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The RBL Antwerp branch wishes all its members and friends
a happy *New Year* filled with joy, peace and love.



THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION ANTWERP BRANCH
Tweemaandelijkse newsletter december 2024 - januari 2025

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Dear members

My! Hasn't this year flown by? High time to look back on this remarkable and busy year for the Branch and everything we achieved.

2024 was a big year for the Branch - with our long-awaited Centenary reception at Antwerp city hall, and most importantly the Tank ceremony commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Liberation of Antwerp where we were fortunate to have the band of the Grenadier Guards and the crew of HMS Cattistock in attendance. But that was not all - the Branch attended many, many remembrance ceremonies, not only familiar ones, but also new ceremonies we had never attended before. Your participation, presence, and passion have been the heart of every event, making them meaningful and impactful. So thank you. We hope we can continue to rely on your support, so that we can continue our work in the same vein.

And now, we welcome the new year! May it bring you and your family peace, joy, and new opportunities. Let us continue to honour the past while embracing the future with hope.

Best regards
 Inge
Newsletter editor ad interim

RBL OPEN EVENING

Every first Thursday of the month, from 8 pm onwards
 Café Highlander, Stadswaag 21, Antwerp
Join us for a chat and a drink!



RBL Antwerp Branch HELPLINE: 0486 646 941
 (Mary Ann Marinus)

If someone is ill, or needs a visit, please **DO** give us a call.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

DATE & TIME	LOCATION	WHAT
Thu 9 January, 7:30 pm	Highlander	RBL New Year's Drink
Sat 25 - Sun 26 January	Mark Liebrecht-schouwborg, Mortsel	BATS pantomime The Little Mermaid www.batsantwerp.be
Thu 6 February	Highlander	RBL Open Evening
TO BE CONFIRMED	Highlander	Bingo afternoon

RBL FLYER

The committee has recently put together an introductory flyer explaining the work the Antwerp Branch does. We think it could be useful for people that want to join the Royal British Legion but are unsure what we are all about in Antwerp. Obviously our focus is somewhat different than the UK branches and the flyer will explain this for potential members or people that are interested in the Legion.

So if you're representing the Antwerp Branch, or people ask about what we do, please ask us for copies of the flyer.

Also, if you know of a place where we could leave some copies, get in touch with Inge (Antwerp.secretary@rbl.community or call 0478 297 687).

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR HOME AND HOSPITAL VISITS

We are looking for volunteers who would be happy to visit Branch Members who are not mobile, well, or in hospital, as part of the Branch Community Support Scheme.

No special training is needed just common sense and a sense of humour.

Interested?
Please contact
Mary Ann: 0486 646 941 (evenings)
or e-mail: Maryann.marinus@hotmail.com



RBL NEW YEAR'S DRINK

The committee of the RBL Antwerp Branch AGM would very much like to invite all its members to a New Year's reception at Café The Highlander on Thursday 9 January.

As we say goodbye to this remarkable year, we would like to invite you to our New Year's reception to kick off 2025. Come and join us for an evening filled with good cheer, and a chance to make a toast to new beginnings, good health, and all the exciting things the year ahead will bring.

We look forward to welcoming you and raising a glass together to celebrate the start of a bright and hopeful 2025!

Sid Wilkins
Chairman, on behalf of the RBL committee



Date: Thursday 9 January 2025

Time: From 7:30 pm onwards

Location: Café The Highlander, Stadswaag 21

RSVP by Monday 6 January 2025 to Inge
(Antwerp.secretary@rbl.community or call
0478 297 687)

To offset the cost, we would like to ask a **small contribution of €5/person**, payable to the RBL bank account BE53 9730 0871 2553. This includes a drink (bubbles, a small beer or a soft drink) and some nibbles.

LAM TO THE SLAUGHTER (from: *Amazing and extraordinary facts - The British at war*)

In the course of the Second World War, huge amounts of ingenuity were expended on devising new weapons. But not all the ideas that get off the drawing board were well thought through.

Two of the more questionable ideas for aerial combat - now almost entirely forgotten - are the device known as the Turbinlite and a flying bomb called LAM.

