael Whitburn*



Long-time Branch member Jackie Farbridge can always be relied upon to do an excellent job raising funds for the Poppy Appeal.

Even though Jackie has been living in Belgium for nearly 50 years, she still describes herself as “British through and through”.

Jackie was born in Enfield, in what was then the county of Middlesex (now a London borough). Her father grew up in London and lived there throughout the Second World War.

Both her parents had elder brothers who were away fighting, and Jackie remembers their stories about their wartime experiences at family reunions.

As far back as she can remember, everyone in her family always participated in Remembrance Day and wore poppies.

Jackie was 22 when she came to Belgium to find a job and learn French. It was in Belgium that she met her Italian-born husband, Jean-Louis. Once married, they decided to stay in Belgium for good.

In 1996, Jackie took up a teaching position at the Ecole Fondamentale Léonie de Waha in Liège, the first English immersion school in Belgium, where she initially taught in the kindergarten and later in the primary section.

At one stage in her career, Jackie thought it was time she talked to her pupils about how poppies had become a symbol of remembrance for the military who died in the First World War. She contacted the RBL in Brussels and was put in touch with Ann Morley, who at the time was the Poppy Appeal organiser.

It soon became obvious that the children were really interested in the subject. In years 5 and 6, they were in fact already learning about the First and Second World Wars, so their teachers were very pleased the children were told about poppies and their connection with WW1. Admittedly, it was harder to explain these matters to the younger children, especially as all the teaching at the immersion school is in English.

In 2012 there were Collection boxes in the classrooms and a stand in the entrance hall. In 2014 there was a display to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. The children made 1,000 poppies (one poppy for every Belgian soldier killed during the war) and the poppies were put on display in the school.

The next step was to organise a street collection for the Poppy Appeal.

In 2018, in Liège, teachers and children collected over €500 and the year after, an even larger sum was raised.



English immersion school, Ecole Communale Primaire et Maternelle, Fétine, Liège

Jackie's daughter Jessica and her son-in-law Anthony both work at schools in Liège; both of them now also collect for the Poppy Appeal.

Though Jackie has retired as a teacher, she continues to run her project of which she is very proud.



Jackie is featured on our webpage at:

<https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/members/members-and-friends/jackie-farbridge/>

## Remembrance Sunday in Heverlee

*Author: Denis Abbott*

The Remembrance Sunday ceremony at Heverlee Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery on 9 November attracted around 300 attendees, including many branch members and a large scout contingent, as well as senior military and diplomatic representatives.

After a word of welcome from Chair Dennis Abbott, UK Ambassador Anne Sherriff gave a moving opening reflection.



The ceremony, which took place in unexpected sunshine, was conducted by the branch's Chaplain, the Revd Canon John Wilkinson.



The Military Wives Choir, led by Sarah Kirby and Caroline Johnson, performed beautifully, as always.

Branch Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux was flanked by Deputy Standard Bearers Charlie Wilson, 17, and Faith Wittevrongel, 19. Charlie is a member of the Brussels Explorers while Faith volunteers with the 1st Brussels (British) Scout Group and Sonian Explorers, her former unit.



Vice-Chair Jean-Pierre Pede read out the names of the First World War casualties laid to rest at the cemetery, while Eleanor Vaughan, representing the Welsh Government/Llywodraeth Cymru, spoke of the tragic loss of Hedd Wyn (Ellis Evans), the bardic poet killed on the first day of the Battle of Passchendaele.



Branch President Zoe White pronounced the Exhortation and Kohima Epitaph.



Wreaths were laid by:

- H.E. Anne Sherriff, UK Ambassador to Belgium
- H.E. Angus Lapsley, UK Permanent Representative to NATO
- Lt Gen Ian Cave, UK Military Representative to NATO
- Ms Eleanor Vaughan, Head of Europe, Welsh Government//Llywodraeth Cymru
- Mr Martin Johnson, EU Director, Scottish Government
- Mr Aodhán Connolly, Director, Office of the Northern Ireland Executive Brussels
- Mr Daniel D'Amato, Director, Government of Gibraltar Representation to the EU
- Lt Gen Greg Smith, Canadian Military Representative to NATO
- Ms Johanna Taylor, Counsellor, Australian Embassy to Belgium and Luxembourg and Mission to the EU and NATO
- Général Cyril Carcy, French Military Representative to NATO
- Col Jacek Popławski and Lt Col Paweł Kucharczyk, Polish Military Representatives to NATO
- Mr Ludwig Decamps and Major General Krzysztof Kociuba, NATO Communications and Information Agency
- Mr Stephen Hanson, Royal Air Forces Association
- Mr Victor Alves Gomes, Liga dos Combatentes (Portuguese Veterans League, Belgium)
- Alderman Liesbeth Vandermeeren, City of Leuven
- Ms Lisa Hyde, Military Wives Choir
- Jonathan Wittevrongel, Brenda Gaiotti and Noah Vincent, 1st Brussels Beavers
- Elliot Dencik, 1st Brussels Cubs
- Valentina Endean, Antek Evison and Oliver Higham, 1st Brussels Scouts
- Aarushi Sharma and Daniel Du Toit, Sonian Explorers
- Zoe Cloetens, Toby Curtis and Tycho Joachimsmann, Central Brussels Scouts
- Alicja Kowalska, Brussels Explorers
- David Bizley, Royal British Legion Brussels Branch

