

March 2017



HALE BRANCH ROYAL BRITISH LEGION NEWSLETTER – Issue 16

Welcome to the March edition in which we report on recent events and provide notice of a variety of events coming up during the year.

Summary of Recent Events

The Hale Village's usual Remembrance Sunday parade took place on Sunday 13th November. Legion members led the parade with a good number of villagers and local folk to a service at the war memorial and then a short service at Hale Church followed by light refreshments at The Wellington Public House amiably serviced by Ruth Nixon and the Hale line dancers.

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The AGM was held on 7th December 2016. Branch Officers are the same as the previous year and are:-

Major (Retd) Eric Goldrein, Honorary President
Bill Sergeant, Chairman
Sheila Deakin, Secretary
Paul Bostock, Treasurer
David Hudson, Membership Secretary
Joe McGorry, Welfare Officer & Standard Bearer

Committee members are:-Keith Banks, Marie Fisher, Steve Hall, Evelyn Hudson, Joyce Hughes, Lesley Jackson, Terry Melia and Alan Sergeant.

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Sheila Deakin kindly arranged the Branch Christmas meal which took place on Friday 9th December at the Childe of Hale public house. 26 people attended and had a most enjoyable evening.

A number of branch members attended a moving unveiling of a paving slab to Thomas Mottershead VC DCM held in Widnes Park on 17th January. It was well attended by organisations including cadets and school children.

Marie, Lesley and fellow branch member, Tommy, organised a Burns Night Supper on 27th January which was well attended. The haggis was piped in, as is the tradition, and with the addition of the address to the haggis plus poems, we all appreciated a hearty meal and enjoyed the atmosphere with a wee dram. Well done to the Chef of The Childe of Hale.

The Hale RBL Branch now has a website and its address is :-

<http://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/hale> - do take a look for up to date information on fundraising events and trips.

Future Events 2017

Sunday 23rd April – St. George's night two course meal at The Childe of Hale at 7.00pm. Price to be confirmed.

This years Armed Forces Day will be hosted by the city of Liverpool and held on Saturday 24th June in conjunction with the International Mersey River Festival 23rd-25th June. For more details:- <https://www.armedforcesday.org.uk/armed-forces-day-2017-to-be-hosted-by-liverpool/>

The branch's next trip to Belgium will depart on Friday 28th April returning on Tuesday 2nd May at a cost of approximately £300 when sharing a double room or £380 for a single. Packed lunches are included along with one evening meal which will be served in the hotel on Sunday 30th April. The hotel is Hotel Alize, Mouscron, where branch members have stayed before so comes highly recommended. There is a wide variety of eating establishments in the town for the other evenings. We will visit, amongst other places, the Somme (Montauban and Guillemont) and also Flanders (Cambrai, Passchendaele and Noel Chavasse's grave). To book your place contact the Chairman. A deposit of £100 is required at the time of booking.

On Saturday 14th October we will be running our annual trip to Pickering for the 1940s War time weekend. Departure time and cost to be confirmed nearer the time.

If you would like to attend any of the above, get tickets or more information please get in touch with Marie, Steve, Lesley or Bill

Anniversaries

January 1917

Widnes pilot, Sergeant Thomas Mottershead was awarded the Victoria Cross, already having been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, for his courage in saving his observer Lieutenant Gower while flying his pusher FE2d biplane over Ploegsteert Woods. The aircraft was attacked from behind and despite their best efforts, the plane was set on fire over enemy lines. Determined to save his observer, Thomas flew the craft back towards British lines although he was on fire himself. He crash landed the plane with the observer being thrown clear. Thomas Mottershead survived the crash but was trapped in the burning wreckage and died of his burns a number of days later.

January 1942

The last blitz on Liverpool took place 10th January. The bombing was relatively minor compared to previous years and destroyed a number of houses in Liverpool 8. A house in Stanhope Street where Alois Hitler, Adolf's half-brother, had lived in the 1930's, was amongst those bombed. The city was not attacked from the air again thereafter. Merseyside was the most bombed area outside of London during the war resulting in the deaths of almost 4,000 people.

