

Branch Newsletter – August 2022

Next Meeting:

Will be on Saturday 13th August at St Peter's Collegiate School, Compton Park, Compton Rd. West, Wolverhampton WV3 9DU. 2.00pm for a 2.30 kick-off.

The speaker this month is Judith Beastall - *"Every picture tells a story"*, The story of her grandfather and his brothers.

Judith is the vice-chair of the Wirral branch.

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A short message from our esteemed Treasurer:

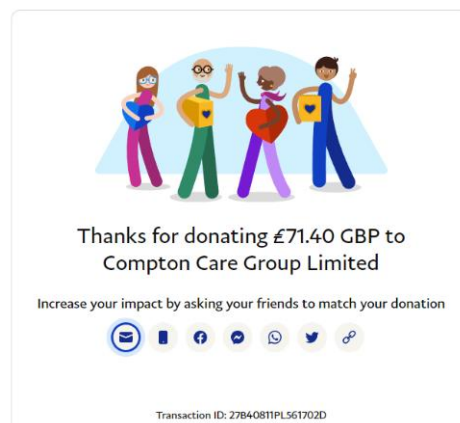
COMPTON HOSPICE COLLECTION

At our July meeting we had a collection for the Compton Hospice 40th anniversary "£40 for 40" fundraising. We said that the branch would match the donations.

There was £35.70 in the collection, so here is the receipt for that £35.70 along with the branch's matching donation.

Thanks to you all.

Andy



A postscript to last month's feature by Nick Baker from John "Snapper" White:



“Following on from Nick Baker’s article about the Dunkirk bombardment in WW1, here is a snap, with quite a nice sky, of the WW2 Dunkirk Memorial, with the CWGC cemetery in the back corner.

The Cemetery contains 100 burials from WW1 with an unusually wide range of Units & Regiments.

[CWGC list of casualties buried therein](#)

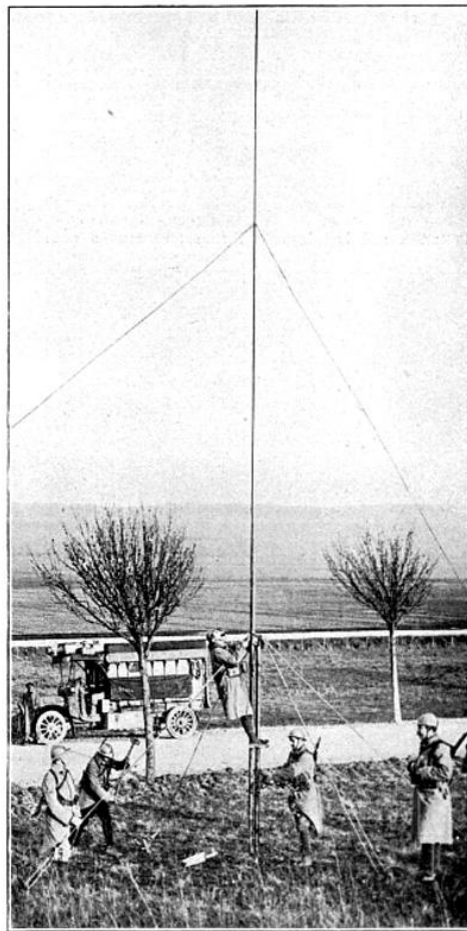
John White”

And what better way to follow up that than with another piece from Nick Baker:

Wireless Thoughts.
Nick Baker

We know the drill, “Will those of you with a mobile ‘phone turn the bloody thing off.” Thus is delivered unto us, at each meeting of the Wolverhampton Western Front Association, a stern and startling warning from our Chairman (even when he isn’t there). Quite what would happen if by some extraordinary oversight we did leave a ‘phone on, and heaven forbid it

rang, we don't know. The consequences don't bear thinking about. The warning is enough. Which leads us onto the subject of electronic wireless communications and the First World War and an interesting and previously unknown (to me anyway) photograph taken in late 1915/early 1916 that I recently discovered while looking for something else. This shows a French 'Wireless Apparatus Motor Car' with its crew in the act of setting up a huge aerial. The equipment van is parked on an adjacent road. This is clearly some way behind the front and thus illustrates the key issues with land based wireless early in the First World War, bulk, vulnerability and lack of mobility. This 'Wireless Van' was probably about as mobile as it got at the time and offered little in the way of getting wireless communications where they mattered – to the front line during battle. Nevertheless, as we know, by the end of the war wireless had 'come on a bit' (aided no doubt by experiments such as this van) and was being used in the air and in vehicles including tanks, thus contributing to the coordinated all arms offensives that were so vital in the 'hundred days'. Although, of course, we shouldn't forget that even then all wireless communication was by Morse code, as if crewing a FWW aircraft or tank wasn't difficult enough in the first place.