Following the wreath-laying, Aodhán Connolly, Director of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, gave a remarkable reading highlighting the sacrifice of the Irish servicemen laid to rest at Heverlee.

Nathanael Wittevrongel, Yoojin Monk and Emil Dencik of the Sonian Explorers then stepped up to read the poem 'A Thank You', written by members of the unit including the aforementioned Nathanael and Yoojin.



*(above) H.E. Angus Lapsley and Lt Gen Ian Cave*

*(below) David Bizley*



Revd Canon Wilkison gave the final address and led prayers to conclude the service before the Chair invited everyone to lay poppy tributes on the graves.

Special thanks to Mika-John Southworth, Irina Krishnan, David Bizley and Steve Grant.

### Remembrance Day Speeches – Heverlee War Cemetery- 9 November 2025

Speech by Aodhán Connolly, Director, Office of the Northern Ireland Executive Brussels

Ambassadors, honoured guests, Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

We gather today in the quiet dignity of Heverlee War Cemetery – a place of peace born from the noise of war – to honour those who gave their lives so that others might live free.



Among the rows of white stones here rest young men from across the world and from Ireland and Great Britain –

from Belfast and Sligo, from Tyrone and Roscommon, from Larne and Cork. Protestant and Catholic. North and South. Men from both sides of the Irish border, who in the darkest days of the last century stood together, lived together, fought together – and, here in Belgium, died together – for a greater good.

Their names tell stories of courage and heartbreak.

There is Fusilier Joseph Burns, just 28, from Cookstown, County Tyrone. Killed during a desperate rearguard action west of Brussels as his battalion fought to hold off Rommel's advance in May 1940. Two of his brothers had already served in the First World War – one was a prisoner of war in Germany. Their family's sacrifice spanned two conflicts and a generation.

Beside him lies Fusilier William Gillespie, born in Fivemiletown, Co Tyrone, a tailor's son, one of nine children. He fell on the same day as Joseph Burns, during the retreat to Dunkirk. Two of his brothers also wore the uniform and survived the war.

And from the West of Ireland, Fusilier Patrick Henry of Sligo – a husband and father, whose grave, though simple, speaks volumes of love and loss.

We remember too those who served in the skies above this land.

Sgt Daniel Synnott from Newry who was only 19 years old and Sgt Thomas Whiteside of Belfast who was 22 when he died.

Sergeant Harry McKernin and Sergeant William Neill, both from Belfast, who lie side by side after their Lancaster was brought down by a German night-fighter. And Sergeant John McKinstry of Larne, whose brother Thomas was also lost in the air war. Families who bore not one loss, but many.

And then the Sheehan brothers – Henry, Frank and Edward – from Fermoy, County Cork. Three sons of one Irish family who had moved to Canada, all killed while serving in Bomber Command. Their mother died before the war's end; their father lived to mourn not one son, but three. The Sheehans remind us that the impact of war reaches across oceans – and across generations.

Among them too rests Flying Officer Donald Garland, born in County Wicklow, posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his courage in attacking the Albert Canal in May 1940. He was just 21 years old. His 3 brothers also served, and all were lost before the war was over.

Each of these names – Irish, Northern Irish, British, Canadian – speaks to something profound: that in moments of greatest peril, what mattered was not where one came from, one's background or beliefs ... but what one stood for.

Here, in this Belgian soil, they lie together – a silent testament to a shared sense of duty that transcended politics, borders, and creed.

Today, as we stand among them, we remember not only the cost of war, but also the unity born of shared sacrifice. Men from both communities in Northern Ireland, and from both sides of the Irish border, served shoulder to shoulder in a fight for freedom, for democracy, and for the rights we too easily take for granted.

