

## THE POPPY



### THE NORFOLK BRANCH NEWSLETTER

Western Front Association

March April 2024 VOL 24 No6

#### CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

This report serves a dual purpose in that it covers the two roles I will be required to report on at the AGM. It will save time (reason explained below) if I provide my report now.

As Chair, I firmly believe that the past year has been a good one for WFA Norfolk branch. The attendance has remained reasonably strong, but we could still do with a few more attendees. The venue (The White Horse), wonderfully managed by Pam and Andy, has once again done us proud. Despite the recent change to the time that we can access the room (now 7pm), I have one constant prayer, it is that we are able to continue using the facility into the long-term. I certainly feel that we would be looking for a very long time to find its match if in fact it is possible to do so!

Despite the odd hiccup, the last years speakers program appears to have been well received. We are blessed that the generous nature of a vast majority of speakers means that I have, by and large, been able to keep costs down at a time when fuel/travel costs alone remain high. As Treasurer, Rob Burkett has once again done a sterling job in keeping the books/accounts in order and, perhaps more importantly, he regularly reassured me that I have not burst the budgetary dam! Thank you Rob. As Secretary, Bob Kerry, has proved himself to be invaluable to the branch. As the result of his efforts, our on-line presence has been hugely improved, not least in this is our branch information area on the WFA website. Add Bobs efforts in regularly updating events pages in local publications, and I do not doubt that the long-term future of the branch will greatly benefit from his good work. Thank you Bob. Jackie and Roger Berry have now between them, produced a large number of the branch magazine 'The Poppy'. I always forward it to friends and relatives. The biggest complement I could pay your efforts is that should I forget (no comments here please Jackie!), I often get chased for it, not least by the History Department staff at my last school. Jackie and Roger, your efforts are valued and valuable to a lot of people. We are fortunate indeed to have you both in branch. Committee members Brian Lawrence and Mike Lawson, between them, possess an encyclopaedic knowledge of WW1 history. Many of the suggestions for speakers and or subjects for talks have originated from our conversations. Brian's efforts with the raffle, and should Brian be absent - Mike's efforts, have added valuable funds to the branch coffers. Thank you both.

As a whole, and with your blessing/agreement at the AGM, the committee have all agreed to continue in their respective roles. If anyone would like to join the committee, please contact me

ASAP. On the subject of the AGM, we will, as previously mentioned, be pushed for time. Due to a new long-term booking before us on Tuesday evenings, we are unable to access the room until 7pm. This unfortunately means that during AGM evenings, we have just 15 minutes within which to set up the room and take entry donations and raffle ticket money. Out of respect for the speaker, I would like to complete the AGM by 7.30pm. Last year we managed it in 14 minutes! That said, I will not prevent the essential debate of AGM business should it be required. Should you have an urgent matter for discussion please let Bob Kerry (Hon' Secretary) or I know by e-mail prior to the meeting so it can be factored into the agenda. I look forward to seeing you all at the AGM and for the talk that follows which is: Major Phil Watson: 'Le Moncel - Lance verses Lance'. ([paulevansfwa@hotmail.com](mailto:paulevansfwa@hotmail.com) or [bob.kerry@btopenworld.com](mailto:bob.kerry@btopenworld.com)).

#### FROM THE EDITORS

Please let us have any items for consideration for inclusion in the Poppy by the 20<sup>th</sup> April by post to Mrs J Berry, 8 Fairstead Rd, Norwich NR7 8XQ or by email, items can also be given at meetings.

[jackie.berry3@btinternet.com](mailto:jackie.berry3@btinternet.com)

#### MEETING REPORTS

Our January meeting was about the Guards Division at War 1915-17 with David Griffiths, focusing partly on the Battle of Loos, but with mention of other events during this period. Griffiths is writing a book due out sometimes this year and he says it is all due to an Arctic Warbler! No doubt this will be mentioned in the book...