The caption to the photograph tells us 'after a few minutes preparation messages are transmitted'. Even as I write this Alan will be wondering just how many minutes. As we all know he only allows seconds for compliance to his 'turn off' request so its a good job the 'Wireless Van' is a thing of the past. At least all we have to do these days is press a button (well, I take the battery out as well just in case).

It's Caption Competition time!



(Photo courtesy of Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum via WFA North Wales FaceBook page)

Our worthy Secretary and aspiring “George Smiley”, Bill Pinfold, has a few words of helpful advice:

A cautionary note for aspiring Intelligence Officers.

“Following the article in the July Newsletter claiming that Germans can't say squirrel I eagerly awaited a visit last week from my two German Grandsons to test out the theory. They both pronounced squirrel perfectly and their mother who teaches English in a German secondary school said that she couldn't see it being a problem for many of her pupils. She suggested that "clothes" would be a much more difficult test.

Regards, Bill”

Never seen a photograph of one of these before:



Sawn-off Lee Enfield rifle, as used by some members of the RE Tunnelling Companies.

Bored? Our esteemed Treasurer, Andy Johnson, has a suggestion for you if you get an idle minute:

“Here's an interesting way to pass 5 minutes. Have you ever wondered who was the closest WW1 casualty to where you live? You haven't? Is it just me then?”

If you would like to know, here's how the CWGC can answer that question: <https://www.cwgc.org/who-lived-on-your-street/>

Then of course you have to research them, and visit their grave, assuming there is one.

Mine if Pte George Price of Foundry Street, Wall Heath. Killed on 13th October 1915 with the 1/5th South Staffs at the Hohenzollern Redoubt. Like almost all the South Staffs killed that day, he has no grave and is commemorated on the Loos Memorial at Dud Corner.

*Regards
Andy”*

Sandwell Archives has a large collection of documents relating to the Patent Shaft Co:



Mark V* Tanks awaiting testing at the Old Park Works. Sandwell Archives photo ref: BS-PS/10/3/382

“It might be blistering hot this weekend, but it is nice and cool in our archives where we found these images in our Patent Shaft Collection, which is one of our largest business collections.

Patent Shaft was founded in 1834, in Wednesbury, and went on to become one of the biggest employers in Staffordshire. The factory originally opened at the Brunswick Works before expanding to further sites across the town.

During both wars Patent Shaft produced weapons and munitions for the British Army. These included some of the first operational Tanks built during the First World War. The worldwide economic recession of the late 1970s and the disintegration of the regions manufacturing industry meant that the factory closed it's doors for the final time on 17th April 1980.”

The Winterberg Tunnel – Ron Cullen reports:

A few days before our branch meeting in May, a digger commenced exploration of an area of ground within the forest of Vaucclair north of the ruined village of old Craonne at the eastern end of the Chemin des Dames ridge in Aisne department of France.

The name Chemin des Dames derives from the fact that the road was created on top of the ridge to carry the daughters of Louis XV en route to Reims. This escarpment is the high ground between two rivers the Ailette to the north and the Aisne to the south. The ridge itself running from north east of Soissons to north west of Reims.

It was traversed by parts of German First and Second army in early September 1914 as they advanced to the River Marne. Following their defeat at the Marne the Germans halted their retreat on the Chemin des Dames ridge , dug in and repulsed the efforts to dislodge them by parts of French VI and V armies with the BEF positioned between the French Forces. Some historians have concluded that this was the first instances of trench warfare in the Great War . In spite of the best efforts of French and British forces the Germans clung on to the high ground.

The BEF was extracted and moved north to Flanders by Mid October 1914 and the sector was taken over completely by French forces.

While some jockeying for position took place in late 1914 and early 1915 it remained a fairly quiet sector (quiet being a relative term in the Great War) until the new Commander of the French Armies ,General Robert Nivelle, launched his ill fated offensive in April 1917.

In the interim , however, the Germans had strengthened the defences in what was naturally a very strong defensive position. This included underground workings in an area well used for quarrying over the centuries , indeed the main museum dedicated to the remembrance of WWI in the region is positioned over an old quarry at the Cavern du Dragon near Hurtebise . A number of tunnels were dug to allow German troops relatively safe passage from rear (north) side of the ridge to front line trenches on south side of the ridge . One such tunnel was the Winterberg Tunnel, Winterberg being the name used by the Germans for the area better known to us by the French title - Californie plateau. While the primary function of this tunnel was for the safe passage of troops it had storage facilities and housed a regimental head quarters.

The Nivelle offensive, overall, had failed within days of its launch on 16 April 1917 and the French Army suffered some outbreaks of disobedience and refusal to attack .This was however by no means universal and in early May an offensive was planned by the new commander of French X Army , General Denis Duchêne to take the Californie plateau. The artillery bombardment began on 3rd May.

Fairly early in the proceedings the front line (south) entrances to the tunnel were destroyed. The unit in the sector and using the tunnel at the time were the 111 Reserve Infantry Regiment recruited from the area around Baden and Lake Constance to the south of Stuttgart.