Their courage reminds us that peace is never inevitable – it must be protected, nurtured, and passed on.

So let us honour them not only with our silence, but with our actions – by striving in our own time for the understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect that they embodied in theirs.

May their memory and all those who lie here – Irish, Northern Irish and British, North and South, Australian, Canadian, New Zealander, Polish, South African and American – continue to inspire us to build a world worthy of their sacrifice.

We will remember them.

Speech by Eleanor Vaughan, Head of Welsh Government in Europe

Bore da, good morning everyone.

Today, as we gather to remember those who gave their lives in the service of peace and freedom, I'd like to share the story of one Welsh man whose words still speak powerfully to us – the poet Hedd Wyn, whose real name was Ellis Humphrey Evans.

He was a shepherd from the hills of Trawsfynydd, a gentle, thoughtful man who loved poetry and peace.

Yet, like so many of his generation, he was drawn into the tragedy of the First World War.



He was killed at Passchendaele in 1917, before learning that his poem “Yr Arwr – The Hero” had won the National Eisteddfod that year.

When his name was announced, and it was revealed that he had fallen, the festival was struck silent.

His bardic chair was draped in black – and ever since, it has been known as Y Gadair Ddu’r Eisteddfod – The Black Chair.

Hedd Wyn’s poetry captures both the beauty of his homeland and the grief of his times.

One of his most powerful works, Rhyfel – “War” – expresses the despair of a world torn apart by conflict.

I will read the English translation to you now:

*Why must I live in this grim age  
When, to a far horizon, God  
Has ebbed away, and man, with rage,  
Now wields the sceptre and the rod?*

*Man raised his sword, once God had gone,  
To slay his brother, and the roar  
Of battlefields now casts upon  
Our homes the shadow of the war.*

*The harps to which we sang are hung  
On willow boughs, and their refrain  
Drowned by the anguish of the young  
Whose blood is mingled with the rain.*

These are the words of a man who loved peace – who saw war not as glory, but as loss.

Hedd Wyn’s words are as moving today as they were more than a century ago.

They remind us that remembrance is not only about honouring courage and sacrifice, but also about renewing our hope – that peace, understanding, and compassion will one day overcome the noise of war.

## Remembrance Sunday in Namur

*Author: Jean-François Husson*

Remembrance Sunday in Namur was held on 9 November. A street named after Elsie Gladstone was inaugurated.

Elsie Gladstone was a Sister in the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service, “the ancestor” of the QARANC (Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps).

She died of pneumonia in Namur in 1919 and is buried in the Namur/Belgrade CWGC cemetery.

Elsie Gladstone is one of only two female casualties of the Great War buried in Belgium.



On Friday 7 November, a conference took place on the topic of Namur and British Military History from 1695 to 1945.

## Armistice Day

Author: Dennis Abbott; Photos: Suzanne Nys

Branch Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux had pride of place at the Armistice Day ceremony led by King Philippe at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Brussels on 11 November.

Chair Dennis Abbott and Baron Christian Houtart, President of the Tenby Memorial Committee, laid a wreath on behalf of the of the branch.

Members present included 100-year-old Brigade Piron veteran Count Henri d'Oultremont and Jack van Sprang.

It was nice to see Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever wearing an RBL poppy during the parade.



Branch Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux (3rd from the right)



## Heroes of the Resistance (Helden van het verzet)

Author: Dany Neudt

The story of the young but vibrant Belgian NGO Heroes of the Resistance (Helden van het verzet) began on a hot summer day in 2022.

On 13 August, founder and historian Dany Neudt posted a short story on X (formerly Twitter) with a photo of Belgian resistance woman Suzanne Spaak, sister-in-law of future NATO Secretary-General Paul-Henri Spaak.

Much to Dany's surprise, the post went viral overnight – even abroad. It was the start of a life-changing adventure that is still unfolding.

Since then, every day, at 8am sharp, a mini-story about a forgotten Belgian resistance hero is posted. The format is always the same: photo, short text, #heldenvanhetverzet.

Today, over ten thousand people follow, like, comment, and share the stories on X, Facebook, Instagram, Bluesky, Threads and LinkedIn.

In just three years, the initiative has grown into a true grassroots movement. The organisation has already published four resistance novellas, all by Tim Van Steendam and distributed exclusively by Belgium's leading book retailer, Standaard Boekhandel.

