



frontline.

The newsletter of the MK WFA, February 2023.



Our next meeting on Friday 17th February is in fact our AGM, coupled with a fun quiz on the First World War. In-between will be sandwiches and other refreshments, and of course the bar will be available for refreshments of a liquid kind. The AGM will include the minutes of the last AGM, (see the following page,) and a look at the finances, but will be mainly a report of the branche's activities over the past year, and a look forward to some events planned for the future. I am very pleased (and relieved) to report that the committee are willing to stand for another year, although if anyone else is willing to join us, that would be brilliant. There is no danger of anyone having their arm twisted, so you can all come along and relax, join in the quiz and hopefully have a good catch up. If you think the photo above looks vaguely familiar, you would be right. We used this image on the poster for last

year's AGM. It shows a French tank and British and French troops preparing for the big Allied offensive at the end of the war that was known as 'The last Hundred Days' and this was the subject due to be delivered as part of the AGM by Roger Penny, who traditionally agreed to end up with the 'short straw' of shortening his lecture to accommodate the AGM. Sadly, Roger was unable to present his talk due to ill health, as you know he had already withdrawn from the committee for the same reason, but none of us realised at the time that we were about to lose him forever.

On a much more cheerful note, Jim and the committee are arranging a seminar for this year. Some great speakers have been engaged and a suitable venue is next on the agenda, with several options available. Please make sure that you reserve Saturday October 14th in your diaries, we need a great turn-out!

Minutes MK WFA AGM 18th February 2022

Apologies) Anne, Roger, Jane, Roy, Joseph, Janet, Bob, Keith.

Welcome) Stuart thanked members present for braving storm Eustace to attend.

Minutes - last AGM) The last AGM was held via zoom. The minutes of that meeting were run through and validated.

Chairman's address) This was presented as a PowerPoint. The first slide showed the nine zoom lectures/events that were held during lockdown. Our newsletter, 'Frontline', more than doubled its content during lockdown as it played an essential role in keeping our little group together. Stuart thanked everyone who contributed. MK WFA played an important role in the commemoration at MK Rose for Albert French, and also supported the following commemoration at Wolverton. Anne, Stuart and Ian took the branch display to the Heritage open weekend at MK museum. Other events we attended were Mike Chapman's CWGC tour of Bletchley cemetery and Jane's 'Old Contemptibles' plot at Westminster's Garden of Remembrance. Our first 'live' lecture, in Sept. 2021, was 'On the Beat' police stories from 1914 - 1918 by Terence Cox, followed by Phil Sutcliffe's 'Dad's War'. Then came our move from Roman Way to Wolverton. The lectures that followed were on Lawrence of Arabia (John Peaty) and Air VCs of WW1 (Jim Nicholson). Last month we had our 'Old/New Year' celebration and quiz, bringing us up to date.

Treasurer's report) PowerPoint slide from Caroline outlining the financial side of MK WFA. Despite some 'zoom' speaker costs with no live meeting donations, the balance was reasonably healthy at £1411.98

Future programme) A slide prepared by Anne showed the forthcoming lectures organised by Ian. We have a full and varied calendar for the year.

Future aims) We have postponed our seminar due to the ongoing uncertainties posed by Covid. Jim had already done a lot of background preparation, but we are planning to hold the seminar next year, possibly earlier than we usually do.

Our move to Wolverton Working Men's Club is ongoing but nearly sorted. Owing to the layout of the area we use, the use of two projectors is proving a good solution, and all the associated cables, adaptors, stands etc are being acquired.

Election of Committee.) All the committee were willing to stand for another year, apart from Roger, our secretary, who for health reasons needs to stand down. Anne has volunteered to take on this role if there is no other candidate putting themselves forward. Stuart also asked if there would be another person willing to join the committee. Stuart is going to see via 'Frontline' if there are any other candidates. He thanked the committee for their input and hard work. The present committee were nominated and seconded.

Meeting concluded.