The Guards back then are said to be elite people with Royal connections, including the Prince of Wales and the King at the time. But it seems even they with their high class ways had to be told not to rob their dead colleagues of valuables.

What do we know about the Loos battle, well amongst other things, John Kipling was killed, the remains of the spoil heaps or Double Crassier are now world heritage sites, (would they still be there if not involved in WW1), and then the Scots Guards who took part in a Christmas truce in 1915 which ended up with a couple of men in charge facing courts martial, one was Captain Iain Colquhoun, the other Captain Miles Barne who died in 1917 in rank of Major. Barne was from Sotterley in Suffolk. Barne was let off but Colquhoun, later knighted, was left to face the music and it took his high class friends to get him let off with just a reprimand, a case that would never have happened these days and should not have happened then. All they did was allow burial of the German dead.....

An interesting talk.

In February we learned that our planned speaker was unable to attend at very short notice. Our Chair Paul brought along a very interesting DVD of trains in WW1, which I think was enjoyed by those present. It was narrated by Major Tony Holt whose relaxing tones and a little humour accompanied black and white footage from IWM that I doubt many of us would have seen before. Certainly a side of the war that I had never seen, from the light railways through to the big gun carrying trains and the work involved in loading and firing such big guns. From the poor horses and mules that helped build some of the lines, footage of locals with chickens and the odd pig needing to dodge the trains moving through villages away from the front lines and happy laughing men often well back from the front lines. It also showed the laying of tracks as well as moving of stores and also how it transported men, both in Europe and the Middle east.

And there was still some footage left if a similar thing should happen again!

## FUTURE PROGRAMME

Paul has now completed his list for the year - as we all know with these things, they are subject to change at short notice.

05/3/24 Major Phil Watson: *'Le Moncel - Lance verses Lance'*.

02/4/24 Jeremy Gorden-Smith: *'Ypres - ruin to restoration'*.

07/5/24 Dr Peter Hodgkinson: *'Fear and courage in the trenches'*.

04/6/24 Rob Burkett and Andrew England: *'A Great War Miscellanea..... aspects, stories and encounters on the Western Front'*.

02/07/24 Jonathan Dutton: *Subject TBC.*

06/08/24 Jo Costin: *'Cambridgeshire Kitcheners'*.

03/09/24 Simon Shephard: *'Artillery conquers, infantry Occupies: British Artillery at the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of Ypres'*.

01/10/24 John Chester: *'Eight women and a boy - Serbia in the Great War.'*

05/11/24 Bryn Hammond: *'Franco-British co-operation in practice'*.

03/12/24 Peter Hart: *'The French at Gallipoli'*.

It would be good to have a list of volunteers who could do something in an emergency, we have had a few people come forward, it does not have to be a long piece as we could put a couple or more of short talks together. Please speak to Paul, Bob or Jackie so one of us can note the details.

## IN THE NEWS

Sadly damage has been done to the war memorial area at Harleston, the metal Tommy silhouette placed by the memorial was vandalised and now been removed for safe keeping and presumably for repair.

Police have spoken with a teenager who admitted he had damaged the silhouette of a Tommy and could have to go to court if he is found not to be eligible for a place on an offenders program.

## SUFFOLK WFA

Meetings held at the RBL Club, Tavern St, Stowmarket IP14 1PH 7.30pm

March 13<sup>th</sup> - A foot soldiers memoir of WW1 - 1918/19 spring offensive and POW - Phil Sutcliffe

April 10<sup>th</sup> - Daring Deeds of the Dardanelles - Clive Harris

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

This year will be the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the D-Day landings and the start of a long journey to Germany and on to Berlin for all the Allies, with all the fighting this would entail en-route. It will mean men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> WW will fight in places they knew of from their fathers, brothers, friends and possibly even had fought themselves just 30 years before in some cases. Many men will try to find family members and friends killed in WW1 in any spare moments they might have during the advance. There are many pictures out there showing men wandering round cemeteries looking at graves.