The latest, *The Sacrifice* (Het offer), tells the extraordinary but almost forgotten story of SOE agent Henri Heffinck (see the separate article in this newsletter). In May 2023, together with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels, VUB), the academic Chair Traces of the Resistance was launched in the historic Gothic Hall of Brussels City Hall. Last March, *The Guardian* published an extensive article on the Chair's first citizen science project, which centres round the farewell letters of executed Belgian resistance members.

Meanwhile, approximately thirty 'Resistance Cafés' have been held in Flanders and Brussels – story-telling evenings where relatives share the wartime stories of their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. The first French-language 'Café de la Résistance' was recently organised, and more will follow.

For three consecutive years, a 48-hour reading marathon has been live-streamed from the former Belgian SS concentration camp of Fort Breendonk. During this marathon, more than 150 famous Belgians recite the names of fallen resistance members. Belgian personalities who have taken part in the event include the Chief of Defence Frederik Vansina, captain of industry Thomas Leysen, prominent journalist Béatrice Delvaux, and Holocaust survivor Simon Gronowski.



See the website at: <https://heldenvanhetverzet.be/>

## The sacrifice of Belgian SOE agent Henri Heffinck

*Author: Dany Neudt*

War can bring out the worst or, as with Henri Heffinck, the best in people.

Henri Heffinck will be remembered for his extraordinary courage.

Henri was a bicycle repairman from the small West Flemish village of Anzegem. After the Blitzkrieg and at the beginning of German occupation, his first acts of defiance – destroying abandoned British war material – were modest. He was captured and briefly imprisoned, but managed to escape. What followed was a harrowing odyssey of wandering across Europe, enduring brutal imprisonment in Spain, and finally reaching London where refugees awaited official papers at the Royal Victoria Patriotic School.

Henri wasted no time: at the Belgian Embassy offices on Eaton Square, he immediately applied and was accepted to join the Special Operations Executive (SOE).

Training was relentless. At a secluded Scottish lake, with snow-capped mountains as backdrop, mornings began with cross-country runs followed by gruelling drills. Henri practised telegraphy and Morse code; he trained to use revolvers, rifles, submachine guns, hand grenades, and practised bayonet charges on straw dummies. In silent killing exercises, recruits learned to creep up on guards and slit their throats. He later attended a parachute school at Ringway in Manchester, studied ciphering at Bletchley Park, and trained in espionage techniques at Beaulieu, one of the British schools for secret agents who would be dropped into occupied Europe. He mastered codes, navigation, and survival skills – preparing not to stand out as a paratrooper, but to blend in as an ordinary civilian with lethal expertise.

On 18 December 1942, the awaited message arrived: Henri would be deployed before the end of the year and parachuted over occupied Belgium.

What followed was nothing short of extraordinary. Henri is credited with some 350 acts of sabotage, making him one of the most effective Belgian agents of the war. The statistics underline his achievement: the average operational life expectancy of an SOE agent was only six weeks, with survival odds barely 50 per cent. Of the 333 SOE agents that were sent into Belgium, only 53 completed two missions, and Henri was one of them. Only six agents managed three. In total, 187 were captured and 97 killed.

Henri's first mission alone lasted an astonishing 18 months behind enemy lines.

After the war, despite numerous decorations from Belgium, France, and Great Britain, Henri Heffinck remained silent about his exploits. His story faded into obscurity – until now.

The Sacrifice (Het offer), the latest novella published by Heroes of the Resistance, pays a long overdue tribute to a forgotten hero.

## The Montgomery Club in Brussels – A WWII Soldiers' Club in the Palais d'Egmont

*Author: Alain Brogniez and Michael Whitburn*

On Christmas Eve 1944, only a few months after the Liberation of Brussels, the Palais d'Egmont opened its doors as the Montgomery Club.

The club was named after Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, commander of the 21st Army Group and operated by the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes).

The NAAFI was an organisation that ran clubs, bars, shops, launderettes, restaurants and cafés that sold and issued goods to servicemen and their families. By April 1944 the NAAFI ran 7,000 canteens and had 96,000 personnel, many of whom were from the Royal Army Service Corps.



*Postcard featuring the lounges at the Montgomery Club, Brussels*

For thousands of men and women, the Montgomery Club offered a welcome escape from the hardships of the campaign – a place to eat, drink, write letters home, enjoy entertainment, and socialise with comrades. Unlike officers' messes, it was designed specifically for the rank and file.

