
THE WIPERS TIMES

Newsletter of The Royal British Legion Brussels Branch



Welcome to this Spring-Summer issue of the Wipers Times.

We would like to thank all Committee and Branch members who contributed to this issue.

The proximity of the 80th anniversary of VE Day gave special significance to the annual commemorations at Hotton and La Roche-end-Ardenne on 4 May. We report on these commemorations graced by the presence of Princess Léa of Belgium.

Tribute was paid at Hotton Church and Cemetery as well as at the Welsh Memorial to those who lost their lives in the Battle of the Ardennes (also known as Battle of the Bulge). A small but moving ceremony was held at the 51st (Highland) Division Memorial at La Roche.

We explain the crucial part played by British troops in the Battle of the Ardennes.

Using reports published in *Le Soir Illustré*, shortly after the battle in 1945, we dwell on the impact of the conflict on civilian populations, on the scale of destruction, and on rebuilding the country after the battle.

The surrender of the remaining German armed forces to the Allies on 8 May 1945 marked the end of the war in Europe – a momentous event celebrated across the world even though the war continued to rage in the Far East.

On 15-16 November 1945, some 6 months after the VE Day Celebrations, Winston Churchill received a tremendous welcome when he visited Brussels. The report and photos published at the time in *Le Soir Illustré* capture some of the real joy and excitement of those two historic November days in 1945.

Andrée Dumon, one of the great heroines of the Comet Line, passed away in January. We recount her life and explain the importance of the Comet Line in helping Allied servicemen and citizens leave Nazi-occupied territory.

Branch member and uniformologist Alain Brogniez selected items from his vast personal collection for an article about the uniform worn by 2939931 L/Cpl Nathan Atherton, who served and fought with 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders' A Company, during World War II.

We hope you will enjoy reading this new issue of the RBL Brussels Branch Newsletter and look forward, as ever, to your reactions and suggestions.

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) and Scott Wilson (scofranwil@hotmail.com).

Website and social media

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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



Congratulations are in order.

First to Count Henri d'Oultremont, a wartime veteran of the Brigade Piron, who celebrated his 100th birthday in May and therefore becomes a centenarian member of the RBL.

Not only is he only the second Brussels branch member to reach treble figures (the late Roger Ellis was first), he no longer has to pay his annual subscription!

On VE Day, Henri (*right, in uniform aged 19*) gave a stirring interview to RTBF actus, calling for an “awakening” to avoid making “the same stupid mistakes as 80 years ago.”

He celebrated the original VE Day dancing with young friends and urged the youth of today not to despair, but to find solutions to build a better and more peaceful world.

You can read excerpts from the interview in this newsletter and more about his wartime experiences [here](#).



Speaking of the newsletter, bravo to Michael and Scott for another fantastic edition. It's packed with great articles and pictures. Look out for a report on Winston Churchill's visit to Brussels in November 1945 and original dispatches covering the devastation of La Roche during the Battle of the Bulge.

Talking of La Roche, thanks to all who took part in our annual ceremony at the 51st (Highland) Division memorial on the eve of VE Day, as well as at the 'British Day' commemorations in Hotton where we were treated to Princess Léa of Belgium doing a Sandie Shaw. If you're not old enough to get that reference, check out the article below.

I hope to see you at our next RBL ceremony (they come thick and fast at this time of year) at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in Evere (Brussels Town Cemetery) on 21 June. We'll be joined by the Military Wives Choir and Henri d'Oultremont. Please arrive by 11.15am.

Congratulations to our friends at Ypres branch who are celebrating both their 100th anniversary and the official birthday of King Charles on 14 June with a service at St George's Memorial Church, followed by a Garden Party. Vice Admiral (Rtd) Paul Bennett CB OBE, National President of the RBL, will be present. If you plan to attend, please RSVP via [RBL Ypres Branch Centenary 1925-2025](#).



A plaque recalling the exploits of Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart, the one-eyed, one-armed, 11-times wounded Belgian hero who won the Victoria Cross at the Battle of the Somme, was unveiled at the Prince Albert Club in Brussels on 22 May. It was a pleasure to see branch members among the guests including (*pictured, left to right*) Olivier d'Olne, newly appointed Vice-Chair of the Fraternelle des Agents

Parachutistes, Rodolphe Lancksweert and Yvon Gilles. The unveiling, which I had the honour of taking part in, was followed by a fascinating presentation by our friend Patrice-Emmanuel Schmitz on how Belgium and its army ended up on the winning side at the end of the Second World War. Patrice is the author of *Les Cent Jours de L'Amassadeur*, a new book about Baron Emile de Cartier de Marchienne, Belgium's top diplomat in London, who rallied the country's Ministers to the Allied cause when all seemed lost.

He's not connected with our branch, but I'm sure this will be of interest: Universiteit Gent has awarded an honorary doctorate to Dr Gunter Demnig. He's the German artist who invented the Stolpersteine or 'stumbling stone' brass plate memorials to victims of the Holocaust and Nazi persecution. To date, more than 100,000 stones have been placed across European towns and cities, including Brussels, in front of the homes where the victims last lived in freedom.

It's a pleasure when members get in touch to share their stories – or more often those of the 'golden generation'. Ernie Baker wrote to tell me about his father Norman, who served in the Royal Army Service Corps with the Desert Rats in North Africa. He met his future wife Julienne, a member of the White Brigade resistance, during the liberation of Belgium. They wed in 1945 (*right*) and settled in Aalst, where a group of British veterans established an RBL branch (alas now closed).

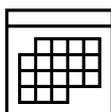


Norman was not the only member of the family in uniform. Ernie writes: "My father's second brother, Bill, was in the Royal Engineers and reached Nijmegen with XXX Corps during Operation Market Garden. Another brother, Lesley, was with an RAF reconnaissance unit searching for airfields and V1 launch sites. My mother's younger sister, Hermine, went to England as a nurse after the armistice in an exchange programme and married a wounded Royal Navy officer."

Ernie recently represented the branch, along with Jean-François Husson, at the annual ceremony held in Yves Gomezée (Walcourt) in memory of seven RAF crew who lost their lives when their Lancaster was shot down over the village on 17 April 1943.

Dennis, 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/>

June	
6 June	First Friday of the Month social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
7 June	Battlefield tour to West Flanders. See later in this issue for more details.
14 June	Thanksgiving service at St George's Memorial Church, Ypres (starts 15.00), celebrating the centenary of Ypres Branch and the birthday of King Charles III. Followed by Garden Party (16.00). RSVP by 30 May via RBL Ypres Branch Centenary 1925-2025
21 June	Commemoration at Evere/Brussels CWGC cemetery
July	
4 July	First Friday of the Month social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
12 July	Belgian Parade at the London Cenotaph (Whitehall)
August	
1 August	First Friday of the Month , social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
15 August	80th anniversary of VJ (Victory in Japan) Day
September	
5 September	First Friday of the Month
October	
3 October	First Friday of the Month
November	
9 November	Remembrance Sunday, Heverlee CWGC cemetery
9 November	Remembrance Sunday, Namur Belgrade cemetery

Membership fees

Members who joined before 2015 renew the membership fee in October. Those who joined later renew their subscription in the month that they joined (see your membership card).