Of course the WW1 battlefields had been fought over throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> war but in a much more mobile way than in the Great War, although some damage was done to cemeteries, as well as to towns and villages still recovering from the past. By 1944 the tide had turned and the Germans were being pushed back towards Germany. Places which had been under German occupation for much of the war were being liberated by the Allies.

One country that had been badly effected by German occupation was Belgium yet again, where much fighting took place over the area of the Ardennes as the Allies pushed the Germans back around the end of 1944 over ground fought on in WW1. It has been said that German forces were following their old WW1 frontier lines in some cases.

The city of Ypres suffered under German rule in WW2 but in September of 1944 the German occupation was ended by Polish Forces. As well as the population getting their freedom back, it meant that the Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate to honour the dead of WW1 could resume after years of not being able to hold the nightly event when the Germans took the city four years earlier. During this time the British held a replacement ceremony at Brookwood Cemetery here in Britain.

With this being the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D-Day no doubt there will be several commemoration events and most likely several TV programs marking this period in history.

## HAWTHORN CRATER

Recently geoscientists and archaeologists from Keele University, Goldsmith's University of London and assorted other Universities and Archaeology units did some work on the Hawthorn Crater in agreement with the Hawthorn Ridge Crater Association using drones, laser scanners and other modern technology to see what they could find to help understand more about the crater and how it impacted on the Battle of the Somme. The results published make for interesting reading. Using the modern high tech methods they could see into the earth, causing less damage to the features and cheaper than a traditional dig would be.

The results allow historians and others to see how the exploding of the mine turned into a disaster for the British. Firstly it tipped off the Germans that an attack was coming, secondly the fact that the mine was blown 10 minutes before the attack was to begin, allowing the debris to settle and to aid the British attack but it also allowed the Germans time to incorporate the crater into their front line. The Germans then used the trench as an observation and sniper firing point. The modern methods used found the physical evidence that the Germans had done this.

The British did learn from this attack apparently. They realised they did not need to blow mines in advance of an attack, but just go for it straight away after the explosion. At Hawthorn Ridge a few months after the first explosion, a second mine was exploded from the same point forming a

smaller crater which led to better success for the British allowing the capture of Hawthorn Redoubt and Beaumont Hamel.

You can read more on this on the Keele University website.

## CAESAR NEW ZEALAND WAR DOG

Apparently there has been talk that some military men do not approve of the new poppies that have appeared in recent years, in particular the purple poppies that raise funds for animals who work in modern military and civilian roles such as police, fire service etc. True, in the First World War men had little choice about serving, but animals were not given and never have been given much choice in what we humans think they should do, they were just taken to the hell of war.

Animals and in particular dogs were used in all sorts of roles, mascots, moral boosters, comfort givers, messengers, as well as search or medical assistance dogs. We all know of the horses, mules, donkeys etc that were there mainly to pull carts of guns, equipment and food supplies, but also carry men into battle, but even here larger breeds of dog were often to be seen pulling smaller carts around.

There was Sergeant Stubbie the American dog well known for his service to US soldiers during the war, but I also came across a New Zealand Bulldog called Caesar who also became a war service dog, he started out as a mascot for the 4th Battalion, New Zealand Rifles. Caesar was brought by his owner to Egypt in early 1916 and was trained to be a Red Cross Dog after his handler was assigned to Ambulance Driving duties before heading to France and the mud of the Somme.

As a Red Cross Dog Caesar would be trained to only find men still alive out on the battle field, he would learn to know only to help Allies and not enemy, work from hand signals, to accept the noise of battle and wear a gas mask. He and other similar dogs would carry water, medical kits which wounded men could use if not too badly hurt and writing materials so men could write down information. He could lead lightly wounded men to safety or take an item from a badly injured man and this allowed stretcher bearers to go to assist. He and other dogs would often stay with a dying man until he passed away. The mud of the Somme would be tricky for a dog such as Caesar with his short legs, but he was known to have helped many men before he sadly lost his life to a possible sniper, he was found with a dead soldier who had placed his hand on the dog so it was guessed that they died together. These two were buried together at a Casualty Clearing Station. His handler took Caesar's death badly, he also suffered gas poisoning but with the help of a VAD nurse he recovered from both happenings and they later married, they had a picture of the dog on the wall for the rest of their lives.