For centuries, the Palais d'Egmont had been one of Brussels' grandest residences. By 1944, its vast marble staircases and reception rooms had been re-purposed into restaurants, lounges, and games halls to cater for the needs of servicemen and women.



*Postcard featuring a restaurant, lounge and grand staircase at the Montgomery Club, Brussels*

During the German occupation, the palace was requisitioned to house the German Chamber of Commerce and later a German Army Ordnance Service.

When Brussels was liberated in September 1944, German military maps still hung on its walls, but only a few months later, the Palais d'Egmont had been transformed into the Montgomery Club, once again becoming a stage for history – this time for the soldiers of the British Liberation Army.

### Life at the Montgomery Club

For the thousands of British servicemen and women passing through Brussels, the Montgomery Club rapidly became a favourite destination.

A guide issued to troops in 1945 listed no fewer than 350 rooms, with facilities that rivalled many city hotels. Guests could dine in the main restaurant, enjoy a cup of tea in one of the lounges or a glass of beer in the Beer and Wine Tavern. Ladies' and Gents' Hairdressing, a Photographic Studio, Library, Writing and News Rooms, and a Library were some of the many services provided, as listed in the advert below:



Source : <https://www.normandywarguide.com/articles/montgomery-club-brussels>



## British WWI war artists

*Author: Michael Whitburn*

British war artists were employed to produce specific works during both the First and the Second World War. Official war artists have often been appointed by governments for information or propaganda purposes and to record events on the battlefield, but there are many other types of war artist.

The works produced by war artists illustrate and record many aspects of war, and the individual's experience of war, whether allied or enemy, service or civilian, military or political, social or cultural.

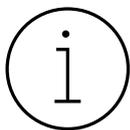
Throughout the early years of the First World War, the British Government did not support an official war artist scheme. This began to change after artists who had served on the Western Front, such as Paul Nash and C.R.W. Nevison, exhibited paintings based on their experiences in France. In 1917 arrangements were made to send artists to France, including Nash and Nevison, to paint pictures of the front.

Early in 1918, responsibility for the British war artists was passed to the British War Memorials Committee (BWMC). Rather than focus on short-term propaganda, the main aim of the BWMC was to create a lasting memorial to the war in the form of a national Hall of Remembrance, a series of large paintings and sculptures commissioned in commemoration of the war dead .

After the First World War, when the BWMC was wound up, this series of artworks, which included *The Menin Road* by Paul Nash and *Gassed* by John Singer Sargent, became part of the Imperial War Museum collection.

Brothers Paul and John Nash were both commissioned during the First World War.

Prior to their becoming official war artists, both brothers had seen active service on the Western Front. Their experiences and observations are recorded in striking artworks depicting trench life, troop movements and shattered landscapes.



*For more information see:*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_official\\_war\\_artists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_official_war_artists) and

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-powerful-western-front-paintings-of-the-nash-brothers>



*The Menin Road, 1919, by Paul Nash. IWM (Art.IWM ART 2242)*



*Wire, 1918, by Paul Nash. IWM (Art.IWM ART 2705)*



*Stand To' Before Dawn, 1918, by John Nash. IWM (Art.IWM ART 1160)*



*We are Making a New World, 1918, by Paul Nash. IWM (Art.IWM ART 1146)*



*Paths of Glory, 1917, by C.R.W. Nevinson. IWM (Art.IWM ART 518)*

The paintings by CRW Nevinson depicted soldiers suffering and dying on the battlefield. Though his work was well-received, some found it too grim and controversial for display during wartime.

One of Nevinson's most famous paintings shows the bodies of two dead British soldiers in no man's land. Here, the *Paths of Glory* lead only to terrible death.

*Paths of Glory* was famously censored by the official censor of paintings and drawings in France. The decision was confirmed three months before the opening of Nevinson's exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London in 1918. Outraged by what he could only describe as hypocrisy, Nevinson still included the painting with a brown paper strip across the canvas, inscribed with the word 'censored'. Predictably, the stunt created a fair amount of publicity for the artist.



You can view this painting online at

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20211>.

## Alfred Lichtenstein

*Author: Michael Whitburn*

The previous issue of the Newsletter (October 2025) included the poem *Farewell (Abschied)* by the German war poet Alfred Lichtenstein (1889-1914).

Lichtenstein's verse often reflected the grim realities of early 20th-century Europe, the senseless horrors of World War I and as in *Gebet vor der Schlacht (Prayer before the Battle)*, the fear of death.