Turbinlite was nothing more or less than a huge searchlight attached to the nose of an aircraft, like a headlight. The idea that it would be used in conjunction with radar (then just beginning to be introduced to combat planes) to locate and then illuminate enemy fighters at night. While the German planes were caught in the glare of the Turbinlite, Hurricanes would close in and shoot them down. It seems not to have occurred to anyone that the target planes might not obligingly fly straight and steady within the Turbinlite's beam; or that an attacking plane that could direct a searchlight directly at an enemy might as well be shooting a gun at it instead.



LAM was an even worse and rather bizarre idea. The acronym stood for Long Aerial Mine, and it was essentially a bomb on a rope. The idea was that an explosive charge would be towed behind a Havoc nightfighter on a cable 2,000 feet (600 metres) long. An enemy aircraft flying into the rope cause the bomb to be drawn against its hull, where it would explode on impact. Again, the obvious failing was ignored: that the tangle of the two aircraft in flight might very well result in both of them crashing to the ground.

A final absurdity: the entirely transparent code name for LAM was 'Mutton'.

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE (from: *Amazing and extraordinary facts - The British at war*)

The Christmas truce of 1914, in the first winter of the Great War, is often seen today as a parable of the futility of war - and the ironies of that one day's peace were not lost on those who took part. On that day, in many parts of the Western Front, German and British troops spontaneously stopped fighting for a short while. Instead they left their trenches and greeted each other, tentatively, as friends.

There are many accounts of the truce, and most seem to agree that the Germans instigated it. It began on Christmas Eve - which is when the festivities get under way in the German traditions. 'The Germans entrenched opposite us began calling over to us "Cigarettes", "Pudding", "A Happy Christmas" and "English means good",' wrote one English rifleman named HC Brazier. 'So two of our fellows climbed over the parapet of the trench and went toward the German trenches. Half-way they were met by four Germans, who said they would not shoot on Christmas Day if we did not. They gave our fellows cigars and a bottle of wine and were given a cake and cigarettes. When they came back I went out with some more of our fellows and we were met by about 30 Germans, who seemed to be very nice fellows. All through the night we sang carols to them and they sang to us and one played *God Save the King* on a mouth organ.'

Something similar happened further down the front line, near Armentières. The British troops saw that the Germans, a few hundred yards away were decorating the lip of their trench with Chinese lanterns. Two British officers went out across no-man's land and persuaded the first German sentry they encountered to call for an officer of his own. A local ceasefire was agreed for Christmas Day, which was marked with a game of football and an exchange of cigarettes. Football was not everywhere a possibility, because the



ground was churned up, and too thickly sown with corpses, as Rifleman Brazier recounts: 'On Christmas Day we all got out of the trenches and walked about with the Germans, who, when asked if they were fed up with the war, said "Yes, rather". They all believed that London had been captured, and that German sentries were outside Buckingham Palace. They are evidently told a lot



Did you know?

- The song 'All Together Now' by Liverpool band The Farm, took its inspiration from the Christmas Day Truce of 1914. The song was rerecorded by The Peace Collective for release in December 2014 to mark the centenary of the event
- The video for the 1983 song 'Pipes of Peace' by Paul McCartney depicts a fictional version of the Christmas truce.
- In the Doctor Who 2017 Christmas Special 'Twice Upon a Time', the First and Twelfth Doctors become accidentally involved in the fate of a British captain seemingly destined to die in No Man's Land in a standoff with a German soldier. The Twelfth Doctor sent him a few hours forward in time so that the start of the Christmas truce would prevent him from being killed.

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE - cont'd (from: *Amazing and extraordinary facts - The British at war*)

of rot. Some of them could speak English fairly well. Between the trenches there were a lot of dead Germans whom we helped to bury. In one place where the trenches are only 25 yards apart we could see dead Germans half-buried, their legs and gloved hands sticking out of the ground. The trenches in this position are so close that they are called "the Death Trap", as hundreds have been killed there.



A Private Frederick Heath delighted the Germans in this sector with a present of a plum pudding. His rueful joke, that this might be the secret to ending the war, is made, one feels, only half in jest.

