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Dear members

End of February and there is definitely a touch of spring in the air! And with spring, we are also gearing up for the start of the new 'season' where you'll be seeing our standard bearers on parade at the various remembrance services we are invited to. It is however not because winter is the 'slow' season, that our parade marshal and standard bearers have been taking it easy - as always they continue to practice regularly and brush up on their skills. And, believe it or not, after all this time, we still come across 'new' remembrance services! So, on a bitterly cold 14 February, a good-sized delegation from the Antwerp Branch participated for the first time in the remembrance service 'De Vleugel' at Meerhout. And we hope to be invited back in the coming years!

Later this year we are planning something new - an RBL family day! We are still working out the details, but do keep a close eye on this newsletter or our FB page for more information. We are working on making this a fun day out for everyone - adults and children alike - so we do hope to welcome you, and loads of other people that are potentially interested in the work of the Royal British Legion!

In the meantime, enjoy the nice weather, and of course enjoy your Newsletter :-)

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 5 March	Highlander	RBL Open Evening
Thu 19 March	De Singel	Lenteconcert (more details in this newsletter)
Sun 29 March	Leopoldsburg	Open day 1st Brigade: www.opendeurleopoldsburg.be/programma-2/
Thu 2 April	Highlander	RBL Open Evening
Sat 4 April	Mortsel	Commemoration bombing 5 April 1943
Sun 12 April	Arnhem (NL)	Second Annual Commemoration of the Forgotten Liberation of Arnhem
Fri 8 - Sun 10 May	Brighton (UK)	RBL National Conference
Sat 9 May	Brasschaat	Open day batallion artillery - including tattoo www.bataljonartillerie.be/od-bra/
Sun 10 May	Gierle	WWII commemoration
Sat 4 June	Doel	Commemoration
Sun 7 June	Hoboken	RBL family day - more information soon!
Sat 1 July	Thiepval (FR)	Commemoration of the Battle of the Somme

RBL NATIONAL CONFERENCE

On 8, 9 and 10 May the RBL annual conference will take place in Brighton.

As a member of the Antwerp Branch, you are entitled to attend conference, either in person or online. The Annual Conference is a great opportunity to catch up on Royal British Legion news, meet fellow members and RBL teams. It includes the standard bearers' competition, and the annual accounts report, the Director General's address and voting on motions brought by delegates from branches/counties.

If you want to attend, feel free to get in touch with Inge (Antwerp.secretary@rbl.community or call 0478 297 687). Deadline for registration is 23 March (in-person attendance) or 6 April (online attendance).



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



INVITATION LENTECONCERT (MILITAIR COMMANDO PROV. ANTWERPEN)

Donderdag
19 maart 2026
**39^e LENTE-
CONCERT**

van het Militair Commando Provincie Antwerpen
t.v.v. onze goede doelen
Princess Máxima Centrum Foundation Belgium -
Het Geleed - Apoppa - Think out of the box

Koninklijke Muziekkapel van
de Belgische Luchtmacht

Met gastoptreden van
Astrid Stockman

**BELGIAN
AIR FORCE
BAND**

Kunstencentrum DE SINGEL
Desguinlei 25, 2018 Antwerpen
Voor INFO en RESERVATIES: Scan QR Code
02/4430915 of PROVANTW-LENTECONCERT@email.be

DEFENSIE

.be

The Militair Commando van de Provincie Antwerpen invites you to their annual Lenteconcert on Thursday 19 March.

This year's concert will be conducted by the renowned Royal Air Force Band. Lars Corijn, a talented singer and conductor who graduated from the Antwerp Conservatory, will conduct these top musicians and inspire them to give a formidable performance.

Together, they will accompany the well-known soprano Astrid Stockman, an artist with an expressive voice and artistic finesse, in a mix of pop, chanson and musical theatre.