You can use the details below for your renewal:

- Amount: 30,00 €
- Bank account: BE89 2100 1555 2485 – BIC: GEBABEBB
- Name: RBL Brussels Branch - Brussels
- Communication: Membership number, Last name, First name and renewal of membership fees 2024-2025.

Thank you for your renewed subscription and your loyalty to the RBL.

Poppy Appeal Coordinator

The branch is looking for a volunteer to take over the reins from David Bizley as **Poppy Appeal Coordinator** next year.

Could it be you?

This key position involves leading the local appeal ahead of Remembrance Day and providing wreaths and fundraising goodies for other events during the year.

The Poppy Appeal Coordinator also automatically becomes a member of the branch committee.

What does the role entail?

- Obtaining stock from RBL HQ, either online or via our very helpful relationship manager.
- Keeping/distributing wreaths for events.
- Preparing poppy collection boxes and liaising with members to distribute and collect them.
- Counting the proceeds with other volunteers.
- Completing a simple end-of-year return to declare the final amount raised.

David (*right*) has done a marvellous job in the past few years since succeeding Ann. As well as expanding our network of supporters receiving collection boxes, he has brought in electronic point-of-sale devices to make it easier to donate by card. For the first time this year we have QR codes to further facilitate online payments.



Raising funds for beneficiaries in need is at the heart of what we do and why the RBL exists. So please do consider volunteering for this crucial role.

To find out more, please get in touch with David via rblbrusselspoppyappeal@gmail.com. David will shadow the new Coordinator to ensure a smooth handover.

Commemorations at Hotton and La Roche, 4 May

Author: Dennis Abbott; Photos: Michael Whitburn, Viviane Pede, Yvon Gilles, Dennis Abbott

Hotton

Despite a forecast which threatened showers, we were spared once again. Our Chaplain Reverend Canon John Wilkinson, who conducted the service in his usual, beatifically elegant way, had confidently assured me beforehand that “it never rains at Hotton” but I thought his prediction would be severely tested this time.



The procession led by La Fanfare Royale des Joyeux Travailleurs proceeded uphill to the Commonwealth War Cemetery.



With interpretation from Laura, I welcomed the attendees, who included town mayor Philippe Courard, councillors, a military guard-of-honour, the marvellous town band, the St Andrew Scottish Guard, and our always immaculate Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux, leading the Porte-Drapeaux.



The UK Defence Attaché, Group Captain John Dickson (*right*), gave a poignant reflection centred on Rupert Brooke's famous poem The Soldier.

Twelve-year-old Barnaby Southworth (*below*), son of our very own Mr Smooth soundman-event coordinator Mika-John and Ingrid, gave a perfect Bible reading, before Vice-Chair Jean-Pierre Pede took the microphone to recite the Names of the Fallen.



A salvo fired by the military guard-of-honour signalled the beginning of the laying of wreaths at the Cross of Sacrifice.

The grass at the war cemetery was, alas, particularly long and in need of a good mow after a week of sun and rain. But our royal guest reacted with aplomb, slipping off her high heels to make her way barefoot to the Cross of Sacrifice to lay the first wreath, with a little help from 16-year-old 'lady-in-waiting' Felicity Southworth.



As my other half remarked, the resourceful princess had brought to life the popular fairy tale, *La Princesse aux Pieds Nus*.

In addition to the Princess, wreaths were laid by Group Captain Dickson on behalf of the UK Embassy, Group Captain Ian Hough, representing the UK contingent at SHAPE, the Mayor, and Colin Puplett for the branch. The service ended with the Commonwealth and Belgian national anthems played by the Fanfare Royale, followed by the laying of RBL crosses at the cemetery, which contains 666 burials, 21 of them unidentified.





Other than those already mentioned, branch members present included Ethel Pedemoffatt, Viviane Pede, Brenda Puplett, Michael Whitburn, Alain Brogniez and Yvon Gilles.

The ceremony at the Commonwealth War Cemetery was preceded by the traditional bilingual mass at Hotton Church, led by Père Herman Kusola and Canon Wilkinson, where Jean-Pierre and I gave readings, with Freddy once again to the fore. The choir was amazing.





Following the mass, wreaths were laid at the war monument outside the Church.

Together with Gp Capt Dickson I laid a special 80th anniversary VE Day wreath.



Special thanks to Andrée Ferrant and Frédéric Antoine, Secretary of FNC Hotton (Fédération Nationale des Combattants), for all the advance preparation.

Welsh memorial

Before travelling onto La Roche, Laura and I laid a wreath at the memorial to the 53rd (Welsh) Division and armoured regiments. A few minutes' walk from the centre of Hotton, the memorial is impressive – a turret from a Sherman Firefly tank with a 17-pounder gun.

The engraved plaque in French pays tribute to “the brave men of the 53rd (Welsh) Infantry Division and support Armoured Regiments that liberated our towns and villages in January 1945 during the Ardennes Offensive.”



La Roche



The branch also held its customary ceremony at the 51st (Highland) Division Memorial at La Roche-en-Ardenne, commemorating the 54 men who lost their lives during the Ardennes Offensive.

We were joined by new member Alisdair Harrison, whose father served with the Seaforth Highlanders during the Second World War. Alisdair, who also served in the Army with the Royal Signals and later at NATO, wore the Seaforth Highlanders' kilt and all the accoutrements, including an officer's *sgian dubh* dagger. After telling us about his father's wartime experiences, he laid a wreath on behalf of the branch.





Also present at the ceremony were Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux and members Gilles Bouillon, owner of the Musée de la Bataille des Ardennes in La Roche, Alain Brogniez, Yvon Gilles, Colin and Brenda Puplett, Alan Puplett, Michael Whitburn, me and Laura, joined by her parents, Bruno and Martine Houlgatte.

After the ceremony, the group was invited by Gilles Bouillon for a very welcome verre de l'amitié followed by a short visit to the Musée de la Bataille des Ardennes.



The ceremonies at Hotton were the subject of a report by tvlux, which covers the province of Luxembourg:

https://www.tvlux.be/video/info/bataille-des-ardennes/hotton-rend-hommage-aux-britanniques-tombes-il-y-a-80-ans_48663.html.

Musée de la Bataille des Ardennes

Author: Dennis Abbott



The collection of WW2 military equipment and memorabilia on display at the Musée de la Bataille des Ardennes is truly quite impressive.

The museum was founded by Michel Bouillon (1932-2014), a local history enthusiast who started putting the collection together in the 1960s.

His youngest son Gilles now runs the museum.

The collection consists of thousands of original items – rifles, pistols, revolvers and personal items – many of them presented in life-size scenes in which uniformed mannequins and a whole range of military equipment including some twenty combat and transportation vehicles are presented against painted background scenery.