January 1965

On 24th January, Winston Spencer Churchill, the Prime Minister who saw Britain through to victory in Europe against Nazi forces, passed away following a severe stroke some 9 days earlier. He was 90 years old and was accorded a state funeral. He lay in state in Westminster Abbey for mourners to pay homage. The great man had planned his own passing and decreed that he be laid to rest with his forebears in Oxfordshire. His coffin was due to be taken by train from London to Bladon Church a route that normally would have started at Paddington Station. Knowing that the French premier, President De Gaulle would have to be invited to the funeral, WSC decreed however, that the funeral train commence from Waterloo Station as a final salute to his French nemesis. The train was hauled by 'Battle of Britain' Class steam locomotive named WINSTON CHURCHILL, while the driver set the white indicator discs on the front of the train in the form of a V. Interestingly as the barge carrying WSC's coffin down the River Thames to Waterloo passed the riverside warehouses, the crane drivers, effectively Churchill's political opponents, lowered the jibs of the cranes horizontally as a mark of respect.

February 1942

Simultaneously with the attack on Pearl Harbour, Imperial Japanese forces invaded northern Malaya. The British army

was not well trained in the art of jungle warfare and had no tanks with which to counter Japanese armour, so progressively they were pushed down the Malayan peninsula until they reached the straits of Singapore. Two Royal Naval capital ships, H.M.S. Repulse and the H.M.S. Prince of Wales, sent to destroy invasion shipping, were sunk during the campaign by Japanese torpedo bombers with great loss of life. The RAF valiantly tried to defend surface forces, but with too few obsolete aircraft, were driven from the skies leaving ground and naval forces undefended from aerial attack.

In spite of a sturdy resistance together with reinforcements, British, Indian and Australian troops were pushed back from the straits to the outskirts of the city. To prevent further destruction and bloodshed the commander of British forces surrendered to the Japanese army on 15th February. This resulted in the worst ever defeat of the British Army in history and led to the appalling mistreatment of 80,000 servicemen and women in prisoner of war camps.

April 1917

As part of an Allied major offensive proposed for the Western Front, the French Army, under its new commander Nivelle, planned a major offensive in the Aisne Region of France on the 'Chemins des Dames'. The attack was planned to breach German lines and lead to the end of the war. Tragically it achieved little, resulting in massive casualties amongst the assaulting troops and leading to a mutiny in the ranks of the French army.

British forces planned their own assault in support of the French attack at Arras and in the first virtually all Canadian assault of the Great War at Vimy Ridge. Both attacks were meticulously planned in secrecy to try and minimise casualties. Major systems of tunnels were created under the city of Arras to accommodate troops waiting to assault German trenches so that they would be safe from enemy shelling and could then emerge at the last minute into the front lines to 'go over the top'.

Tanks and aircraft were employed in the battle and in spite of appalling weather conditions, both attacks at Vimy Ridge and Arras were successful and achieved their objectives, the capture of a dominant ridge which the French had not been able to retake previously and the advance of British lines outside the suburbs of Arras. Sadly after the failure of the French offensive, Allied high command demanded that the Arras battle continue with tragic results for British troops. The Germans were now prepared, and while the attack progressed, casualties were appalling with the result that Arras became known as the bloodiest battle of the Great War. However, the

British sacrifice helped the French army to reorganise and hold their line.

April 1917

Before commencing the Arras offensive, the Royal Flying Corps had to achieve aerial ascendancy over the Imperial German Air Force. Sadly German aircraft technology had advanced such that British aircraft were left inferior. However, the attack progressed but resulted in the deaths of hundreds of pilots and observers. Aircrew were not issued with parachutes. Replacement aircrew, sometimes with minimal training, only lasted for a few days in combat before being killed. The period was known to the RFC as 'Bloody April'. Their names are commemorated on the RAF memorial in Arras

April 1917

After staunchly refusing to get involved in the war in Europe, other than supplying munitions to all sides, the USA finally declared war on Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 6th April. In spite of the USA's large German ethnic population, the Kaiser provoked America with unrestricted U Boat warfare, sinking neutral American merchant ships with the resulting deaths, and also conspiring with Mexico to attack the USA. President Wilson felt that the USA could no longer stand aloof. The problem was that America had a comparatively small army so this had to be expanded and then transported to Europe. It would be over a year before American troops reached Europe in large numbers.

June 1917

The ridge at Messines in Belgium had long been a thorn in the side of the British Army defending the southern end of the salient at Ypres. To recapture the heights lost in 1915 and straighten a bulge within the Salient, an attack was planned to assault the German trenches and drive the enemy back behind the ridge. The main drive for the attack was to be meticulous planning and the use of mines, tanks massed artillery, a Livens Projector (a large type of mortar which could fire barrels of oil which ignited on impact) and aircraft. The plan evolved was to physically blow the enemy off the ridge and to this end 25 mines were dug, starting in 1916, and loaded with 454 tons of explosive. On the morning of the attack, 19 mines were set off in a staggered pattern; the detonations were heard as far away as London. It would be the most destructive man made series of explosions until the nuclear age dawned in 1945. The attack using British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand troops was a great success.