Proceeds of the concert will go to charity.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

- **Date:** Thursday 19 March, 7:30 pm
- **Location:** De Singel, Desguinlei 25
- **Price:** € 55 per person, reception included
- **Bookings:** https://events.mil.be/e/inschrijving_lenteconcert2026

INVITATION COMMEMORATION BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The President, officers and members of the Somme branch of the Royal British Legion invite you to join them

**at the 110th Commemoration
of the Battle of the Somme at the Thiepval
Memorial to the Missing, Somme (France)
on 1st July 2026 at 1200 hrs**

in the presence of HRH The Princess Royal, together with His Majesty's British Ambassador to France Sir Thomas Drew KCMG and the National President of the Royal British Legion, Vice Admiral Paul Bennett CB, OBE.

RSVP

Please confirm your attendance by email to
trblsomme@icloud.com or
SommeBR3530@hotmail.com



COMMEMORATION 'DE VLEUGEL' (MEERHOUT)

On Saturday 14 February we attended what was, for us, a new ceremony.

We were invited to commemorate the crash of a Wellington Bomber (HE 164) of 466 Squadron RAF, that was shot down during the night of 14/15 February 1943 on its way to Köln. It was shot down by night fighters over Kwamol and crashed in Meerhout.

Sadly, three of the six-man crew died in the crash:

- F/lt William Kirk, pilot (23 years),
- F/O John Mason (29 years)
- F/Sgt William Smith (21 years)

All three are buried at the Schoonselhof cemetery

The remaining three crew were captured and imprisoned, and suffered severely during captivity: Sgt Raymond E. Bentley, Sgt Norman A. Leonard and Sgt Thomas W. Reynolds.

The tailfin of the wreck was not found by the German recovery team as a local farmer buried it until after the war. It was then placed at the side of the road close to the crash site. In 1985 it was placed upon a footing where it stands today.

Each year the local community and veteran organisations commemorate this event with a church service, followed by a wreath laying ceremony at the monument itself.

So, on a very cold Saturday morning we gathered at the city hall in Meerhout, some 36 standards from veteran organisations plus a similar

number of sympathisers (including the Provincial Commander and the CO of 29 Log Regt) paraded to the church.



After a short church service which included participation of children from De Duizenpoot (who did a very nice presentation) we boarded buses to take us to the monument site where a short ceremony and wreath laying was held. Again the children participated in the ceremony. A very nice gesture from 7 and 8 year olds; well done to the staff for generating the interest and organising the children.



After returning to Meerhout we were able to thaw out at a reception hosted by the town and were able to chat with participants that are not part of our 'regular' crowd.

This is a nice ceremony that we will be setting as a fixture in our calendar as it always takes place on 14 February – sorry ladies.

COMMEMORATION 'DE VLEUGEL' (MEERHOUT) - CONT'D



TRAVELLING TO THE UK AFTER 25 FEBRUARY 2026

Visitors to the UK need an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) if they do not need a visa for short stays of up to six months, or do not already have a UK immigration status. From **25/2/2026 eligible visitors without an ETA will not be able to board their transport and cannot travel to the UK.**

Dual citizens with British or Irish citizenship are exempt from needing an ETA. However, from **25/2/2026, dual British citizens must have a valid British passport or certificate of entitlement when travelling to the UK.** Travelling on a foreign passport alone, even one that would normally permit visa-free travel, is no longer accepted.

More information: <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/electronic-travel-authorisation-eta-factsheet-november-2025/>

PARADE MARSHALS' COURSE *(report by Ian Newbitt)*

I have been performing the duties of Parade Marshal for the Branch for the last 6 or 7 years. During this period, I have relied upon my military experience and the military courses that I followed during my 22 years of Service.

During the summer I was made aware of the upcoming Parade Marshals' Course, scheduled to take place in October. My initial application was held over for a year due to funding issues, but early September I received a call from the National Parade Marshal's office asking if I was still available. I gave the only answer possible and thus began a small adventure for me.