Over 150 uniforms – some on loan from Branch member and collector Alain Brogniez – are those that were worn by American, British, and German soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge.





The British in the Battle of the Bulge

Author: Michael Whitburn; Photos: <https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/legacy-of-liberation-commonwealth-troops-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/> and Wikimedia Commons

Source: *The British in the Battle of the Ardennes*, Office de Promotion du Tourisme Wallonie-Bruxelles.

This article previously included in the RBL Brussels Branch Newsletters of July 2017 & 2018.

On 16 December 1944, at 5.30 am, on a cold and foggy morning, from Monschau to Echternach, began the Battle of the Bulge also known as the Battle of the Ardennes or Von Rundstedt Offensive.

Some 55,000 British Army troops, including the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, participated in the battle.

The general counter-offensive began in terrible weather conditions on 3 January 1945.

Battalions of the 6th Airborne Division, supported by tanks of the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry Regiment and 23rd Hussars, were the first to become involved. After three days and three nights of intensive fighting and heavy losses, the men of the 13th (Lancashire) Battalion liberated the village of Bure. The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion occupied Rochefort, and on 4th January, the 53rd (Welsh) Division, supported by the tanks of the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry Regiment and 144th R.A.C. Regiment, launched its attack between Marche-en-Famenne and Hotton. On 8 January, the 51st (Highland) Division relieved the exhausted Welsh units.

On 11 January, the 1st Black Watch Battalion entered the town of La Roche-en-Ardenne. The following day, a reconnaissance unit of the 84th US Infantry Division entered the town and linked up with the 51st (Highland) Division: the scene is portrayed on a plaque in the town centre.

By 28 January, the Germans had been pushed back beyond the Siegfried Line. This marked not only the end of the Battle of the Bulge; it also signified the end of German occupation.



A British Sherman Firefly tank at Namur, Belgium, guards the river

Devastation and rebuilding

Reports and photos are from issues of Le Soir Illustré published in January 1945 and May 1946.

The impact on civilians

The Battle of the Bulge significantly impacted civilian life in the Ardennes region, leading to widespread suffering and displacement. Local populations faced bombardments and violent clashes, resulting in the destruction of homes and communities. Fear and uncertainty became pervasive as civilians grappled with the chaos surrounding them.

Many residents were forced to evacuate their homes, seeking safety amid the advancing troops. Refugee stories highlight the resilience and bravery of individuals who endured harsh winter conditions while fleeing from the fighting. Families were often separated, and their plights illustrate the human cost of this monumental battle.

In addition to physical dangers, civilians contended with dwindling resources. Food shortages grew rampant as supply lines were disrupted, forcing locals to rely on improvised means for survival. The psychological toll of the conflict left deep scars, as communities struggled to recover long after the fighting ceased.

Source: <https://totalmilitaryinsight.com/battle-of-the-bulge/>

The Battle of the Bulge left many towns and villages in the Ardennes region completely in ruins. Rochefort, Houffalize, Stavelot, Malmedy, Wanne and St Vith were among the hardest hit but there were many others.

La Roche completely destroyed

By Roger Crouquet, war correspondent for *Le Soir Illustré* (25 January 1945)

We stayed in a small village near La Roche. No sooner had we retired for the night than the sound of cannon fire began. Sharp blasts ripped through the air and shook the house. A little later, we witnessed an attack by enemy aircraft. Four or five planes circled above the village. The sky suddenly lit up. Rockets descended slowly towards the ground, illuminating the snow that took on an orange colour. A few bombs exploded. The artillery thundered. By then, the planes were already moving away.



La Roche, place du Bronze, near the bridge and just below the medieval castle

A few kilometres from where we were, men were fighting in temperatures of eight degrees below zero.

The next morning, we set off for La Roche.

The road that leads to La Roche has been cut in many places by exploding mines and is lined with burnt-out and abandoned vehicles.

When we arrived, we saw nothing but crushed houses. Only the damaged church tower emerged from a vast field of ruins. A cataclysm had struck this pretty, cheerful holiday resort and had reduced it



to a pile of rubble. Shells and bombs had ravaged this small tourist centre in just a few days.

Of the five hundred houses of pre-offensive La Roche, only four remain undamaged and around twenty are still habitable. We saw a group of people trying to locate what was left of their homes. People were crying. Whole areas of the town have been completely annihilated.

On the farm of La Petite Strument, a good hundred refugees have been living in anguish for three weeks, huddled together. They have found refuge in the cowshed and in two rooms that have been spared by the shelling. Living conditions are simply unimaginable. We had no idea how much the people of La Roche must have suffered. Death lurks in the surrounding forests. Fires ravage the villages. War continues to rage in the cities.

Let us not forget our brothers in La Roche and in the Ardennes and let us think of all those who are still suffering and mourning.

Remember that La Roche is only one hundred and fifty kilometres away from Brussels.

(Translated from French using DeepL.com and revised by Michael Whitburn)

Rebuilding La Roche: the situation one year after the battle

By Roger Crouquet, war correspondent for *Le Soir Illustré*, 19 May 1946

A year after the battle, we returned to these hard-hit areas. We were no longer confronted with the terrible sight of gutted towns, corpses huddled under a shroud of snow and crosses at the side of the road. Of course, not all traces of the fighting had disappeared. It takes more than a year to erase the many scars etched into the earth and the stones of the Ardennes as a testimony to the folly of mankind. It will take many years for La Roche, Houffalize and Bastogne, to name but a few of the martyred towns, to regain their peaceful pre-war appearance.

'Les tubes', petrol station and temporary church, and the postman calls

It is, however, undeniable that a commendable effort has already been made, if not to restore these towns to their former appearance, then at least to bring them back to life, which is essential. The heroic towns of the Ardennes will remain disfigured for a long time to come, because the problem of reconstruction in our country is far too vast, and reconstruction will inevitably extend over a long period.

What we really need if we are to bring the Ardennes back to life is a magic wand. Unfortunately, our ministers have no such accessory. For lack of funds, we have had to settle for a reconstruction programme that can be summed up in two points:

patch up what can be mended and build temporary homes for the victims.

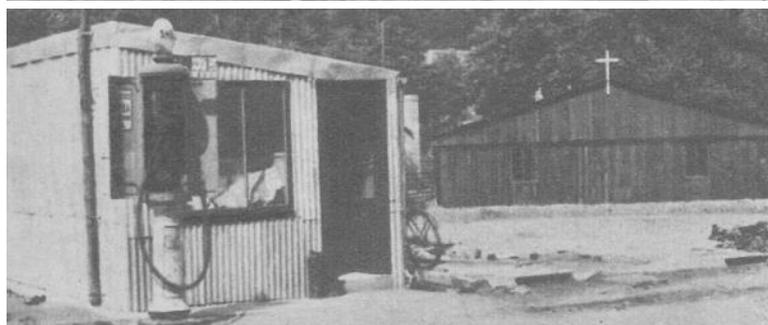
Less than was hoped for, but more than could reasonably be expected.