Northern access to Winterberg tunnel

A number of soldiers from the regiment were sheltering in the tunnel when a French shell hit a munition and fuse store close to the northern entrance to the tunnel enhancing the explosion and causing the collapse of the only remaining entrance to the tunnel trapping a number of soldiers . It seems that around 30 soldiers managed to escape immediately after the collapse of the tunnel entrance and that three trapped soldiers managed to escape at a

later stage , while it is not clear , at least not to me , how they alone escaped while,the others remained entombed . The accounts by these three men of conditions within the sealed off tunnel are as harrowing as might be anticipated.

While efforts were made by their comrades to dig out survivors, within a few hours the area was in French hands , who probably had no knowledge or perhaps interest in attempting the extraction of the remaining soldiers of 111 RIR entombed in the remnants of the tunnel Nor indeed was any effort made when the German army regained the area in the offensive of May 1918 or indeed a subsequent German army in 1940. The dead thus lay buried in the Winterberg tunnel, in which they had sought shelter.

While it is indeed probable that the French and German Authorities were at least peripherally aware of the existence of what is essentially a war grave they had no interest in exploring the site.

Frustrated at this a local historian , Pierre Malinowski ,who knew the area well and had made a detailed study of the of the site in the French military archives in the Chateau de Vincennes in Paris tried to persuade the authorities of the value of a systematic exploration. Having failed in this, his son and some friends explored the site on the night of 31/12/19 and 1/1/20 and confirmed from artefacts they found that this was the probable side of the Winterberg tunnel . This was entirely illegal and in spite of their offered excuses that they had covered things up and left it as they found it within a few days trophy 'hunters ' were exploring the site . The authorities had no choice now but to get involved and the site was secured . As fortune would have it M . Malinowski's son had not in fact found the entrance to the tunnels but a store of tools etc close by , but with contents to confirm the identification of 111RIR as regiment involved .

Epaulette

Thus after the covid restrictions were lifted the Volksbund Deutsche Kriesgräbenfürsorge (VDK)- the German equivalent of the CWGC- commenced exploring the site in May of 2022. Using the archives in Karlsruhe among others that determine the likely location of the northern tunnel entrance. With precision digging the managed to achieve access for a fibre-optic camera to confirm the presence of tunnel, visibility was however very poor the structure very unstable such that further interference was deemed to risk collapse.

The site was resealed, secured and restored and the authorities withdrew to think again!

At a press conference a joint Franco German statement emphasised that the exhumation of the bodies of the soldiers was not the main objective of this operation but a study of the site probably with the ambition of it becoming a memorial site. The future of this site is very significant as it is 'hugely symbolic' and will be object in the next months of ' a joint reflection between the French and German authorities with the shared concern in maintaining the memory of this tragic episode of the Great War

Prior to the actual exploration of the site detailed archival research had already been going in Karlsruhe and elsewhere to gather information together with further details of the soldiers who might remain entombed .

Soldiers of 111 Reserve Infantry Regiment

*Following on from this research the archives of the district of Bad Wurtemberg are presenting an exhibition which commenced 19 April 2022 entitled ‘ Death in the Winterberg Tunnel , a First World War Tragedy ‘
The exhibition revisits the tragedy of the tunnel which was created by the German Army at Craonne on the Chemin des Dames and in which between 100 and 150 soldiers of the 111 Reserve Infantry Regiment were entombed as a result of a bombardment on 4 May 1917 . The exhibition creates an image to evoke the structure of the of the tunnel in three dimensions based on historical records and sources both public and private in Germany as well as work undertaken by the VDK to rediscover the tunnel and identify soldiers who remain*

The Exhibition will be on display in Karlsruhe between 19 May and 14 August 2022 before moving to Constance followed by Brussels and arriving at the Cavern du Dragon on the Chemin des Dames in January 2023.

The Archives of the district of Bad- Wurtemberg have put various parts of the exhibition on line as well as referencing sources used. (Available in German and French although I can only access the details in German).

R J Cullen

Richard Pursehouse has been researching the Canadian Press:

“Makes me wonder if this was happening in other countries besides Canada - and if there was a honeymoon night by proxy.... Richard”

Ottawa Free Press newspaper 25 August 1915

MANY MARRIAGES BY PROXY IN FRANCE PARIS, August 1915 -

Since the new law of April of this year authorizing military marriages by proxy came into force, over 700 such marriages have been performed. The law provided that two months must elapse between the application for authorization and the performance of the ceremony. One result of this delay is that In several cases the bridegroom has been killed on the battlefield by the time the proxy marriage took place.

Dates for your Diary

Alas, none that I know of.

Over to you!

If you know of any other relevant events that our members may be interested in, don't be shy – let me know and I'll put it in the Newsletter.

Future Newsletters:

Please send any items you would like to be included to me at my official e-mail address: wfawtoneditor@gmail.com

Many, many thanks to those members who have provided items for the Newsletter; you know who you are, and your reward shall be in Heaven...

John Hale
Branch Newsletter Editor