Prior to departure of course several issues had to be resolved. My first priority was to contact Urbain and warn him that he was needed for the weekend of my absence, and between us we worked out a plan whereby he would conduct the remaining parades in the intervening period with me attending in the mentoring role.

For myself there followed an intensive period of preparation and study prior to departure. Once I had received the joining instructions, I entered the realms of ensuring that I had all the required equipment and materials to do the course. This involved the acquiring of a cane, new white gloves, a second 'parade' suit; in addition to making sure that everything was cleaned, polished, and generally 'up to standard'. This was backed up with extensive study of the RBL Ceremonial Manual and practising the handling of the Standard and giving instruction (to myself) on the correct movements. Mainly in my back garden - Not sure what the neighbours thought of that!

So, Friday 17 Oct it was time to go. I left Antwerp very dark o'clock in the morning to catch the Eurostar to London, and then a further train to Loughborough, arriving at the hotel three hours before the rooms were ready for occupation. Heavy sigh!

Once installed in the room it was hastily unpack and courtesy of the hotel provided iron to repair the ravages of travel on my parade gear. Then report to the camp and start meeting the fellow students and the Directing staff.

After introductions and initial briefings, it was down to business with the discussion over dress and turnout followed by the first kit inspection of the weekend. Being a veteran I knew that there would be a lot of fine detail, but was still somewhat surprised at how fine that detail could be! This was followed by Legion ceremonial procedural matters before returning to the Hotel for evening meal and networking/social.

We began Saturday with care and maintenance of Standard and equipment, a run through of the expected standards. This was followed by aspects and organisation of Standard bearer training, health and safety, and the organisation of services and parades; some self-evident, some regulated by UK rules others by common sense.

There followed lessons on training of standard bearers, but also of carrying and movement with the cane leading on to giving instruction and words of command.

After lunch we were organised into groups to provide a syndicate approach to organising events. This proved most interesting to see the variety of experience available and made for an educational experience. The day closed with discussions over parade etiquette and the working of the Ceremonial Work group.

PARADE MARSHALS' COURSE CONT'D) *(report by Ian Newbitt)*

Back at the hotel once again very useful discussions and the sharing of experience among the students and staff as we relaxed and had our evening meal. It became evident that The Antwerp Branch is one of the busier Legion branches, a fair amount of amazement at the number of ceremonies we participate in during the course of a year.

Sunday was testing day and began with an hour long written test on the contents of the Ceremonial Manual – it's a long time since I had such exam stress!

After a break we then changed into uniform for inspection/assessment, taking into account the comments made over turnout during the initial inspection on the Friday. Following the inspection, we went on to the practical assessment of giving words of command and cane drill, which was basically an hour of either giving words of command or being commanded, all the while being assessed by the staff.

After lunch we went onto the practical instruction of a standard bearer 'by the book' or better explained 'by numbers'. Again, we were being assessed constantly. The course then closed with a wash up period, and a Q & A session before we all departed for our respective home destinations.

The course was useful for a number of reasons:

- Apart from the legal issues it confirmed that our approach to ceremonies is on the right lines.
- Standard of turnout is one point that is improving, in good old military fashion it is never good enough! As a team we are planning a training session dedicated to cleaning and maintenance not only of the uniforms but our Standards and equipment.
- It reiterated the need for training for the standard bearers and the correct manner of training. We are now busy with 'upping' our standards during the monthly training sessions that we already do.
- It reinforced the need for the correct format for ceremonies – a point we try to guide organisations towards anyway.
- There is a backup within the Legion for advice and guidance not only over welfare matters but also the ceremonial side as well, the added advantage of this course is that we now have contacts within the office of the National Parade Marshall and are known to them.
- As a Branch this course fell during the busiest time of the year for us, obviously making it difficult. For myself it was a huge learning curve and immensely useful. For the Branch it gives us a basis for further building on our image and reputation around our comrades within the local veteran organisations.

Note from the Editor

We have since learned that Ian passed the course with flying colours, earning a Grade A!