Less, because the people concerned were hoping that their war damage claims would rapidly be settled and that their homes would be rebuilt.

More, if you consider the state of our finances, the excessive burden on our treasury and the sluggishness of our administrative services.

We set out to investigate the reconstruction of the Ardennes and went to La Roche, one of the towns that suffered most during the von Rundstedt offensive. One hundred and seventeen civilians were killed, three hundred and fifty buildings were completely destroyed and three hundred and twenty-seven were seriously damaged. Only four houses were classified as 'intact'.

We had been to La Roche soon after the British and Americans had liberated the town and had seen a pile of rubble under a white blanket of snow. We had met people in a state of shock, their eyes enlarged by terror as they recalled the terrible days they had been through. People who had suffered hours of anxiety sheltered in a farmhouse at La Petite Strument, lying on the freezing ground. Many of them did not survive.



Today, if it were not for the gutted church building and the severely damaged old castle, you would not recognise the site of La Roche. The skeletons of the houses and the shaky sections of wall have disappeared. Buildings in danger of collapsing have been levelled right down to the cellars and the rubble disposed of.

New homes have sprung up like mushrooms. What are they like? Neither beautiful nor ugly. This new town that the locals call Matadi after our Congolese port has no character whatsoever.

It is as though a mischievous giant, carrying some eighty shacks of all shapes, materials and sizes in his apron had climbed the hill of Corumont in two strides, and from up there, suddenly shaking out his apron, had poured its contents into the valley. That is the impression we got from this raggle-taggle set of temporary bungalows scattered over the area.

Admittedly, we could have done better. We could for instance have chosen something more in keeping with the building traditions of the Ardennes.

And what about comfort? Again, the result leaves much to be desired. Most of the newly assembled bungalows have no running water and no toilets.

The installation of a number of 'tubes', or sheet metal cylinders divided in two, is currently being completed. Each household will have a kitchen and two small bedrooms measuring around 2m15 by 1m90, which is clearly far too small for a bed, chair and wardrobe. People are reluctant to occupy these cylinders and prefer to put up with their current misery.

It could all be better; and yet, bringing life back to a town that had been all but completely wiped out has been a remarkable tour de force. For La Roche is now very much alive. On the eve of the summer season, the town is a hive of activity. Some hotels have already reopened their doors and are impatient to be able to welcome tourists.

The Tourist Office has wasted no time. Hiking paths have been signposted and are now open to the public. Benches are to be installed shortly. The entire area has been cleared of mines. A bus service will soon link Marloie to La Roche. Two hundred hotel and guesthouse rooms will be made available for visitors this summer.

We can only hope that measures taken by the public authorities will meet the expectations of the people of La Roche and other disaster-stricken towns and villages who expect nothing more than to get back to life as it was before the war.

(Translated from French with DeepL.com and revised by Michael Whitburn)

In the wake of the battle

By **Fanny Lardot** (2014), in *Tourism in Belgian Luxembourg*, Down Memory Lane blog.

By 1945, 1,146 wooden prefabs (200 for Houffalize and 80 for La Roche) had been assembled to house the victims of war and a further 225 for livestock. The prefabs were however not adapted to winter conditions in the Ardennes. Some had actually been intended for the Belgian Congo.

There were many complaints about delays in construction work.

Why was it all taking so long? The first reason was that before 1947 there was no specific law on war damages. There were many other reasons: the shortage of building materials; the disastrous state of the roads that made it very difficult to bring materials to the building sites; the lack of manpower as men were still being held in Germany; and a great many financial and administrative problems.

Picking up the pieces in a shattered world

In 1945, the whole of Belgium had to be rebuilt for the second time in 20 years. The material damage was as extensive as it had been after the First World War, the difference being that it extended far beyond the regions that had been devastated in WWI.

The damage suffered by the people of the Ardennes

In 1945, a report for the province of Luxembourg showed that 12,577 homes had been destroyed or severely damaged and that 1,282 civilians had lost their lives as a result of the battle. Many religious and public buildings (local communes, schools, etc.) had also been destroyed. In the three areas of Bastogne, Marche-en-Famenne and Neufchâteau, 33% of the population was affected.

Not only had many people lost their homes; they were also having to endure the full impact of the icy, wet winter weather. People were living in cellars, stables, barns or partly ruined houses. Diseases like diphtheria and pneumonia spread like wildfire; scabies and dysentery were rampant because of poor or non-existent sanitary facilities; and because people were afraid to leave their towns and villages since fields and forests were heavily landmined, diseases spread all the more rapidly.

Infant mortality was also high due to the lack of hospitals, sanatoria, maternity wards and midwives.

Also, the vast majority of roads and railways remained impassable, which further isolated the province from the rest of the country and from vital food and other supplies.

Post-war reconstruction in the Belgian province of Luxemburg

Two ministerial departments were responsible for providing aid to war victims: the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Reconstruction.

Other organisations included the National Relief Fund for the Provision of Aid to the Victims (equipment), the Red Cross (hygiene, healthcare, food), the Secours d'Hiver (clothing) and the Mine Clearance Service.

Not surprisingly, there was general disorganisation straight after the end of the war but many fund-raising initiatives were initiated by local parishes, schools, scouts' associations and local citizens' associations.

1948

Not before 1948 did the situation really begin to improve with the new law on war damages (1947) and the Marshall Plan enabling rebuilding to really get underway.

<https://traces-memoire.ardennebelge.be/lapres-bataille-comment-sorganise-la-reconstruction/>