'Here was no desire to kill, but just the wish of a few simple soldiers (and no one is quite so simple as a soldier) that on Christmas Day, at any rate, the force of fire should cease. We wrote our names and addresses on the field service postcards, and exchanged them for German ones. We cut the buttons off our coats and took in exchange the Imperial Arms of Germany. But the gift of gifts was Christmas pudding. The sight of it made the Germans' eyes grow wide with hungry wonder, and at the first bite of it they were our friends for ever. Given sufficient quantity of Christmas pudding, every German in the trenches would have surrendered'.

Heath ended his account, written soon after Christmas, by saying: 'As I finish this short and scrappy description of a strangely human event, we are pouring rapid fire into the German

trenches, and they are returning the compliment just as fiercely. Screeching through the air above us are the shattering shells of rival batteries of artillery. So we are back once more to the ordeal of fire.'

Peace broke out again the following Christmas, 1915. 'We could hear "Merry Christmas, Tommy", wrote Llewellyn Wyn Griffith, an officer in the Royal Welch Fusilliers. We saw hands and bottles being waved at us, with encouraging shouts that we could neither understand nor misunderstand ... in a few moments there was a rush of men from both sides, carrying tins of meat, biscuits and other odd commodities for barter.' An afternoon football match was mooted, but this time the senior command was wise to what was going on up at the front. A brigadier 'came spluttering up to the line' and threatened everybody with courts martial. He ordered an especially intense bombardement of the German positions for that night. Many soldiers on both sides aimed high that Christmas night - they had to fight, but they could avoid killing. But the truce was over. Griffith read in the paper a few days later that there had been no fraternising with the enemy at Christmas because 'hate was too bitter to permit of such a yielding'.



V2 ATTACK ON CINEMA REX

On 16 December 1944 (incidentally also the day of the start of the Battle of the Bulge), an unmanned V2 rocket was fired from a base in the Netherlands. It hit the roof of the Cinema Rex at precisely 15.23 pm. More than one thousand people were in the cinema at the time watching a matinee performance of the cowboy film *The Plainsman*.

The rocket killed 567 people, including 296 Allied soldiers from Britain, the United States, Poland and Canada. This was the single highest death total from one rocket attack during the war in Europe.

The destruction was total. Afterwards, many people were found still sitting in their seats, stone dead. For more than a week the Allied authorities worked to clear the rubble. Later, many of the bodies were laid out at the city zoo for identification.

Following the attack all public performance venues were closed and the town council ordered that a maximum of 50 people were allowed to congregate in any one location. People who could afford it left the city for safer parts and Antwerp became a somber and semi-deserted city.

There was a total news blackout about the bombardment in the papers and this went on until April of 1945. What made matters worse was that this included any news about how the war effort was going. Any reports about locations of V1 or V2 hits would have given the Germans data that they could have used to improve their aiming. So, the people of Antwerp never got any official information about what was happening.

On 16 December 2024, the Antwerp Branch attended a remembrance ceremony at the plaque set in the pavement outside the UGC Cinema.



POPPY APPEAL

In November the Antwerp Branch was out in full force on the Meir to raise funds for the Poppy Appeal. A big thank you to everyone who came out to help or donated. We're still making the final calculations, but we will let you know as soon as possible how much we raised.



AGM & POPPY LUNCH

November is also Poppy Lunch and AGM-time. At this year's AGM, we were very proud to officially present Frans with the medal he was given for his service at the King's Coronation, and to present two of our new members with their membership badge.

In addition, we included a short ceremony in which the standard bearers accepted the charge of the Standard. The dedication, as read by our President Bob Chambers, reads:

The President read the dedication: "The Standard which you are now privileged to carry, having been solemnly dedicated in a sacred place, represents the ideals of service to God and to our King and country. The Union Flag, in the top left-hand corner, is symbolic of our unity and our loyalty to the crown, community and nation. The royal blue signifies fidelity, and the gold band recalls all those who have died in the service of our country, and reminds us who remain that we must ever be true to "Service not Self". I exhort you to remember always that this Standard is a sacred emblem, and it is now placed in your charge to be cared for in the name of the Royal British Legion. Do you accept this Charge?" After which each Standard Bearer stated "I accept the Charge".