"... Your dedication, professionalism, and commitment to excellence were clearly reflected in every aspect of the course. From your meticulous dress inspection and confident command presence to your clear instructional delivery and active group participation, you demonstrated the qualities we value most in ceremonial leadership. Your poise during cane drill and your thoughtful contributions to group work were particularly commendable.

...

On behalf of the Royal British Legion, and especially your colleagues in the Antwerp Branch and Belgium, thank you for representing us with such distinction. We are proud to have you among our ranks and look forward to your continued contributions to ceremonial excellence."

We couldn't agree more!

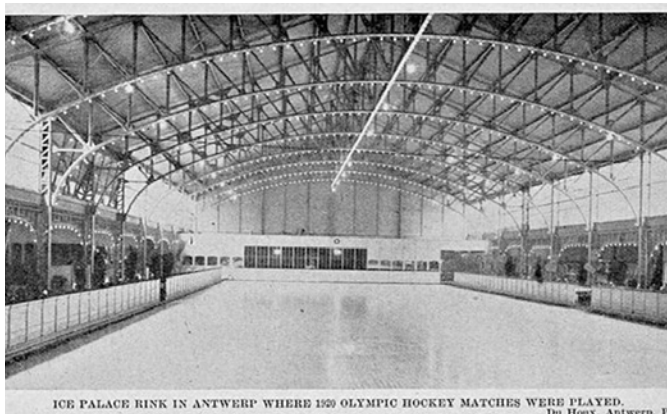
WINTER OLYMPICS AND THE WORLD WARS

The past couple of weeks we have all been able to enjoy the Winter Olympics in Milano Cortina. But when did these games start? And what happened during the world wars?

First Winter Olympics

The first organised international competition involving winter sports was introduced just five years after the birth of the modern Olympics in 1896. Known as the Nordic Games, this competition included athletes predominantly from Nordic countries. It was held 8 times between 1901 and 1926, with Stockholm hosting all but one time. Figure skating was included in the Olympics for the first time in the 1908 Summer Games in London, although the skating competition was not actually held until October, some three months after the other events were over.

In 1911 a member of the International Olympic Committee suggested that Sweden should either include winter sports in the 1912 Olympics or stage a separate Winter Olympics in the same year. Concerned that such a move would jeopardize the Nordic Games, Sweden refused. Germany supported plans to stage a competition of winter events in early 1916 as part of the Olympic Games scheduled for Berlin later that year. However, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 caused the cancellation of the Berlin Olympics and made the question of Winter Olympic Games moot. Despite continuing protests from the Nordic countries, winter sports returned to the Olympics for the 1920 Games in Antwerp, where medals were awarded in figure skating and ice hockey.



ICE PALACE RINK IN ANTWERP WHERE 1920 OLYMPIC HOCKEY MATCHES WERE PLAYED. Du Houx, Antwerp, P



Two years later an agreement was reached to celebrate an IOC-sanctioned International Winter Sports Week. Held in Chamonix, France, in 1924, the event was a huge success. There were six sports in the Olympic programme: hockey, speed-skating, figure skating, curling, bobsleigh and skiing. Some 300 competitors from 16 nations experienced the adventure of what observers at the time were to describe as 'virile and



stimulating duels, combining strength, agility, youth and friendship'. Nearly 10,000 spectators attended the Games. Norway topped the medals table, and the Nordic countries dropped their previous objections. The following year the IOC modified its charter to create a separate Winter Olympics. The Games staged in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1928 were formally designated the second Winter Olympics. From 1928 the Winter Games were held every four years in the same calendar year as the Summer Games.

WINTER OLYMPICS AND WORLD WARS

An Olympic hiatus

The 1940 Winter Olympics were to be held in Sapporo, Japan, but were canceled in 1938 after Japan invaded China in the Sino-Japanese War. The 1940 games were then awarded to St. Moritz, Switzerland, withdrawn because of controversies, and finally given again to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. However, just 3 months later, Germany invaded Poland, and the 1940 winter games were canceled altogether. Similarly, the 1944 Winter Olympics were given to Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, in 1939 but subsequently canceled because of World War II.