### **Prayer before the Battle**

The men are singing with fervour, every man for himself:  
God, protect me from a great tragedy;  
Father, Son and the Holy Spirit,  
May no grenade wipe me out,  
May those bastards, our enemies,  
Not capture me, not shoot me,  
So I do not die like a dog  
For the beloved Fatherland.

Look here, I really do want to go on living;  
Milk cows, make love to girls;  
Give that moron, Sepp, a good thrashing,  
And get drunk, often,  
Until my blessed death.

Look, I will eagerly and gladly recite  
Seven rosaries every day,  
If only you, God, in your grace  
Could kill my friend Huber or Meier,  
And spare me instead.

But if the worst should happen,  
Could you make sure I am not too seriously hurt;  
A slight leg wound maybe  
Or a small injury to the arm,  
So that I may return home a hero,  
With a story to tell.

### ***Gebet vor der Schlacht***

*Inbrünstig singt die Mannschaft, jeder für sich:  
Gott, behüte mich vor Unglück,  
Vater, Sohn und heiliger Geist,  
Dass mich nicht Granaten treffen,  
Dass die Luder, unsre Feinde,  
Mich nicht fangen, nicht erschießen,  
Dass ich nicht wie'n Hund verrecke  
Für das teure Vaterland.*

*Sieh, ich möchte gern noch leben,  
Kühe melken, Mädchen stopfen  
Und den Schuft, den Sepp, verprügeln,  
Mich noch manches Mal besaufen  
Bis zu meinem selgen Ende.*

*Sieh, ich bete gut und gerne  
Täglich sieben Rosenkränze,  
Wenn du, Gott, in deiner Gnade  
Meinen Freund, den Huber oder  
Meier, tötest, mich verschonst.*

*Aber muss ich doch dran glauben,  
Lass mich nicht zu schwer verwunden.  
Schick mir einen leichten Beinschuss,  
Eine kleine Armverletzung,  
Dass ich als ein Held zurückkehr,  
Der etwas erzählen kann.*

*Alfred Lichtenstein*

Unfortunately, Lichtenstein's prayer was not heard. He was killed, aged 25, on 25 September 1914, near Vermandovillers on the Somme.

## Standing with Giants

*Author: David Lees*

Most of you have probably heard of the 'Standing with Giants' installations (<https://www.standingwithgiants.co.uk/>).

'For Your Tomorrow – the People's Tribute', at the British Normandy Memorial in Ver-sur-Mer, returned to mark the 80th anniversary year of VE Day and was in place from 12 April to 12 September 2025.

In 2024, nearly a quarter of a million people visited the Memorial and enjoyed the installation during its first stay.

Among the 1,475 figures, the installation featured approximately 200 new creations including radio operators, medics and a Scotsman playing the bagpipes. The project also included bespoke Giants to represent the only two women on the Memorial itself, nurses Sister Evershed and Sister Field, who died while saving 75 men from a sinking hospital ship.

Four articulated lorries with flatbed trailers crossed the Channel in March, embarking at Portsmouth Harbour after visiting Blenheim Palace and Fort Nelson. Supported by a team of volunteers, the journey via Portsmouth took place on 28 March and the completed installation was available to visit from 12 April.

At the end of its display in Normandy, the complete installation had to be dismantled, starting on 13 September.

Ann Morley and I had the pleasure and honour of helping with the dismantling on Monday 15 September.





The Giants' return to the UK provides the opportunity for inspection, repair and a deep clean. As mobile artworks, they require regular maintenance and are not suited for prolonged display, particularly during Normandy's autumn and winter. The Memorial's meadow also needs ongoing care to preserve its wildflower habitat; a permanent structure would conflict with these essential conservation efforts.

The Giants will be installed in various UK venues honouring those who served in the Second World War and other conflicts. Giants in other formats have also been produced, for example, the 255 created for the Falklands Tribute at Nothe Fort in November (<https://nothefort.org.uk/2025/09/14/standing-with-giants-falklands-tribute/>).

Eventually, the installation will return to Normandy in April 2026 for another summer season. We hope to join the volunteer team again and support the installation work.

The Giants are made from recycled building site scrap metal.

## Truce Tournament

*Author: Dennis Abbott; Photos: Premier League and Last Post Association*

The Chair, together with branch members Stuart Green and Laura Houlgatte, were invited by football's Premier League to its annual under-12 Christmas Truce tournament in Ypres.

The tournament ran on 12-14 December and saw top Academy teams including Arsenal, Manchester City, Manchester United and Aston Villa take on their counterparts from leading European clubs including Anderlecht, Club Brugge, Strasbourg and Borussia Dortmund.