POPPY LUNCH & AGM - CONT'D



THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES (from: *Amazing and extraordinary facts - The British at war*)

The expression 'Don't shoot until you can see the whites of their eyes' has become a kind of military cliché - a strange evocation of the close-order firing method used by the British colonial armies all over the Empire.

Some sources say that the order was first given at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, but it is not clear which commander said it. Whoever it was, he may have been quoting James Wolfe, who certainly said something along these lines at the Plains of Abraham in 1759. And Wolfe himself was probably repeating a remark made by a German prince, sometimes quoted in lives of Frederick the Great (with which Wolfe would surely have been familiar).

But the earliest definitely attributed use of the phrase belongs to a Scottish officer, the magnificently names Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Andrew Agnew of Lochnaw. At the Battle of Dettingen, which was fought in Bavaria on June 27th, 1743, he gave this order to his Scots Fusiliers as the French cavalry advance to engage them: 'Dinna fire til ye can see the whites of their e'en ... if ye dinna kill them, they'll kill you.' Crucially, of course, the closer the enemy at the moment of firing, the more of them were likely to be hit and killed. The key thing was for the

riflemen to hold their nerve.

The French marshal Thomas Bugeaud, who fought against Britain as a junior officer in the Peninsular War, has left an account of what it felt like to face a well-drilled infantry regiment, firing in volleys at close range. As his column advanced towards the British, wrote Bugeaud: 'Some men hoisted their shakos on their musket, the quick-step became a run; the ranks began to be mixed up; the men's agitation became tumultuous, many soldiers began to fire as they ran. And all the while the red English line, still silent and motionless, even when we were only 300 yards away, seemed to take no notice of the storm which was about to break on it.

At this moment of painful expectation, the English line would make a quarter-turn - the muskets were going up at the "ready". An indefinable sensation nailed to the spot many of our men, who halted and began to open a wavering fire. The enemy's return, a volley of simultaneous precision and deadly effect, crashed upon us like a thunderbolt. Decimated by it we reeled together. Then three formidable *hurrahs!* terminated the long silence of our adversaries. With the third they were down upon us, pressing us into disorderly retreat ...'

ONCE I WAS A SOLDIER

Did you know that one of our long-standing members Gerry Gallagher also writes poetry? No? High time to share one of his poems with you.

ONCE I WAS A SOLDIER

Once I was a Soldier, proud to serve my Queen and Country
Then my world came tumbling down, and now my life seems empty
Some say I am a Veteran, some just call me a no good tramp
For now I live in Squalor and the pavement is my camp

The Government made Defence cuts, and threw us on the streets
There was no flats or houses, no lodgings warm and neat
But us disregarded Veterans, we all just took it in our stride
Just like we followed orders, so why were we so surprised

Well, with no fixed place to call my home, no job of work was found
But for many Soldiers who still had families, they got help to get around
With all that I have seen and done and the horrors of the Battlefield
I remember every minute and I live though it in my dreams

The flashbacks bring me anguish, I wake up in an ice cold sweat
The PTSD it lives inside, and it will stay with me until I'm dead
There is no help from the M.O.D. or the Government although we pleaded
The NHS they cannot help their services have been cut and so depleted

With no help for the many soldiers who suffer with PTSD so badly
Relationships, marriages, families break up and ends up with Suicide, sadly
When a Veteran commits Suicide, there are friends and families who remain
Left wondering why there was no help, and what drove their loved ones so insane

Will Politicians ever stand up, and help our Veterans back on their feet.
Migrants get hotel rooms and they all sleep soundly warm and neat
Migrants also get a hand out and they all seem to have a smart phone
While Veterans get no Government aid and no place to call their home

Where is the Justice, where is the sense, of all the Veterans disregarded
Thrown aside like rubbish no longer wanted so thousands just discarded
Will another Government respect our Veterans, and offer help that's badly needed
Veterans Suicide rates are unacceptable and every year the rate increases

Once I was a Soldier and proud to serve my Country and my Queen
Now still proud I'm now a Veteran with no home but not serene
There are many more just like me, Air Force and Navy Veterans
Together we form a family that Civilians will never understand.