'Games of renewal'

After a 12-year hiatus, the 1948 games were held in St. Moritz, chosen for its neutrality. Unlike the Summer Games though, the IOC decided that the 1940 and 1944 Winter Games that had gone uncelebrated would also go unnumbered. Thus, it was the Vth rather than the VIIth edition that was held in St. Moritz as part of the cycle of the XIV Olympiad. Overcoming a lack of financial and human resources, the winter games were held from 30 Jan to 8 Feb and attracted 28 nations and 670 athletes for 22 events in four sports. Chile, Denmark, Iceland, Korea, and Lebanon debuted at these Winter Olympics. Germany and Japan were not invited to compete.

Although these winter games were some of the most competitive in history, they also were steeped in controversy: Norwegian skiers had to borrow skis from the American team to compete, the 1920 Antwerp Olympic flag was stolen, two rival U.S. ice hockey teams arrived to compete, and a truck driver accidentally backed into a shed housing the U.S. bobsleds, which had to be repaired.

WOUNDED HORSES (from 'The British at War')

After the Battle of Waterloo, the horses of the Household Cavalry that had sustained wounds in the fray were gathered together and sold at auction. The anatomist Sir Astley Cooper, soon to become the personal doctor of George IV, bought a dozen of the injured animals, and had them taken to his estate in Herfordshire. Here he cared for the horses as assiduously as he looked after his human patients. He treated their wounds, and removed buckets of bullets and grapeshot from their bodies. When the horses seemed well enough Cooper released them into the park. He was surprised, one morning soon after, to see the 12 war horses form up into a line and advance to a charge, retreat and then gallop about excitedly, as if reliving the battle. These equine veterans of Waterloo repeated their little ritual every day for the rest of their lives. Another horse that had been rescued from the mass killing fields of Waterloo would put himself on alert for a charge upon the slightest noise and start, as if to avoid a sabre cut.



However, they were the lucky ones. Out of 60,000 horses on the field of battle that day at least 7,000 were killed or wounded, with at least one estimate putting the figure as high as 20,000.

ANZAC DAY (from Australian War Memorial website)

Anzac Day, 25 April, marks the anniversary of the first major military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces during the First World War. ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. The soldiers in those forces quickly became known as Anzacs, and the pride they took in that name endures to this day.

When war broke out in 1914 Australia had been a federated nation for only 13 years, and its government was eager to establish a reputation among the nations of the world. When Britain declared war in August 1914 Australia was automatically placed on the side of the Commonwealth. In 1915 Australian and New Zealand soldiers formed part of the expedition that set out to capture the Gallipoli peninsula in order to open the Dardanelles to the allied navies. The ultimate objective was to capture Constantinople (now Istanbul), the capital of the Ottoman Empire, an ally of Germany.



The Australian and New Zealand forces landed on Gallipoli on 25 April, meeting fierce resistance from the Ottoman Turkish defenders. What had been planned as a bold stroke to knock Turkey out of the war quickly became a stalemate, and the campaign dragged on for eight months. At the end of 1915 the allied forces were evacuated from the peninsula, with both sides having suffered heavy casualties and endured great hardships.

The Allied deaths totalled over 56,000, including 8,709 from Australia and 2,721 from New Zealand. The campaign at Gallipoli had a profound impact on Australians and New Zealanders at home,

and 25 April soon became the day on which Australians remembered the sacrifice of those who died in the war.



Although the Gallipoli campaign failed in its military objectives, the actions of Australian and New Zealand forces during the campaign left a powerful legacy. What became known as the 'Anzac legend' became an important part of the identity of both nations, shaping the ways in which they viewed both their past and their future.