La Roche today: just below the castle and place du Bronze, from

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Roche-en-Ardenne



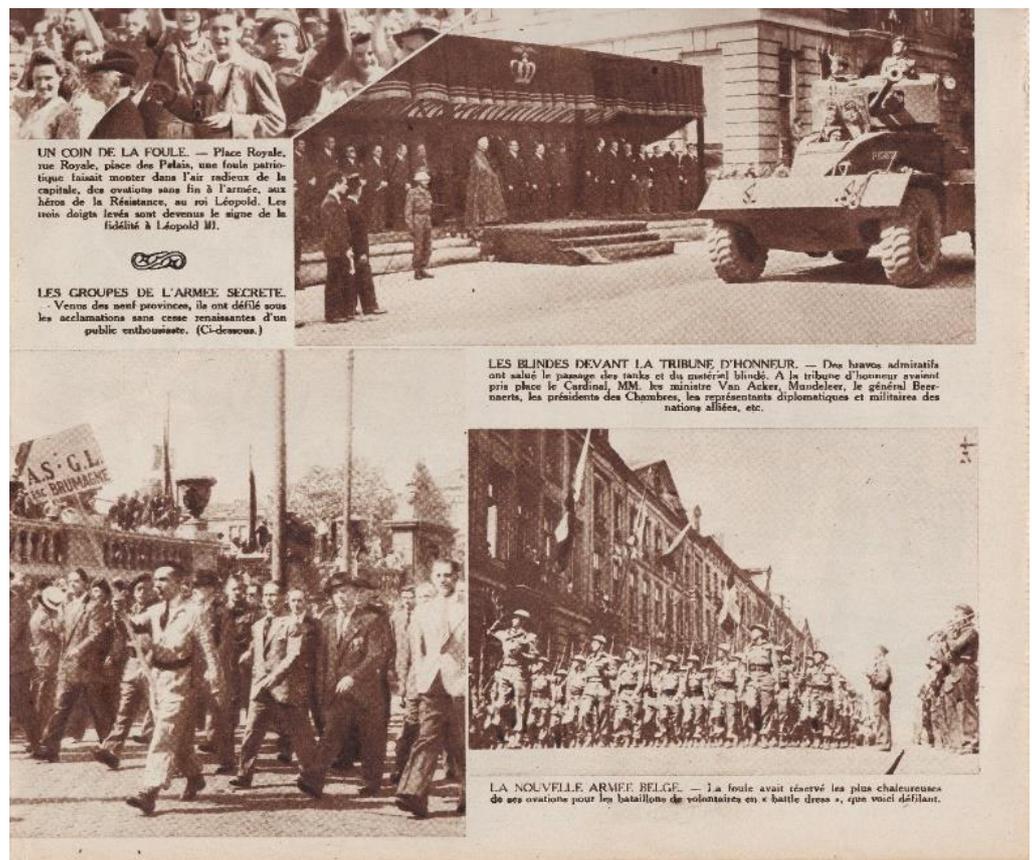
VE Day and the continuing fight in Burma

Author: Michael Whitburn; Photos: Le Patriote Illustré, 20 May 1945

Though WW2 did not end before Japan finally surrendered on 2 September 1945, and though British troops continued to wage war in Burma (now Myanmar), the surrender of the remaining German armed forces to the Allies on 8 May 1945 did mark the end of the war in Europe.

Henceforth, 8 May would be celebrated as the Day of Victory in Europe or VE Day (the word Europe was added later to avoid confusion with Victory over Japan Day or VJ Day on 2 September 1945).

When 8 May 1945 was declared Victory in Europe Day, crowds across the world flocked to greet and celebrate the defeat of Nazi Germany after six long years of war.



Top right: Armoured vehicles drive past the VIP grandstand

Bottom right: The new Belgian army

Bottom left: The Belgian Secret Army



Top right: Belgian section of the Royal Navy

Bottom right: Belgian section of the RAF

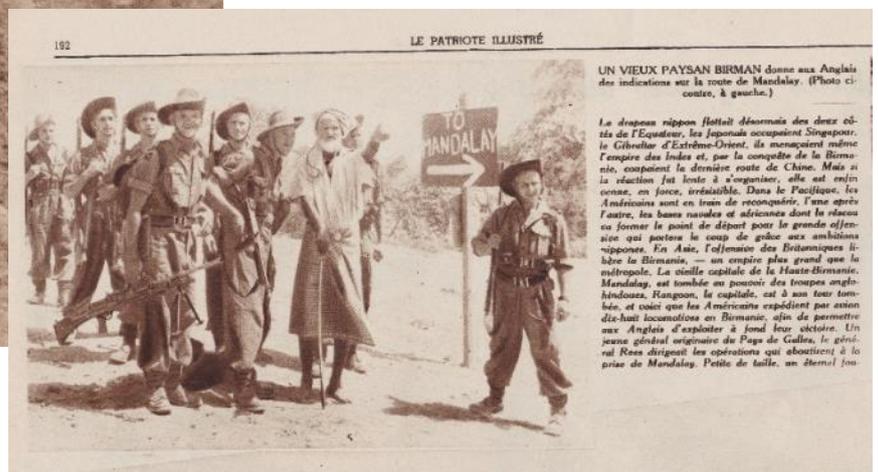
The British in Burma

Meanwhile, British and Indian soldiers in Burma continued to encounter fierce Japanese resistance. Faced with the additional challenge of monsoon weather conditions, their advance had slowed significantly.



A British officer observes the impact of bombs and shells

A Burmese local gives directions to the British



Wooden crosses near Mandalay bear witness to the sacrifices that were made to reconquer the city



The Battle of Mandalay

The Battle of Mandalay was a decisive engagement near the end of the Burma campaign during WWII.

Despite logistical difficulties, the Allies were able to deploy large armoured and mechanised forces in Central Burma and also possessed air supremacy. Most of the Japanese forces in Burma were destroyed during the battles, allowing the Allies to later recapture the capital, Rangoon, and reoccupy most of the country with little organised opposition.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Meiktila_and_Mandalay

The capture of the capital Rangoon (now Yangon) in early May allowed many soldiers in the region to celebrate their own hard-fought victory.

However, the defeat of Japanese forces in Burma still did not mark an end to the conflict. Plans were under way for an invasion of Japan's home islands in the months to come.

Victory over Japan signalled the end of the Second World War, giving rise to further celebrations across Britain and the world. The defeat of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan was a momentous achievement that had required huge sacrifices. Millions had lost their lives, cities and towns lay in ruins, and many of the survivors – both military and civilian – held on to the trauma of their experiences.

Source: National Army Museum, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/victory-may-august-1945>

Winston Churchill in Brussels

Report from Le Soir Illustré, 22 November 1945, translated with DeepL.com and revised by Michael Whitburn. Photos: Le Soir Illustré and Pourquoi Pas.

Some six months after VE Day celebrations, Winston Churchill and his youngest daughter Mary (whose wartime service included commanding an ATS gun battery at Terlanenveld near Overijse), received a tremendous welcome when they visited Brussels on 15-16 November 1945.

It was easy to predict that Brussels would give Winston Churchill the warm welcome he so much deserves.

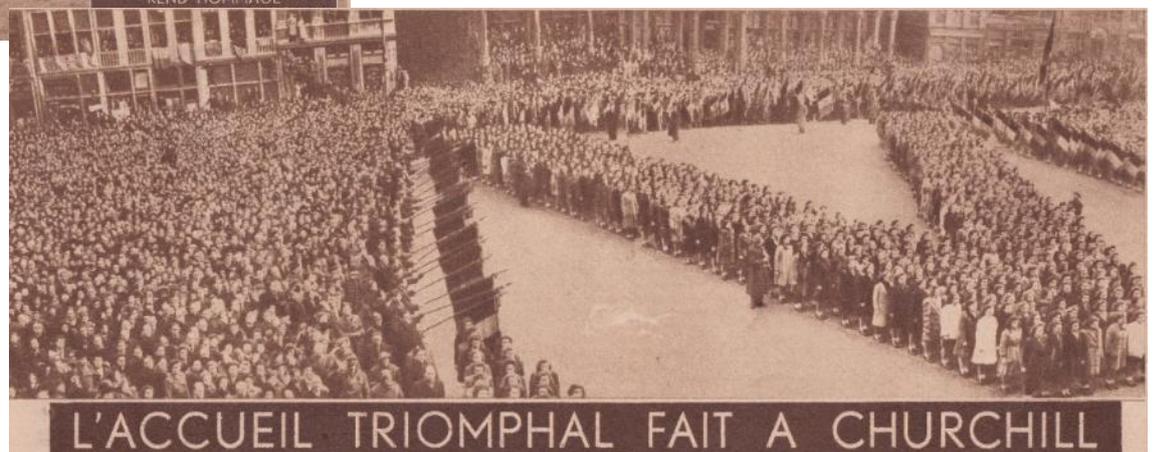
Who does not owe a debt of gratitude to this great statesman and great European? Was it not he, and he alone, who through his energy and foresight, rallied the forces of Britain and the British Empire against the onslaught of evil?