J Gallagher 01/03/2024

OUR STANDARD BEARER AT THE FESTIVAL OF REMEMBRANCE

The annual Festival of Remembrance in the Royal Albert Hall is an event many of us look forward to. During the event, the Legion honours the service of, and the sacrifices made by, the British and Commonwealth Armed Forces community.

In the presence of Their Majesties The King and Queen, personal testimonies, storytelling and wonderful music performances express the nation's gratitude to serving personnel, veterans and their families.

This year we were very proud to have our standard bearer Urbain De Groof there, to represent the Antwerp Branch. Thank you Urbain - you did the Antwerp Branch proud!

Here is Urbain's report:

The Festival of Remembrance is as always the highlight of the year for The Royal British Legion.

For me too, this was an event to look forward to, as I was appointed to represent the Antwerp Branch after being invited by London head office.

On Friday, there was a training session at 4 pm, to rehearse for the two performance on Saturday. This was organised under the supervision of the Parade Marshals and the National Parade Marshal John Thornhill. Together with the other standard bearers (100) we practiced until the Parade Marshals were happy with our performance.

Was all this tiring? Yes, definitely, but it also went very smoothly thanks to the dedication and discipline of all standard bearers.

On Saturday morning, we had to be in the Royal Albert Hall for a full rehearsal of the show by 7:30 am. After that: a quick lunch, get changed, get ready for inspection by the Parade Marshals to see whether both uniform and standard were all in order for the first afternoon performance.

After the first show, a short break (?) and time for something to eat, it was time for the evening performance, attended by King Charles III and the Royal Family. This was for many standard bearers, and definitely for myself, an unforgettable highlight.

I would like to thank the Antwerp Branch, for this unique opportunity, and also a thank you to Inge for helping to follow-up on the mails from London.



REMEMBRANCE WEEKEND

Remembrance weekend in London is of course ceremonies at the Cenotaph and the Festival of Remembrance but there are often many other remembrance related activities. For instance there is also the annual **Field of Remembrance** at Westminster Abbey.

The Field of Remembrance was first held in 1928, organised by George Arthur Howson, an officer in the British Army in the First World War and founder of the Poppy Factory. In the first year, there were only two memorials: one dedicated to 'Tommy Atkins' (a nickname for a rank-and-file soldier in the British Army); and one to Field Marshal Douglas Haig, 1st Earl Haig, founder of The Royal British Legion.

Now, the lawn of St Margaret's Church, Westminster, is marked out with 250 plots for regimental and armed services associations and this for eight days, from the morning of the Thursday before Remembrance Sunday until the evening of following Thursday.



Participants can buy a wooden token of remembrance decorated with a remembrance poppy. The token is generally marked with the name of a member of the armed forces who was killed in action and planted in the appropriate plot.



After the Field of Remembrance closes, the crosses are collected and burnt, and the ashes are scattered at the First World War battlefields in northern France and Belgium.

In addition, this year there was also 'Poppy Fields at the Tower' - a sound and light installation at the Tower of London, in remembrance of those who lost their lives in World War 1 and 2.

It featured projections of soldiers and poppies as well as images from the Historic Royal Palaces and Regiment of Royal Fusilliers' own collections, alongside music and poetry readings.



BATTLE OF THE BULGE

The Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes was the largest battle ever fought by the United States Army. Over 83,000 Americans were casualties during the battle which lasted from December 16, 1944 until January 25, 1945, now 80 years ago.

As 1944 was drawing to a close, the Allied forces could look back on a year of great strides towards victory over the Axis powers. In Europe, the successful D-Day landings had given way to the liberation of France and Allied forces now were into Holland and Belgium, poised along the German border. A sense of overconfidence began to infect the Allied leadership, where some even predicted that the war would be over by Christmas.