The tournament takes place close to where soldiers from the opposing armies played football on no man's land during the famous Christmas Truce of 1914.

On the eve of the tournament, Dennis Abbott was invited to address the young players about the role of the RBL and the importance of remembrance.

Academy players from several Premier League clubs also presented the results of their educational projects linked to the Truce.

These included stories about football stars of the past who served in the First and Second World Wars, meetings with modern-day veterans and, memorably, a 'remembrance rap' sung by a young ambassador from Fulham FC.

Pieter-Jan Fonteyne, a counsellor at the UK Embassy, represented the Ambassador to Belgium.

After the reception, Dennis and Stuart, who is also secretary of Ypres branch, joined the young players in laying wreaths at the Menin Gate.

Anderlecht, beaten finalists in 2024, went one better in the tournament this time, lifting the Truce trophy after a 2-1 win against Wolverhampton Wanderers.



*(above) Dennis Abbott and Stuart Green leading the wreath layers at the Menin Gate*

*(right) Pieter-Jan Fonteyne (UK Embassy), Stuart Green and Dennis Abbott with the Premier League trophy*



## Christmas Dinner

*Author: Dennis Abbott*

At the suggestion of Standard bearer Freddy Roiseux, Branch members enjoyed an excellent Christmas lunch at the Club Prince Albert.



The mouth-watering menu consisted of shellfish gaspacho followed by carpaccio of scallops and citrus langoustines, pan-fried duck foie gras with figs, Champagne sorbet, pheasant stuffed with chestnuts, and raspberry and almond milk ice cream log.

The meal was served with a white wine, Domaine le portail La pépite Cheverny (2023), and a red, Lalande de Pomerol Château Grand Orneau (2018).

## George Beeston's memoir, *Survival*

*Author: Michael Whitburn*

George Beeston completed his wartime memoir, entitled *Survival*, in the early 2000s and later entrusted the manuscript to the Brussels Branch of the RBL following discussions with members.

The late Simon Robbins initially edited the text and Colin Puplett transformed it into a publishable format. However, plans for publication were put on indefinite hold after various questions arose and contact was lost with the Beeston family.

Happily, last November Branch Chair Dennis Abbott was able to track down George's son John who has authorised publication and filled in some gaps in his father's story. Dennis has since thoroughly edited the text anew after discovering additional sections of the memoir.

George's situation at the outbreak of the Second World War was complicated to say the least. He was born in Australia to a British father and Belgian mother who had emigrated from Belgium, but the family moved back to live in Charleroi when George was still very young.

George and his two younger brothers had British nationality through their father but were all educated in Charleroi and spoke French fluently. George's Belgian grandparents were Flemish, so he grew up speaking English, French and Dutch. The latter, as it turned out, proved to be very useful during George's war years as his knowledge of Dutch helped him understand and communicate in German.

After the war, George served in the British Army for many years.

He died shortly after entrusting his memoirs to the branch.

George Beeston's story of a young man exposed to the horrors of the war is more than just another historical testimony. It is a gripping and compelling account. We are delighted to be able to include an excerpt from the story in our newsletter. This and further issues of the newsletter will include more excerpts from George's memoirs. The full text will be made available for download from our website.

## Excerpt: 1940 The Invasion of Belgium and France

Author: George Beeston

On 8 May 1940 a friend who was serving in the Belgian Army told me that the Nazis were massing troops on the Belgian and Dutch borders, and that there was a real possibility that war was inevitable. At first the news did not trouble me, but only until the night of 9 May. I was on night shift in the laboratory of a chemical plant where I was employed in Charleroi. It must have been about 5 o'clock in the morning,



Image : IWM (F 4502)

when I heard the rumbling sound of aircraft flying low overhead. I rushed outside, remembering my friend's warning. Many of my colleagues were already in the factory yard and looking up into clear morning sky. I stood with them gazing at the planes flying low over the town in a westward direction. They were so low that the crosses on the fuselages of the planes could be plainly seen. Soon they were seen disappearing over the factory buildings. For a very short time all went quiet again then suddenly the sound coming from Gosselies left us without a doubt that they were bombing the airfield and its workshop buildings.

The bombs were still exploding when the bombers returned from their mission of death and destruction, flying east towards Germany to replenish fuel tanks and bomb-bays ready for another deadly mission.

At exactly that moment the advance formation of the Wehrmacht had started crossing the Belgian and Dutch borders. The treacherous aggression was launched without any ultimatum. Almost immediately, the economic and industrial life of the two countries came to a halt on 10 May.