For two unforgettable days, life in Brussels came to a standstill: everyone wanted to see him, to cheer him, to show him just how grateful they were.



(left) The most known pays tribute to the unknown. Winston Churchill lays a wreath before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during his two-day visit to Brussels on 15-16 November 1945

(below) Less than one year after celebrating the Liberation of Brussels, huge crowds gather at the Grand Place



L'ACCUEIL TRIOMPHAL FAIT A CHURCHILL

(right) Two very young-looking MPs shake hands with Winston Churchill.

Just for the record: the two boys, who would later become well-known TV journalists at the RTB (Belgian Radio and Television), are the brothers Josy and Jean-Claude Dubié (the latter would later change his name to Jean-Claude Defossé).

Josy became an international correspondent working for the RTB in the 1970s reporting from Vietnam, then from Chile, shortly before the fall of President Salvador Allende (he was in fact the last journalist to interview the President); from Portugal, where he was one of the first journalists to report on the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974; from Angola and Mozambique, and from Soviet-occupied Afghanistan.

Jean-Claude became an investigative journalist. In 1986, he became famous for directing *Le Journal des Travaux Inutiles*, a series of special reports on the scandalous waste of public funds generated by hugely expensive and completely unnecessary construction projects.



Debout dans sa voiture, à côté de sa fille Mary, Churchill ne cesse de saluer et de faire signe à la foule massée sur le passage du cortège et qui acclame sans arrêt le grand homme d'Etat.



Place Madou, Churchill serre la main à deux « M. P. » venus de Lilliput pour régler la circulation « à sens unique » au moment de son passage.

The *Pourquoi Pas* was a (moderately) satirical weekly magazine founded in 1910. It was absorbed by *Le Vif/L'Express* in 1989 and rapidly disappeared from the media scene.



Why is 8 May no longer a public holiday in Belgium?

Author: Michael Whitburn

Adapted from 8 May 1945, 8 May 2020 ... 75 years on, yet silence reigns ... by Belgian historian Chantal Kesteloot

8 May 1945 was a day of public rejoicing in Belgium. People celebrated in the streets, but the fervour was maybe not quite the same as for the celebrations of the Liberation of Belgium and Brussels in September 1944. The intervening eight months had been marked by a number of situations that had had a dampening effect on the spirits: the return (or non-return) of prisoners, deportees or victims of Nazi persecution; the harsh post-war living conditions; and the heated discussions surrounding the return of the King from exile in Germany.

As is still the case in France, 8 May was a public holiday also in Belgium until 1983.

In 1974, a law was passed that limited the number of public holidays to 10, and in 1983, 8 May lost its public holiday status.

Since then, the two World Wars have been commemorated the same day, on 11 November.

Today, only the Brussels-Capital Region has retained 8 May as a public holiday – a decision that was enacted on 13 March 2003. The 8 May public holiday celebrates ‘the victory of democracy and humanism over the dark forces of obscurantism and fascism’.

The decision to abolish 8 May as a public holiday was met with protest from patriotic associations. It did not however cause much of a stir among the population.

Today, voices are being raised in favour of reinstating 8 May as a public holiday, of turning 8 May into a moment of reflection and debate to strengthen common democratic values.

<https://www.cegesoma.be/en/8-may-1945-8-may-2020-75-years-yet-silence-reigns>

Nadine Dumon and the Comet Line

Author: Michael Whitburn

Sadly, Andrée Dumon, one of the great heroines of the Comet Line (Ligne Comète), passed away in January.

Branch Joint Secretary Andrée Ferrant speaks fondly of Mme Dumon, also often known by her code name 'Nadine', whom she met at the British Embassy, at a time when Andrée was in charge of organising entertainment at the Embassy and British Ambassador's Residence.

She remembers Mme Dumon as a "discreet" figure, who used to attend the Remembrance Sunday Service at Holy Trinity and lay a wreath for RAFA.

Andrée, together with Chair Dennis Abbott, attended the funeral service of Mme Dumon at Uccle's Sainte Anne Church on behalf of the Branch. Freddy Roiseux also attended as standard bearer of the Comet Line Remembrance Association. UK Defence Attaché Group Captain John Dickson represented the Embassy.

WW2 Escape Lines or Freedom Trails of Europe

By Mary Moynihan, writing for Comet Lines – Freedom Trails of Europe, a transnational project with four European partners from Ireland, Spain, Poland and Belgium that promotes the study of European history with a focus on Escape Lines during WWII.

Secret World War II networks known as escape lines were set up to help Allied servicemen and citizens leave Nazi-occupied territory during WWII.

During the war, over one quarter of a million Allied servicemen – British, American, Australian, Canadian and others – were stranded behind enemy lines and became prisoners of war. Only a few thousand – somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 – evaded capture, stayed free and made it home. Just as many tried to escape and failed. Unknown numbers were captured and executed.

The Comet Line

The Comet Line operated from Brussels and helped escapees on their perilous journey to British-controlled Gibraltar, through occupied France, across the Pyrenees and through 'neutral' Spain.

The Comet Line was set up in August 1941 by a brave 24-year-old Belgian woman, Andrée (Dédée) de Jongh (1916-2007). Escapees were given food, clothing, shelter and false identity papers and were guided by a chain or network of 'helpers' from Belgium to Gibraltar, staying in various safe houses along the way.

Many of the escapees assisted by the Comet network were airmen who had survived being shot down over Germany, Nazi-occupied Belgium and the Netherlands.

Two friends involved in setting up the line were Henri De Bliqui and his cousin Arnold Deppé. In April 1941, De Bliqui was arrested and later executed. Arnold continued to organise

escape routes as did Dédée and her father Frédéric de Jongh, a schoolteacher, who organised the escape route from Brussels to Paris and from Paris to the Spanish border and over the Pyrenees into Spain.

Following the arrest of several members of the Comet Line, Dédée moved to Paris from where she accompanied escapees from France into Spain with the support of other helpers along the way. She is thought to have personally escorted 118 airmen over the Pyrenees.