However, Adolf Hitler had other plans and on 16 December 1944, the German army launched a massive offensive in the Ardennes Forest. The Battle of the Bulge would be the largest engagement ever fought by the US Army—and ultimately hasten the end of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.



BUILDUP

By December 1944, Germany was in retreat in both the West and the East. The Allies had liberated Paris months before and had entered Germany itself in September. But Allied troops were exhausted after heavy fighting, and many commanders did not believe the Germans had the capability to launch a large offensive. Yet the Germans still had millions of men and thousands of tanks in the field, and Hitler made one final gamble to win the war in the West: he decided to go on the offensive.



THE PLAN

The German objective was to fight through the dense Ardennes Forest, cross the Meuse River into Belgium, and capture the critical supply centre of Antwerp. Hitler believed that this would split the British and American Allies by physically dividing their armies and creating rifts over military strategy. The ultimate goal was to convince the Allies to negotiate with Germany, allowing Hitler to focus his forces on fighting the Soviets on the Eastern Front.

THE ATTACK

The Germans knew secrecy and surprise were key and managed to assemble their forces without attracting Allied attention. They codenamed the operation Wacht am Rhein ("The Watch on the Rhine") after a popular song of the era, suggesting that it would be a defensive action. The start of the offensive on December 16 took the Allies by surprise. The Germans deliberately chose to attack in bad weather to neutralise Allied air forces. The plan initially achieved success, and the Germans inflicted heavy casualties as they pushed forward. The Germans created a bulge in the Allied front, giving the battle its iconic name.

TURNING THE TIDE

The German offensive was initially stalled by acts of Allied heroism. At the town of Bastogne, the 101st Airborne Division kept fighting and refused to surrender despite being surrounded. Units

BATTLE OF THE BULGE - CONT'D

from the VIII Corps put up heroic resistance at the critical village of St. Vith, delaying the German offensive and buying time for the Allies. American units similarly managed to stop the Germans at Elsenborn Ridge and inflicted heavy casualties. Ultimately the Allies contained the offensive. In early January, the Allies counterattacked from the north and south of the bulge, forcing the Germans to retreat at a heavy cost.



AFTERMATH

The Germans were pushed back to their starting positions by early February 1945, losing thousands of men and hundreds of tanks. Hitler's final offensive capabilities in the West were depleted. The Allies continued to push the Germans back along a broad front and, in late March, crossed the Rhine. Hitler's gamble had resulted in disaster. The war in Europe would end in Allied victory just months later.

NUTS!

In this Ardennes Offensive Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe played a major role. As commander of the American 101st Airborne Division he had been involved in the Normandy invasion as well as in Operation Market Garden. On 19 December 1944, McAuliffe and his division arrived in Bastogne, where he established his headquarters at the Heintz Barracks. What followed was a heavy attack of German troops and tanks, that succeeded in pushing back the allied front line.

On 21 December German troops encircled Bastogne; McAuliffe and his 18,000 soldiers were completely enclosed. The following day the German commander Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz sent an ultimatum to the American headquarters in Bastogne, saying: 'There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total annihilation: that is the honorable surrender of the encircled town.'

When General McAuliffe received this message, his immediate reaction was: 'Nuts!' and since McAuliffe's intentions could not be better frased, the official reply to Von Lüttwitz was: 'To the German Commander. NUTS! The American Commander'. A few more days of heavy fighting followed, but McAuliffe and his men stood firm. For his braveness at Bastogne, McAuliffe was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.



Decades later, "Nuts!" remained in the American canon of famous retorts, somewhat to McAuliffe's chagrin during his lifetime. His Times obit says the general 'grew sick of being introduced at lunches, dinners and parties as the man who told the Germans what they could do with their "ultimatum".'

Only to a point, though, as McAuliffe turned the tables with a story of his own:

'One evening a dear old Southern lady invited me to dinner,' he said. 'I had a delightful time talking to her and her charming guests. I was pleased because no mention was made the entire evening of the nuts incident. As I prepared to depart and thanked my hostess for an enjoyable evening, she replied, "Thank you and good night, General McNut."'

YOUR COMMITTEE CONTACTS

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