Early commemorations

In 1916 the first Anzac Day commemorations were held on 25 April. The day was marked by a wide variety of ceremonies and services across Australia, a march through London, and a sports day in the Australian camp in Egypt. In London more than 2,000 Australian and New Zealand troops marched through the streets; a London newspaper headline dubbed them 'the knights of Gallipoli'. Marches were held all over Australia; in the Sydney march convoys of cars carried soldiers wounded on Gallipoli and their nurses.

For the remaining years of the war Anzac Day was used as an occasion for patriotic rallies and recruiting campaigns, and parades of serving members of the AIF were held in most cities.

From 1916 onwards, in both Australia and New Zealand, Anzac memorials were held on or about 25 April, mainly organised by returned servicemen and school children in cooperation with local authorities.

ANZAC DAY (cont'd) (from Australian War Memorial website)

During the late 1920s, Anzac Day became established as a National Day of Commemoration for the 60,000 Australians and 18,000 New Zealanders who died during the war. The first year in which all the Australian states observed some form of public holiday together on Anzac Day was 1927. By the mid-1930s, all the rituals now associated with the day – dawn vigils, marches, memorial services, reunions, two-up games – became part of Australian Anzac Day culture. New Zealand commemorations also adopted many of these rituals, with the dawn service being introduced from Australia in 1939.

Later, Anzac Day also served to commemorate the lives of Australians and New Zealanders who died in the Second World War, and in subsequent years the meaning of the day has been further broadened to include those who lost their lives in all the military and peacekeeping operations in which Australia and New Zealand have been involved.

The Service at Dawn

It is often suggested that the Dawn Service observed on Anzac Day has its origins in a military routine still followed by the Australian Army. The half-light of dawn was one of the times favoured for launching an attack. Soldiers in defensive positions were woken in the dark before dawn, so by the time first light crept across the battlefield they were awake, alert, and manning their weapons; this is still known as the 'stand-to'.

A dawn service was held on the Western Front by an Australian battalion on the first anniversary of the Gallipoli landing on 25 April



ANZAC TRADITIONS

In addition to the traditional service at dawn, the Last Post, the Exhortation and the laying of wreaths, there are some elements specific to Anzac day.

Rosemary

Since ancient times this aromatic herb has been believed to have properties to improve the memory. Perhaps because of this, rosemary became an emblem of both fidelity and remembrance. Traditionally, sprigs of rosemary are worn on Anzac Day and sometimes on Remembrance Day, pinned onto a coat lapel, on the left near the heart, or held in place by war service medals. Rosemary has particular significance, as it is found growing wild on the Gallipoli peninsula.



The Lone Charger



Anzac Day marches are often led by a lone, riderless horse, with a pair of boots set backwards in the stirrups and the saddle stripped. Ancient peoples, such as the Saxons, used to bury a warrior's horse with him so that it could serve him in the afterlife. This practice was continued in some European countries until the late eighteenth century. In modern times, custom has been kinder to the horse, which has been led in its master's funeral procession with his boots reversed as a sign that a warrior has fallen in battle. A lone charger has been added to some Anzac Day parades as an additional symbol of respect and mourning, often for the men of the Light Horse units.

ANZAC DAY (cont'd) (from Australian War Memorial website)

April 1916, and in Australia dawn services spontaneously popped up around the country to commemorate the fallen at Gallipoli in the years after this. The timing of the dawn service, traditionally held at 4:28 am, is based on the time that the ANZAC forces started the landing on the Gallipoli peninsula.

After WWI, returned soldiers sought the comradeship they had felt in those quiet, peaceful moments before dawn. A dawn vigil became the basis for commemoration. In 1927 a group of returned men returning at dawn from an Anzac Day function held the night before came upon an elderly woman laying flowers at the as yet unfinished Sydney Cenotaph. Joining her in this private remembrance, the men later resolved to institute a dawn service the following year. Some 150 people gathered at the Cenotaph in 1928 for a wreathlaying and two minutes' silence. This is generally regarded as the beginning of organised dawn services. Over the years the ceremonies have developed into their modern forms and have seen an increased association with the dawn landings of 25 April 1915.