A key person involved in the Comet Line was Baron Jean Greindl (code name Nemo) who worked for the Comet Line in Brussels from 1942, when Dédée was forced to move to Paris. He personally rescued over 70 airmen and over 20 civilians. He was arrested in 1943 and sentenced to death but was killed in an Allied air bombing in the prison where he was held.

Andrée Dumon, code-name Nadine

Also very much involved in The Comet Line was Andrée Dumon, code-name Nadine (to avoid confusion with Andrée (Dédée) De Jongh).

Nadine was the Comet Line's main courier and guide between Brussels and Paris from 1940 to 1942. She was eventually betrayed and arrested on 11 August 1942. She was imprisoned for over a year at St Gilles prison in Brussels before being deported and held in various concentration camps in Germany, including Ravensbruck and Mauthausen.

She was liberated from Mauthausen in April 1945.

The Comet operation was complex: organisers needed to recover fallen airmen, procure civilian clothing and fake identity papers, provide medical aid for the wounded, and shelter and feed the men on their long trek to freedom.

Members of the Comet Line came from all walks of life. Among them were teachers, doctors, miners, bakers, nurses, farmers, factory workers and business people. When caught by the Gestapo they were interrogated, often tortured, and then sent to POW camps. Many of them were executed or died as a result of starvation and repeated beatings. If a person was arrested for assisting the enemy, their family would also be arrested, interrogated, tortured and executed. In France the reward for turning in or revealing the name of someone who had assisted an Allied soldier, was 10,000 francs.



Andrée Dumon-Antoine (1922-2025) was born in Belgium in 1922. She spent the first few years of her life in the Belgian Congo where her father worked as a doctor. The family returned to Brussels in 1928.

During the occupation of Belgium, Eugène Dumon, Andrée's father, was a member of the Belgian Red Cross and the Resistance.

Andrée first joined the Resistance as a courier. In 1940 she met Frederic de Jongh of the Comète organisation. Andrée was to work with him until she was arrested in August 1942.

Her various jobs for the Comet Line included finding food and clothing for Allied evacuees and escorting secret mail and 'parcels' (i.e. Allied airmen) on their journey to freedom via Paris, France and Spain.

It was in December 1941 that Andrée accompanied Allied Canadian pilot Albert Day from Brussels to Valenciennes.

Albert Day had been downed over Frankfurt. Andrée was then an 18-year-old member of the Resistance and Albert was clearly swept off his feet: "She was so tiny, so small, and so beautiful that it almost seemed silly that someone my size was going to put his life into her hands."

Andrée was still not twenty when she was arrested by the Gestapo at her home in Brussels along with her family on 11 August 1942.

"The Germans took my father in a car and me in another car", she later explained in an interview. "I was smiling and one of the Germans said: soon you will not be smiling; but I always smile. I looked so young when I arrived at St Gilles prison that a woman warder told me I would soon be free. 'We don't arrest children', she said, but I knew I would not be freed."

Andrée was interrogated. She suffered repeated beatings and threats of execution but revealed nothing.

She was deported to Germany and was moved from one camp to another, including the slave-labour Ravensbrück concentration camp for women and finally the infamous Mauthausen camp in Austria.

Andrée Dumon survived the war almost by miracle. She returned to live in Belgium in May 1945, in the house where she and her family had been arrested.

Source: https://smashingtimes.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CometLines_Book-Final.pdf

Further links to Mme Dumon and the Comet Line

- https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9e_Dumon
- https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9e_Dumon
- <https://www.cometeline.org/cometorgnameDumonandree.htm>
- <https://objectifplumes.be/author/andree-dumon-nom-de-code-nadine/>
- <https://www.areaw.be/andree-dumon-je-ne-vous-ai-pas-oublies-liberte-1945-ed-mols-coll-histoire-3/>
- <https://www.legasee.org.uk/veteran/andree-dumon/>
- https://smashingtimes.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CometLines_Book-Final.pdf
- <https://www.brusselstimes.com/art-culture/1582118/captured-tortured-defiant-the-incredible-story-of-andree-dumon>
- <https://www.brusselstimes.com/art-culture/1582925/the-resistance-fighters-risking-it-all-for-stranded-allies>



Count Henri d'Outremont

Author: Michael Whitburn

Count Henri d' Outremont was granted centenarian membership of the RBL after celebrating his 100th birthday in May.

One of only three Belgian survivors of the Piron Brigade, the Belgo-Luxembourg unit that took part in the Liberation of Normandy and Belgium alongside the Allies, Count Henri participated in the VE Day commemoration at the Colonne du Congrès in Brussels on 8 May.

Eighty years later, in a recent interview for RTBF actus, Henri expressed concern when asked about the future of peace in Europe and the world.

The current geopolitical situation reminds him of the period that preceded the beginning of WWII.

“Let us hope”, he added, “that sooner or later, but not too late, there will be an awakening somewhere. Maybe people will begin to say to themselves it just doesn't make any sense to make the same stupid mistakes as 80 years ago.”

The current instability reminds him of when Europe was preparing for war in the late 1930s.

“I'm very worried; not for myself, but for my children and for my grandchildren. With all that is happening now, I remember exactly what was going on when I was 13, 14, 15. The three years before 1940. We were sure something was going to happen. And we got ready.”

Despite these gloomy prospects, Henri d'Outremont wishes to convey a message of hope. “I want to tell people and younger people, especially younger people, that we shouldn't despair. We've just had 80 years of peace. Why should it change? We have to look for solutions so that the same doesn't happen again.”

Source: Interview for RTBF actus by Thomas Gadisseux (8 May 2025)

<https://www.rtb.be/article/survivant-de-la-2e-querre-mondiale-j-ai-peur-oui-mais-j-espere-un-sursaut-pour-ne-pas-recommencer-les-memes-betises-d-il-y-a-80-ans-11543597>

Translated from French with DeepL.com and revised by Michael Whitburn



Count Henri d'Outremont speaking at the Gala Dinner organised by the Branch on 4 September 2024 to celebrate the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Brussels.

Lance-Corporal Nathan Atherton's uniform

Author: Alain Brogniez



This article is about the uniform worn by 2939931 L/Cpl Nathan Atherton, who served and fought with 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders' A Company during the Second World War.

This Battalion was part of the 4th Indian Infantry Division (its badge features a red eagle against a black background) during the campaigns in East and North Africa (1940-1943) and Italy (1944-1945); the Battalion was then transferred to the 6th British Armoured Division (a white fist against a black background) for the occupation of Austria. Nathan's uniforms were found some years ago during a house clearance in UK and consisted of a Glengarry (Scottish side cap), a Canadian-made Battle Dress blouse with on each sleeve the Regimental tartan, Divisional badge and rank chevron, and a kilt. There were also three photos: two of Nathan Atherton and one with some of his comrades.