Mentioned in Despatches

James Nicolson

MK WFA kicked off the New Year with an excellent talk by Jim Nicolson, nephew of James Nicolson, on Friday 20th January. Previously Jim had entertained us with a fascinating talk on four relatively unknown ariel VC winners from WW1, so this talk was a perfect follow-up. Out of twenty-two VCs awarded to the RAF in WW2, only one was to a fighter pilot, and that pilot was James Nicolson.

James was born in Hamstead in 1917, soon moving to Shoreham. He was always fascinated by tales of the RFC and RAF and in 1934 applied to join the RAF, only to receive a letter back stating that he needed to be 18 years old to join. Needless to say, in 1936, he did. At six foot three inches, he was quite tall for a fighter pilot, but after training he joined 72 squadron at Church Fenton flying *Gloster Gladiators*, the RAF's final development of the biplane fighter. Despite four machine guns and an enclosed cockpit, the study *Gladiator* was little different from the biplanes of the first war and was rapidly outclassed by the far faster eight-gun monoplanes then entering service. In fact, the only Luftwaffe aircraft the *Gladiator* could catch was the Heinkel 111 bomber, and the *Gladiator* pilots were advised to build up speed by diving on their opponents and attempt to ram them! (Jim showed a photo of seven pilots including James, within a year of the war starting the other six pilots had been killed or badly wounded.) Off duty, James and the other pilots let off steam by racing their sports cars around the airfield, sometimes in reverse, or blindfolded, or both!

James was quite unconventional, and at his wedding the guard of honour was not formed of officers but his ground crew. James evidently often gave them cigarettes because, as he said, they were the ones who kept him alive. Nicolson was then posted south to 247 squadron at Church Fenton flying the more modern *Hurricanes*. By this point the Battle of Britain was hotting up, but Church Fenton was out of the main area of conflict and James did not see much action until, as section leader, he was vectored to lead his three aircraft to intercept a raid over Southampton. Here James fell foul of two of the big disadvantages faced by the RAF at that time. The first was the British tactics for fighter attacks. In order to bring as much firepower to bear on German bombers (thinking back to the four-gun biplanes) the RAF employed a number of attacks that involved fighters attacking the same target together, either abreast or in line astern. This involved the British aircraft flying in a tight 'Vic' of three. Therefore Nicholson, as section leader, led the formation, with his map spread out on his knees to work out the course for the interception. So, he was flying with his head in the cockpit while his other two pilots concentrated on their tight formation with their leader, and nobody was able to keep a watch for enemy aircraft. (The Germans, who operated a much looser finger-four formation or 'schwarm' called the neat but dangerous British formation 'the row of idiots'. The RAF, after heavy losses, soon adopted the German system.)

Nicolson's flight was 'bounced' by Me 109s from above. The first James knew about it was when his cockpit exploded around him, peppering his face with fragments of Perspex and nearly severing his left eyelid. A cannon shell wounded him in the leg, and his Hurricane burst into flames. This is where

James fell foul of the second aforementioned disadvantage. In both the Spitfire and Hurricane, the main fuel tank sat in the nose just behind the instrument panel. If punctured, fuel poured over the pilot's legs and into the cockpit. If it ignited, and it nearly always did, the pilot had under ten seconds to get out. Opening the canopy caused a blowtorch effect as the flames were sucked into the cockpit. Although nearly blinded by blood pouring from his wounds, James rapidly slid back the canopy, undid his harness and radio cable and stood up on his seat ready to dive over the side. At this moment a Me 110 (German twin seat, twin-engined fighter) not the one who had caused all the damage, flashed past him. Enraged, James jumped back into his seat, back into the flames, got behind the German fighter and gave him several bursts of fire. The Me 110 also burst into flames, bits broke off it, and it spun down out of control. By now, badly burned on the face and especially the hands, James bailed out.