ANZAC TRADITIONS CONT'D

Gunfire breakfast

Another tradition of Anzac Day is the gunfire breakfast (coffee with rum added) which occurs shortly after many dawn ceremonies, and recalls the 'breakfast' taken by many soldiers before facing battle.

Anzac test

Beginning in 1997, the Anzac Test, a rugby league test match, commemorated Anzac Day, though it was typically played prior to Anzac Day. The match was always played between the Australian and New Zealand national teams, and drew attendances of between 20,000 and 45,000 spectators. The final Anzac test occurred in 2017.

Domestically, matches have been played on Anzac Day since 1927 (with occasional exceptions). Since 2002, the National Rugby League (NRL) has followed the lead of the Australian Football League, hosting a match between traditional rivals St. George Illawarra Dragons and the Sydney Roosters each year to commemorate Anzac Day in the ANZAC Day Cup, although these two sides had previously met on Anzac Day several times as early as the 1970s. Between 2009 and 2023, an additional Anzac Day game has been played between the Melbourne Storm and New Zealand Warriors; the South Sydney Rabbitohs replaced the New Zealand Warriors in 2024. The Warriors still play on Anzac Day but in New Zealand and against a different opponent each year.

ANZAC DAY IN BELGIUM

In Ypres a dawn service is held at the Buttes New British Cemetery in Zonnebeke. In addition, there is a 9:30 am service at the Tyne Cot Cemetery; a procession from the Ypres Cloth Hall to Menin Gate begins at 11:10 am. The wreath-laying ceremony at the Belgian War Memorial takes place at 11:35 am.



WAR ON TWO WHEELS

When most people think of military equipment, they think of tanks, bombers and aircraft carriers – but a more modest piece of equipment is often overlooked: the bicycle. Few people realise that this steel steed played a surprising role in both world wars.

The British army of the late-19th and early-20th centuries proved to be quick at adopting emerging equipment and technologies, particularly when it came to battlefield mobility.

As early as the 1880s, the army began to include the bicycle in its armoury. Prior to this, the army relied on men or horse transport to cover the ground. Each had limits on speed and range, and the horse needed much by way of logistical support for its feeding and care. With a bicycle, an armed man could move relatively quickly across even poor ground and with longer range than his marching capability.

Formation of bicycle units

The first large-scale formalisation of their cyclists' role came with the Haldane army reforms of 1908 and the creation of ten bicycle units for the Territorial Force. Of these, most were established as units of infantry regiments, while others were independent cyclist units.

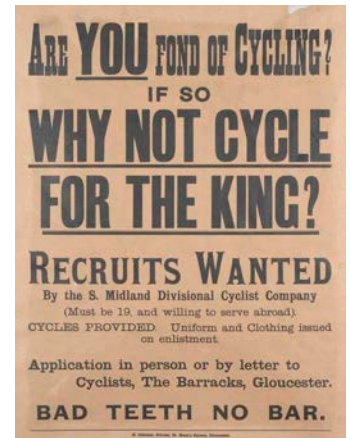
Early in the war, a cyclist company was added to each British division. So for example, the structure of the 1st Division included the 1st Divisional Cyclist Company. These units were technically of the regular army. All of the 'new army' divisions raised under Lord Kitchener's instructions in 1914 also included a cyclist company. Soldiers were seconded to these units from other regiments.

The primary roles of the cyclists were in reconnaissance and communications. They were armed as infantry and could provide mobile firepower, if required. Those units that went overseas during WW1 continued in these roles, but also carried out trench-holding duties and manual work, once the mobile phase of war had settled down into entrenched warfare. They also began to be used for patrol work in the rear areas

behind the front lines and in traffic control duties.

Army Order 477

The formation of a specialist army cyclist corps was authorised by Army Order 477, in November 1914. When the order came into effect, all men who were serving with the divisional cyclist companies, or who were in training as cyclists to provide drafts for those companies, would be transferred into the new corps.