Today we so often see the huge bonds that soldiers and police handlers have with their dogs and the effect it has when one or the other is killed or seriously injured, for the "lucky ones" if you can call them that, the pair die together. A friend lost his police dog killed in action many years ago, he has never forgotten that dog, it finished him in the police force.... So for all those who think we should not support other colours of poppies at Remembrance just remember what the Animals at war memorial in London say "They had no choice"

## WOLFRAM VON RICHTHOFEN

Wolfram Karl Ludwig Moritz Hermann Freiherr (meaning Baron) von Richthofen was a WW1 flying ace and cousin to Manfred, the Red Baron, and his brother Lothar. All were born into Prussian

Nobility in Lower Silesia in Prussia, now part of Poland.

Wolfram joined Manfred's flying circus and took part in his first action on the day his cousin Manfred was killed. He would go on to claim 8 victories by the end of the war.

He continued to be involved with aircraft into WW2 and did very well for himself in various theatres of war until he had to retire due to ill health in 1944. He was made a prisoner of war by the US Army at the end of the war, but died in July 1945 in Bad Ischl in Austria where he was being treated for a brain tumour at what was the Luftwaffe hospital for head injuries. Despite the best doctors in the field and two operations, surgery was not successful.

Hitler had made him one of the youngest General Field Marshall's in Germany.

As we all know the Red Baron was the top ace in WW1 with 80 victories. His brother Lothar was to claim 40 victories and survived the war. He became a commercial pilot post war, only to be killed in a flying accident in 1922, when the plane he was in had engine failure and crashed.

Wolfram had a son also called Wolfram as well as two other children. The son, Wolfram, was listed as missing over Romania in June 1944 and his body never found.

D H Lawrence married into the Richthofen family when he married Frieda, full name Emma Maria Freida Johanna Frelin (meaning Baroness) von Richtofen in 1914. In Europe he was thought to be a spy and arrested but on their return to England they both faced similar problems with them both being thought to be helping the German cause.

And Finally -

#### MILTON CEMETERY PORTSMOUTH - HIDDEN STORIES.

While looking at a story of a young lad who died from gas poisoning age 16, Percy King, boy, of the Rifle Brigade, I spotted this man, Col. Sir Robert Megaw Ireland, CB, CMG, in the list of WW1 dead, he was aged 70 and was listed as Chief Paymaster on the CWGC pages for the Milton Cemetery. Looking him up, a comment on the IWM tells how he threw himself under a train at Portsmouth Town railway station and was instantly killed. It was stated he left a note for his wife, presumably saying he could not cope any longer.

He had fairly recently retired from the Army and when the war began he was called up again to be Paymaster in Southern Command.

It was said having to return to work aged 65 was too much for him and he suffered a nervous breakdown during 1918 and decided suicide was the only way out.

Back to Percy, he committed Suicide at the young age of 16 at Barracks in Portsmouth. He joined the army in 1919 age 15 as a boy bugler but found the army not to his liking, and had often gone AWOL, on one occasion his father had handed him back to the army to avoid getting in trouble himself, it was an offence to hide or aid a deserter. This and other small incidents seem to have led Percy to gas himself in July 1920. Because his death was prior to the cut off for getting a CWGC headstone, although he had not been in the war itself he has the usual headstone, therefore hiding his story.

You never know what stories are hidden by these headstones, as we know those shot at dawn do not look any different to those around them.

Also in the Cemetery are several members of the men lost in the sinking of SS Mendi in February 1917 and Sidney Day VC, Norwich born but serving with the Suffolk Regiment, he died in Portsmouth in 1959 aged 68, and has a normal family grave stone.