One of James's wingmen survived the attack undamaged, the other, King, was also shot down. He bailed out but his parachute collapsed, and he crashed onto a house roof and was killed. King was eighteen. James' troubles were not over. Many spectators below were witnessing the dogfight above them, including a platoon of the Home Guard, who were engaging in a liquid lunch at the pub. Pouring out, their sergeant gave them the order to fire at the descending parachutist. James was hit in the buttocks by shotgun pellets. The local butcher's boy, who also happened to be a boxing enthusiast, rounded on the soldiers and, demanding to know who had given the order to fire, promptly knocked the sergeant out. Ironically, in the confusion, the ambulance which had been summoned for Nicolson presumed the sergeant was the casualty and took him off to hospital instead. The spectators flagged down a passing lorry which gave James a lift to the hospital, but not before James had dictated a telegram to Muriel his wife which read 'Shot down darling. Slightly hurt.' Muriel later received the burnt and tattered remains of Nicolson's tunic, which is now on display at the museum at Tangmere. The incident with the Home Guard was never mentioned in official or newspaper accounts, or in Nicolson's later radio broadcast (which Jim played for us to listen to).

James was treated for burns by Archie McIndoe's team. He requested that they sorted his badly burned left hand so it could still operate a throttle, which they did. In all the following photos that Jim showed us, James always hid his injured hand. Soon after this James was awarded the VC. He was extremely embarrassed by this and said, 'Now I have to earn it!' Jim was of the opinion that the King had expressed surprise that no VCs had been awarded during such a major conflict as the Battle of Britain, so the Air Ministry searched through all the recommendations for the DFC and chose James as a fitting recipient. Jim pointed out that a VC award needed an extreme likelihood of death and several witnesses, and a fighter pilot's deeds and individual acts of courage usually went unseen. James knew this and hated the fact that he had been singled out. He rarely wore his ribbon in public.

Jim then took us through the rest of his uncle's war. After recuperation he went on desk jobs until he persuaded the powers that be to let him return to operational flying. He started back testing turbinelight Bostons (a light bomber fitted with radar and a powerful searchlight to illuminate enemy aircraft at night for an accompanying fighter to shoot down) - these tests were unsuccessful. During this period he had a son but was posted to Burma, as CO of 27 Squadron. He was awarded the DFC aged 27 years flying firstly Mosquitoes and then Beaufighters. Returning to a desk job, he wangled a flight on a four engined Liberator on a bombing raid. On the flight out first one engine failed, then another. Unable to maintain hight, the Liberator ditched into the Indian Ocean. Out of the ten crew only three got out, including Nicolson, but by the time a Catalina flying boat found them Nicolson had drowned and disappeared. He is commemorated on a plinth at the crash site of his Hurricane, on the Air Force memorial to the missing, and has several roads named in his honour, with an RAF VC10 tanker bearing his name and a Eurofighter Typhoon wearing the colours of his Hurricane.

Jim gave us a fascinating and well-illustrated talk with a lot more personal details than I have been able to record here. He also had some really special artifacts to show us, including the original telegram that James sent to Muriel, and the swanee whistle that James used to play. I was quick to offer to demonstrate it (very poorly). For me as a Battle of Britain enthusiast that was a highlight, in twelve months not only had I had a flight in a Spitfire, but I had also played the original swanee whistle that belonged to the only Battle of Britain pilot to be awarded the Victoria Cross!

Farewell to Roger Penny



On the 27th January, on behalf of MK WFA, Anne, Kevin, Ian, Owain and I attended the funeral of our good friend and long serving member and previous secretary, Roger Penny. He was already in MK WFA when I joined and was secretary for Roy and later myself. I know that he gave lectures to other branches as well as ours, and that he had a huge knowledge of WW1 and European history. I also know that he was very supportive and had a great dry humour, and all at MK WFA are very saddened by his passing. Roger was born in Wales, was always fascinated by history, and at one time was employed as model maker for a Welsh museum. He met his wife Gill at university and the couple immediately got married, because, as Roger said, 'Why wait?'. Roger was a member of MK Model society and exhibited in many high-end model exhibitions such as Shuttleworth. He was also a stalwart of Milton Keynes Aviation Society and presented his aviation themed lectures there. We will all miss him.