The men were given the new corps cap badge and were also renumbered in a new corps sequence. The order did not affect the territorial cyclist units or the men serving in them, as they kept their own regimental identities. Men being enlisted for the duration of the war could now be appointed directly to the new corps. The pay of the cyclists was to be the same as that of the infantry. Additional 'proficiency pay' would be given to men who qualified as a proficient cyclist and who had the necessary physical endurance.



In May and June 1916 the divisional cyclist companies were withdrawn from the divisions to form a cyclist battalion for each corps headquarters. The army retained this structure for the rest of the war.

It's not easy to determine how many men served in the various cyclist units. At start of the war, the British had 14,000 cyclists in a variety of bicycle

WAR ON TWO WHEELS (cont'd)

regiments and battalions. In 1916, every corps was assigned 500 riders in three bicycle companies and, by 1919, the British had 100,000 riders. Some 20,000 names can be traced from the campaign medal rolls, but this does not include the many who served in cyclist units at home.

The records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission list 862 men of the Army Cyclist Corps who lost their lives in WW1. There is no regimental memorial to these men, although there is a memorial to cyclists who took part in the war in Meriden, near the bicycle manufacturing centre of Coventry.

The bicycle in WWII

It was in WWII where bicycles truly proved their worth. World War I's trench warfare essentially made bikes redundant but WWII's more mobile warfare style was an altogether different story.

At the start of WWII, the German army used bicycles to invade both Norway and Poland. On the other side of the world, the Japanese army used more bicycles than any other nation; especially in the invasion of Malaysia, where thousands of soldiers cycled into Singapore (although when they landed in Malaysia, on 8 December 1941, they did not bring any bicycles with them. They knew that the British-controlled area was full of good English bicycles that they could easily confiscate!). This was because of a fuel shortage, and bikes were an easier and faster way of transporting militaries to the front lines than other vehicles. For the Japanese army, however, fuel wasn't the only problem. Since rubber was in short supply,



they had to learn to ride bikes on the rims when they had flat tires and couldn't repair them.

BSA Airborne folding bike

One of the more interesting innovations in military bikes was the BSA Airborne bicycle created in 1942. These bikes were specially designed for the UK paratroopers. This bike could be folded up and



attached to the front of the paratrooper's suit and were compact enough to be carried while jumping out of an airplane. The wheels were attached to a parachute suspension line, which made it safe to jump out of a plane with the bike. When the paratrooper landed, they

could use the quick-release strap at the front to detach the bike. After unfolding the BSA Airborne bicycle, the soldier was ready to go.

Bicycles made a difference on D-Day

Prior to D-Day, paratroopers captured the bridges east of Bénouville in Normandy during the night of 5 to 6 June 1944. The order was to hold the position until the invasion force arrived. After the British landed on Sword Beach, about 10 km away, 44 soldiers cycled to Bénouville to help. They played a crucial role in defending the bridges during the German counterattack.

Cycling soldiers defend Alpine country

After 1945, Western countries phased out the bicycle, except for Switzerland. During the Cold War, the neutral country's bicycle infantry had to advance on their army bicycles (Armeefahrrad) in the event of an invasion to stop enemy vehicles. The bicycle could be equipped with a trailer or could pull a portable one. It was not until 2003 that Switzerland abolished its bicycle infantry.

Geef me min fiets!

The Dutch are known for their love of bicycles. Needless to say, the bicycle played an important role in WWII. In particular the Dutch have not forgotten the millions of bicycles stolen by the Germans during the war. A common Dutch taunt of Germans after the war was, 'Geef me min fiets!' Give me my bike! On 'Dolle Dinsdag', or Rabid Tuesday, German troops panicked when the BBC announced that Allied troops had crossed the Dutch border (they hadn't, in fact). Soldiers stole bikes from the general populace and rode out of Holland, with whatever they could carry.

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