Enemy artillery was eliminated by careful bombardment and liaison with RFC planes who had managed to regain aerial supremacy after receiving more advanced aircraft.



The new Mark 4 tanks were employed and made good progress on firm ground. British casualties were relatively low and the objectives planned, were achieved. Approximately 10,000 Germans just disappeared during the setting off of the mines, while the surviving defenders were in no fit state to offer much resistance. For the first time in many years, British troops could look down onto untouched green fields beyond Messines. However, it would be a further fifteen months before these green fields were finally liberated.

By Ben Jackson

Commemorative Paving Slabs

To mark the centenary of the awards of Victoria Crosses gained in the First World War the following commemorative paving slabs, provided by HM Government, will be laid in 2017:-

Sergeant Albert White VC - Friday 19th May at 11.00am in the Gardens at St. Nicholas Church.

Captain Ronald Neil Stuart VC DCM – Wednesday 7th June at 11.00am in Princes Park.

Private William Ratcliffe VC MM – Wednesday 14th June at 11.00am in the Gardens at St. Nicholas Church.

Captain Noel Chavasse VC & Bar MC – Tuesday 29th August at 11.00am in Abercromby Square gardens. A memorial service will also take place that day at 1.30pm in St. Nicholas Church.

Welfare

We pass on our best wishes for better health to Eric and Inge Goldrein, Ron Rowson, Ruby Hitchmough, Jeff Engel and all our members who are ill or not feeling too good at the moment.

Book Review

Sisters of the Somme by Penny Starns

This book tells the story of the planning and running of the Order of St. John Ambulance Brigade Hospital between 1914 and 1918 at Étaples in France and is based on the archive material that belongs to the Museum of the Order of St. John.

It makes use of diaries, letters and first aid manuals and details treatment of the casualties and the stories of those nurses and other staff stationed there. £91,000 was raised by the British public which funded the construction of prefabricated hut style buildings providing a 520-bedded base hospital.

The tales of the day to day duties of the medical staff treating casualties of various battles including the Battle of the Somme, are extremely touching. This is an excellent book looking at a side of the first world that is not as often written about as the battles themselves.

Based on true stories of its medical staff and nurses, this book is a heart-warming account of joys and sorrows of life in an extraordinary Somme field hospital and I can recommend it as an excellent read.

By Lesley Jackson



The Valley of the Shadow : 31st July 1917

By Major E. G. Hoare

From Enos H. G. Roberts' book '*The 9th Kings (Liverpool Regiment) in the Great War 1914-1918*'

Down in the valley the Steenbeek flows,
A brook you may cross with an easy stride,
In death's own valley between the rows
Of stunted willows on either side.

You may cross in the sunshine without a care,
With a brow that is fanned by the summer's breath.
Though you cross with a laugh, yet pause with a prayer,
For this is the Vale of the Shadow of Death.

Down in the valley was rain and rain,
Endless rain from a dismal sky,
But the valley was Liberty's land again,
And the crest-line smoked like a Sinai.
Rain that beat on the tangled mass
Of weeds and pickets and broken wire,
And stride the stream was a brown morass,
In the valley of water and mud and fire.

But all who pass to the crumbling trench
Must go in the spirit that games with fate,
With feet that stumble and teeth that clench
Over the valley of hell and hate.
Over the knees in water and mud,
Up to the waist if you miss the track,
You shall know your path by the trail of blood,
And silent figures shall guide you back.

Down in the valley the waters flow,
You may jump the brook with an easy stride,
They cross it in silence, they who know
What happened that day upon either side.
In the voice of the brook are their comrades' tones,
In the summer's breeze they shall feel their breath,
For under the grass we have laid their bones,
Here in the Vale of the Shadow of Death.

Provided by Bill Sergeant

If anyone would like to write a short report, book review or promote an event or activity for inclusion in a future Newsletters, please contact Lesley, details below.

The RBL Hale Branch meet on the first Wednesday of every month at 8.00pm at The Childe of Hale public house. Please do come along.

You don't have to be a member to join us on our organised trips and if you would like to join us please contact:- Lesley Jackson on 486 1860 or email jackson@huntscross.plus.com; Marie Fisher marie.fisher@ymail.com or tel 07958 399252; Steve Hall steffhall61@hotmail.com or tel: 07807 736666; Bill Sergeant billtanat8@hotmail.co.uk or telephone 0151 724 3171.