Lending Library - Missing in Action

As promised last month, 'Joyeux Noel', 'The War Beneath' and 'Birdsong' are in the lending library so please feel free to give them a go. However, at the moment, the DVD section is looking very depleted, so if anyone has 'The Wipers Times', 'The Water Diviner', 'Company K', 'Passchendaele', 'Journeys End' or 'Forbidden Ground' and have finished watching them, please return them soon. Many thanks

Posting to the Trenches



Discovered too late to include in the talk on the Christmas truce is this first day cover produced in 1999 (if the Booby Moore stamp is anything to go by???) but the talk did bring up the subject of postage costs then and now, and how the mail reached the trenches in WW1, so read on to find out how.

Before the outbreak of WW1 Britain's Post Office (the GPO) was the biggest employer in the world with over 250,000 employees. It was also the biggest earner in the country with an annual revenue of £32 million. The Post Office was responsible for the collection, sorting and delivery of an average of six billion items a year. The penny post had been introduced in 1840 with the introduction of the famous penny black stamp, this rate survived until the end of the war. A postcard cost a half penny, and with several deliveries a day to small towns it created a well organised and effective form of communication. In addition, the Post Office was responsible for telegraph and telephone services, and a savings bank. But at its peak, during the war, it had to deal with an extra 12 million letters and a million parcels being sent to soldiers each week. The lack of ground made on both sides during the fighting meant that the troops on the frontline were cut off from their regular lives, and letters to and from loved ones were treasured items. How the Post Office maintained such an efficient postal service to soldiers and sailors during World War One is a story of ingenuity and courage.

The imperative was clear from the start. Ever since the establishment of the Penny Post in 1840, the ability to communicate by letter reliably and cheaply had become a public expectation. For fighting soldiers, it was essential to morale, and the British Army knew that. It considered delivering letters to the front as important as delivering rations and ammunition. The Boer War of 1899 had established an expectation among soldiers that they would be able to stay in touch with those at home but the logistics of doing so in WW1 provided a challenge on an unprecedented scale, especially as a vast number of postal workers had joined up themselves. Over 75,000 Post Office workers left their jobs to fight in the war and around 12,000 of these joined the Post Office's own Battalion known as the Post Office Rifles, which was the 8th Battalion of the London Regiment. The Rifles had existed since 1868 and were almost entirely made up of Post Office employees. A month after war

broke out a second battalion of the Post Office Rifles had to be created as there were so many men keen to join up from the Post Office. The Western Front became a bloody theatre of war, and the Post Office Rifles were involved in many of the major battles in Europe such as Ypres, the Somme and Passchendaele. The POR received hundreds of gallantry awards, including a Victoria Cross. Losses were 1,800 killed and 4,500 wounded. In total 8,500 Post Office workers lost their lives in WW1. The GPO prided itself in its ability to move millions of letters from anywhere to anywhere, safely, and quickly. The men of the Royal Engineers (Postal Section) or REPS was a part-time reserve unit made up of GPO men who'd had a smattering of military training. This unit of postal workers was immediately subsumed into the Army when WW1 broke out, with the Army was in nominal command. This operation was controlled by the GPO. Even questions in Parliament about forces mail were answered by the Postmaster General rather than the War Ministry.

At the outbreak of war the unit immediately created a sorting office in London's Regent's Park - a gigantic wooden hut covering several acres. Called the Home Depot, it employed 2,500 staff, mainly women, to sort post.



Sorting post at Regent's Park



A field post office

Outward mail was sorted by military unit. Each morning bosses would be informed by Whitehall of the latest movements of ships and battalions so each item of mail could be dispatched to the right place. On its outward journey to the Western Front, a fleet of three-tonne army lorries would take the mail to Folkestone or Southampton where ships would shuttle it across to Army Postal Service (APS) depots in Le Havre, Boulogne and Calais.