On the first day of the aggression my father had gone to the British consulate in Charleroi, where the Consul told not to worry as the German army would be halted at the border. The invasion did not falter, however. Liège had fallen and the Wehrmacht was advancing west.

On the second day my father returned to the Consulate to be told not to be defeatist or panic. On the third day, during another visit to seek information and advice from the King's representative, it transpired that the office had been vacated and that the Consul had panicked and left for England, which he reached safely. The Commonwealth families left behind were caught in the turmoil and the heads of family would spend the rest of the war behind barbed wire. The German Army entered Charleroi on the sixth day of the invasion.

## Wartime memories of a child, part 2

VE Day

Author: Colin Puplett



You can read the first part of Colin's memories in the [October 2025](#) issue of the *Wipers Times*.

I was seven years old on VE Day, and I have very clear memories of the party that was held in our street in South-East London. To give you some idea of what the party meant to me, I would like to say something about the life I had experienced before.

I was born in January 1938, and my formative years were dominated by a set of war conditions. For example, I clearly remember such things as the sound of the air-raid sirens and the effect it had on adults, and how we were shuttled off to the Anderson Shelter in our garden. I also distinctly remember the sound of the bombers flying overhead and the sound of Ack-ack guns.



Colin Puplett, aged 5

I find it rather funny that I was never actually frightened. Maybe it was because I knew no other way of life and because of the calm reaction of my mother, grandmother and grandfather.

My daily life was largely restricted to school and playing in the street. To go to school was quite an adventure. My school was on the other side of the A20, the main road from central London to the Kent coast. The road was sometimes crowded with army convoys and some of them were full of American soldiers. I found that if I waved very enthusiastically, I would often get thrown some chewing gum or chocolate. With three pennies per week pocket money there was little to spend on sweets.

One thing I and most of my friends collected was shrapnel and small pieces of enemy planes. The father of the boy who lived next door worked in the Woolwich Arsenal, which attracted many attacks by enemy aircraft, and so his son was a major provider of interesting pieces of wreckage – all the more so if they bore markings in German.

The downside of air raids became very clear when a V1 Doodle bug fell on a row of houses near my school and blew out most of the classroom windows. Doodle bugs and their pulse jet engines made a very distinct throbbing sound that would stop abruptly when they began to run out of fuel. The Doodle bug would then suddenly begin to lose height, which pushed a little more fuel into the engine and caused the throbbing to resume. On the third blip of its engine, the Doodle bug would fall to earth and explode.

One day my grandmother and I were walking back from the shops at the top of her road when “gran” heard the familiar throbbing sound suddenly stop. Well, I never saw my

grandmother move so fast as she grabbed my hand and rushed us down the road to get inside her house.

VE Day meant I did not have to wear my gasmask anymore. When I was young, it was the red and blue "Mickey Mouse" type of mask and, later, it was the heavier model for adults. With my school out of action, my new school was quite interesting because it hosted a section of the Auxiliary Fire Service, who in their spare time raised pigs, which they kept in one part of the playground. The sight and sound of pigs caused a great deal of interest among city dwellers old and young.

Meals at home were greatly limited by rationing. Luckily, both my mother and grandmother were great at making a little go a long way, which was especially useful with very strict rationing. Many food items were limited to a couple of ounces a week per person. So, to be suddenly able to participate in a VE Day party, with no limit on the amount of food you could eat, was something I had never experienced before.

Our street was lined with tables laden with all sorts of goodies to eat and drink. The tables were covered with coloured paper decorations, which made them look special. I remember each family bringing their own chairs and writing the family name on the underside to ensure the chair was returned to its rightful owner after the party. Thinking back, it was clear everybody had dug into their larders to find tins of treasured food together with homemade cakes and jams and fruit preserves that had been hoarded away for a special day.

## Your Brussels Branch committee

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### About The Royal British Legion

**Patron:** His Majesty King Charles III

**National President:** Vice Admiral (Rtd) Paul Bennett CB OBE.

*The Royal British Legion formed on 15 May 1921 bringing together four organisations of the Armed Forces that had established themselves after the First World War.*

*By 1921, the tradition of a Two Minute Silence had been established. The first Poppy Appeal was held that year, raising over £106,000 to help WW1 veterans with employment and housing.*

*The Legion was established to care for those who suffered as a result of service during the First World War. It has been helping the Armed Forces community and their families ever since.*