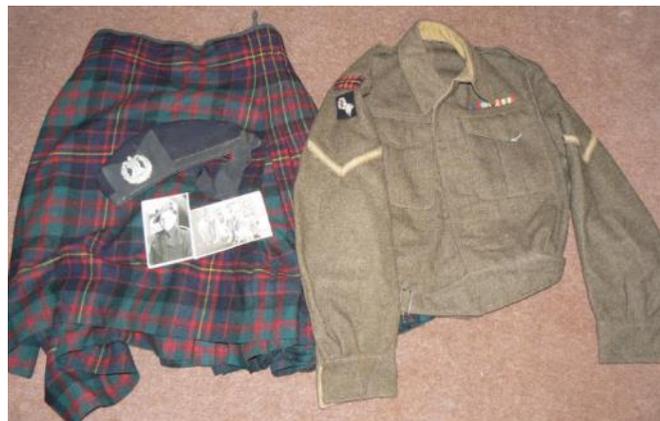


The Camerons were a proud regiment, and they kept their kilts for parades.

Some months ago, quite fortuitously, I was proposed a second BD blouse that had belonged to L/Cpl Atherton (this time an Australian-made one) by a British friend and fellow collector who had found the blouse on a flea market!

For his services during the war, Nathan was awarded the 1939-45 Star, Africa Star, Italy Star and War Medal 1939-45 (the ribbon was created after Nathan Atherton was demobilised).

Let us remember L/Cpl Nathan Atherton.



Remembering the crew of Lancaster VN-U

Author: Jean-François Husson; Photos: A. Clavier and event organisers

On the initiative of the Lancaster Committee, now chaired by Jacques Ganty, and in the presence of Cindy Docq, alderwoman representing the municipality of Walcourt, a ceremony was held on 12 April to honour the memory of the seven sergeants who made up the crew of Lancaster VN-U of the 50th Squadron of Bomber Command, shot down by German fighters on 13 April 1943 at Yves Gomezée.

Ernie Baker and I represented Brussels Branch and laid a wreath.



Flight Sergeant Richard Atha and Wing Commander Adrian Morris represented the Royal Air Force Association. The Belgian Air Force was represented by Colonel Lete, from the Florennes air base that was the home to the 350th Squadron, founded in Britain during war, and the Military Command of the Province of Namur by Chief Warrant Officer Laurent Evrard, a regular participant in the Remembrance Sunday ceremony that we organise every year in Namur. Numerous patriotic associations and some re-enactors were also present.



After speeches by Mr Ganty and Councillor Docq, Flight Sergeant Atha recited the Kohima Epitaph, after which I was invited to remember each of the seven young sergeants:

- Sergeant John Gilchrist Duncan, pilot, aged 21, only son of Andrew and Isabelle Duncan, from Coatbridge, Lanarkshire, Scotland
- Sergeant David Mackenzie Smellie, navigator, aged 27, son of Thomas and Annie Smellie, from Coatbridge, Lanarkshire, Scotland
- Sergeant John Alec Bates, radio operator, aged 22, son of Bernard and Eleanor Bates, of Warrington, Cheshire, England
- Sergeant Cyril Payne, nose gunner, aged 21, son of Fred and Ada Payne, originally from Audenshaw, Lancashire
- Sergeant Hebert Rhys Barnes, tail gunner, aged 21, son of Sidney and Ella Barnes, from Waun-Lwyd, Ebbw Vale, Wales
- Sergeant Albert Warren Berry, dorsal gunner, aged 22, son of Albert and Lilian Berry, from Newport, Wales
- Sergeant James Speirs, flight engineer, aged 27, son of Robert and Christina Speirs, from Darvel, Ayrshire, Scotland. He left behind a widow, Minnie Archibald.

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM!

Florennes

On 10 May, as part of the ceremonies marking both VE Day on 8 May and the invasion of Belgium on 10 May, the town of Florennes and various patriotic associations paid tribute to the 75 members of the RAF, RAFVR, RCAF, RAAF and RNZAF aircrew who are buried in the CWGC section of the municipal cemetery. Belgian political and military authorities were represented, and tributes were also paid by re-enactors, including a group of Ardennes Hunters (1940) and a group representing the Piron Brigade.

Digest

BBCA garden party at Stonemanor

The RBL Brussels Branch was well represented at this year's garden party organised in the grounds of the Stonemanor store at Everberg on 11 May by the Brussels British Community Association.

The weather was simply perfect and the prospect of a free cream tea (scone, clotted cream, strawberry jam, and a cup tea) proved irresistible to many people including the Brussels Branch members who turned up to spend a fun afternoon with family and friends and visit our stand.

There was plenty of entertainment including magic tricks by the Belgian illusionist Jonas De Bruyn and a great performance by the Military Wives' Choir.

Many thanks to all – organisers, sponsors, participants and donors.

The photos show (top to bottom): the Brussels Branch stand; Dave Bradley, Lisa Hyde and Dennis Abbott; Jean-Pierre Pede; and Simon Pascoe (Cornish pastry maker extraordinaire), Jonas de Bruyn (magician) and Ryan (Stonemanor manager) holding up the Stonemanor banner.



West Flanders Battlefield Tour

On Saturday 7 June the Branch is running a battlefield tour to West Flanders to explore an RAF crash landing site, CWGC graves in Veurne and De Panne and a V1 site, followed by a small incursion across the French border to visit the location of the SS massacre of Allied troops at Wormhout. This is a full-day guided tour which will also include a short stop for lunch at an authentic brewery and malt-house dating from the 19th century. The programme is as follows:

08:00 Meet outside the British Embassy, 10 Avenue d'Auderghem, 1040 Brussels
 08:15 Depart Brussels by coach for Ypres
 10:15 Meet our tour guide
 10:30 Guided tour of West Flanders
 13:00 Lunch at Brewery Museum de Snoek, Fortem
 14:00 Guided tour of West Flanders continues
 16:30 Drinks
 17:30 End of tour and return to Brussels
 19:30 Arrival in Brussels

To reserve your place on this day trip, please register online and make a payment of €80* per person as soon as possible. Your contribution covers the coach, the tour guide and a small donation to the Royal British Legion. Lunch is not included in the price. Here are the payment details:

IBAN: BE66-0635-8060-4043
 Name: (Steve Grant)
 Communication: West Flanders 7 June 2025

All are welcome and we encourage you to share these details with anyone who might share our passion for history and exploration.

We are looking forward to sharing this remarkable trip with you all. If you have any questions or need further information, do not hesitate to reach out to Steve Grant.

Keys to the City of Namur

On 21 May, the 2nd Commando Battalion received the keys to the City of Namur, its garrison town, as part of the 'Freedom of the City' ceremony. This was initiated four years ago by the then mayor, Maxime Prévot, now Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The 2nd Commando Battalion is the successor to the 4th Troop of the 10th Inter-Allied Commandos, formed in Britain during the war and trained in Achnacarry, among other places. The current acting mayor, Charlotte Bazelaire, presided over the ceremony, at which our Branch was represented by Jean-François Husson.



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.