Trains ran back and forth across Picardy under cover of darkness dropping some mail off along the route and unloading the rest at railheads where special REPS lorries took them to the "refilling points" for divisional supplies.

Regimental post orderlies would sort the mail at the roadside and carts would be wheeled to the front line to deliver it to individual soldiers. The objective was to hand out letters from home with the evening meal. It's said that no matter how tired and hungry the soldiers were, they always read the letter before eating the food.

Letters back were collected from the men from field post offices. These were equipped as comprehensively as a village sub-office. Men could even buy War Savings Certificates there, exactly as the population did back home. The mail was date-stamped with the field postmark and sent to the base post office for its journey home.

At the beginning of the war every letter home was opened and read by a junior officer. It was then opened and read again at the Home Depot to ensure that it contained no classified information about troop movements or casualties. Eventually men could opt for an "Honour Envelope" which meant the

letter would only be read in London, saving the embarrassment of having their deeply personal endearments read by a censor who they knew.

One method of delivering post to the frontline was to use carrier pigeons; a form of delivering messages that had been in use for thousands of years. During the war a carrier pigeon's job was a dangerous one, with soldiers on both sides often trying to shoot the pigeon down in order to intercept what could possibly be highly classified enemy information. The British Army used 100,000 pigeons during the war and by 1918 there were 22,000 pigeons carrying post to the trenches. Reciprocal agreements between all of the countries involved in the war were made to ensure that post could be delivered to and from prisoners of war. The Post Office was responsible for delivering the post to the prisoner of war camps and this particular type of mail was free of charge. The Post Office employed thousands of women to replace the men who had joined up, and thousands more who were bilingual were employed to monitor and censor correspondence with neutral countries, control the flow of sensitive information, and help catch spies.



At its peak this incredible operation delivered over 12 million letters a week and one million parcels. Wherever armed forces were engaged, REPS would follow, delivering to ships of the Royal Navy anywhere in the world and to soldiers away from the fixed positions of the Western Front. In Gallipoli more unopened letters from those killed in action were being passed back from the front than letters going forward. The GPO always ensured that returned letters didn't arrive before the official telegram telling the family that their son was dead. There were 30,000 unopened letters every day.

Those postal workers who didn't go to war to war were probably glad to be handling letters and parcels rather than rifles and bayonets, but their truly magnificent work was as important to the war effort as the weapons. Indeed, mail exchanged between soldiers and loved ones WAS a weapon. Those who wielded it made a huge contribution to the outcome of the war. Sadly, the huge costs of WW1 caused the end of the famous Penny Post, which had stood for 75 years. In 1918 the postage was raised by a half penny, causing one postal historian to lament 'One of the great triumphs of peace had succumbed to the demands of war'.

Bibliography

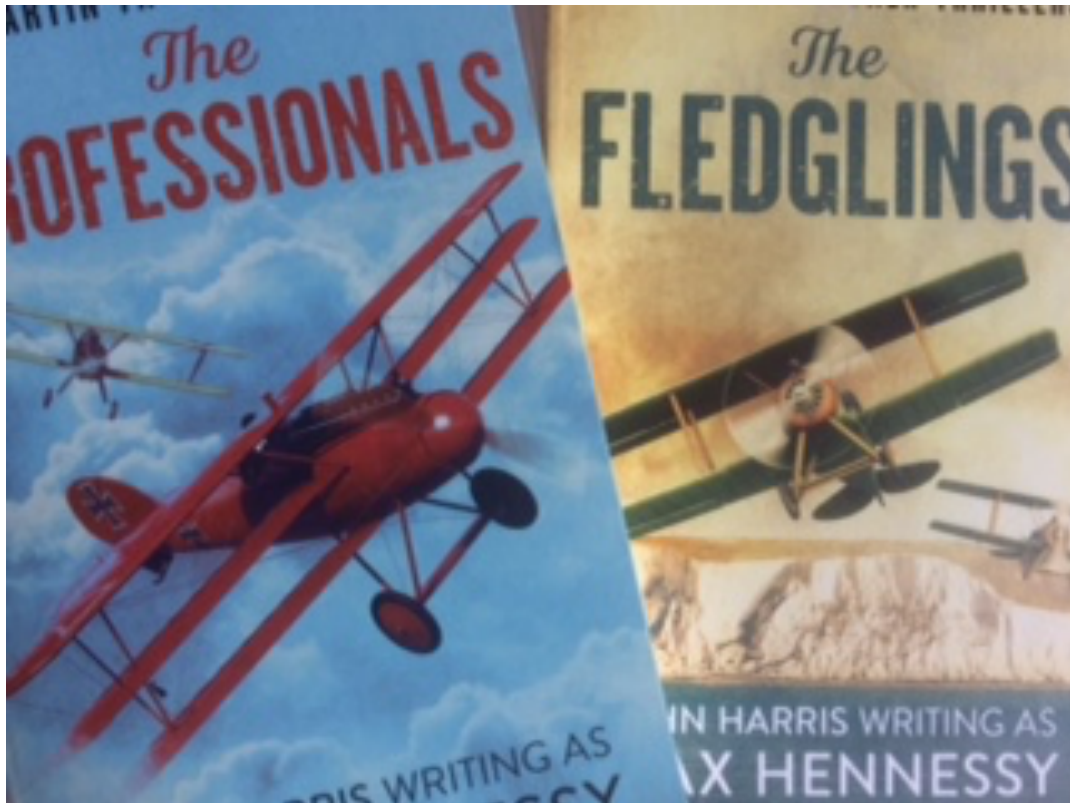
<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25934407>

<https://www.postalmuseum.org/>

Authors, alias Mark Hennessy.

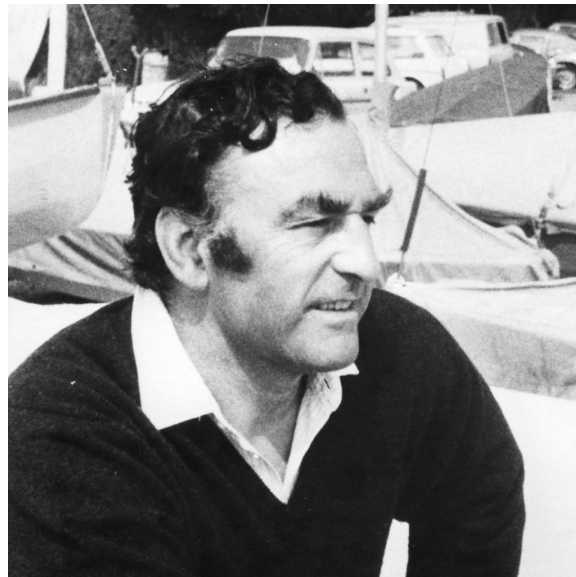
Looking at authors whose books are available to borrow from our lending library.



These two books have just been added to our lending library, courtesy of a cheap garden centre deal. They take me back to my teenage years when I first read a novel by Max Hennessy entitled 'The Interceptors'. (I also recall another favourite, 'B Flight' by Bruce Carter). Being a big fan of W E Johns and Biggles, especially the WW1 stories, I immediately took to Hennessy's style. Less 'Boy's Own' than Biggles and more realistic, 'The Interceptors' is set in 1919, when the First World War had just finished. The central character is Martin Falconer, a veteran airman while still in his teens who now, adjusting to peacetime, is asked to go to Russia to fight the Bolsheviks. The Great War had taken away much of Martin's idealism, shown him the gruesome realities of battle. But Russia in 1919, a chaotic, desperate country, shows him another sort of conflict, a civil war of great savagery and bitterness on both sides. I think this was my first introduction to British forces being involved in Russia at that time. I now realise that I started this series at the wrong end, the series starts with 'The Fledglings' (where Martin learns to fly) then 'The Professionals', (both shown above, and in the library), and 'The Victors'. Although pleased to read the first two novels, I must take issue with the cover of 'The Professionals.' I bet you have noticed something wrong as well. The cover appears to show an Albatross triplane, a plane that never existed apart, from a single prototype, being pursued by what looks like a Boeing Steerman, an American trainer from WW2. I'm all for a little artistic licence, but that is really pushing things too far!

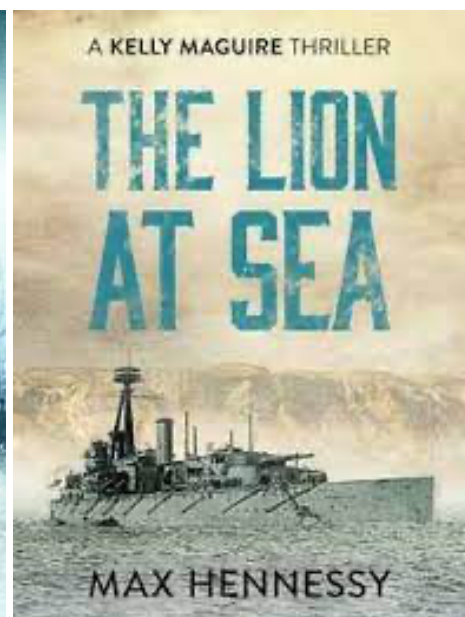
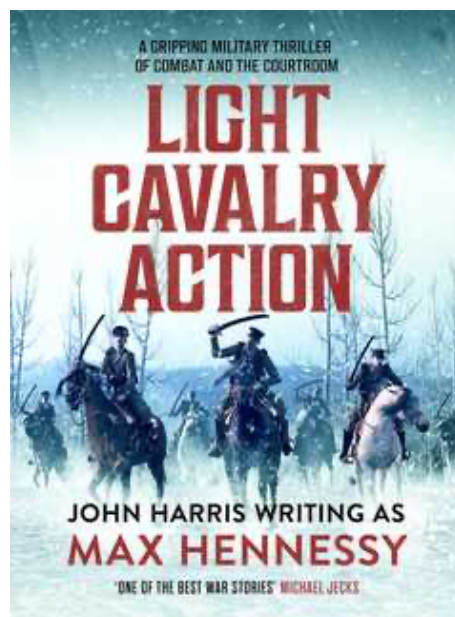
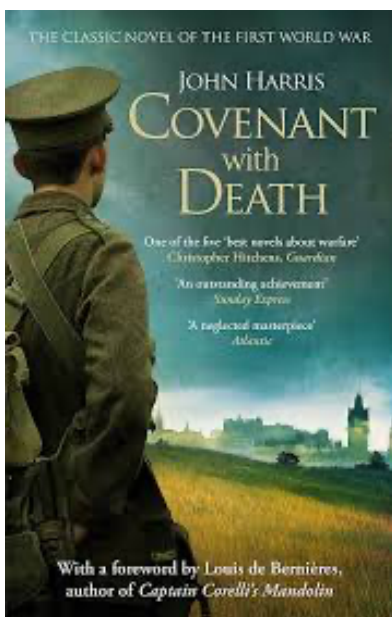
John Harris (18 October 1916 - 7 March 1991) was a British novelist. He published a series of crime novels featuring the character Inspector Pel, and a wide variety of war books. He wrote with his own name, and under the pseudonyms of Mark Hebden and Max Hennessy. The first book I remember reading of his was his 1953 novel 'The Sea Shall Not Have Them' and I also remember the feature film of the same name that was produced in 1954. Harris had a wide variety of jobs from sailor to

cartoonist and became a highly inventive, versatile writer. In addition to crime fiction, Hennessy was a master of the war novel and drew heavily on his experiences in both the navy and air force, serving in the Second World War. His novels reflect the reality of war mixed with a heavy dose of conflict and adventure.



John Harris.

Harris has written dozens of stories, mainly about the second World war, but in researching him for this article I came across a novel by him called 'Covenant with Death' which I shall search out for our library because it comes highly recommended.



The plot is as follows - When war breaks out in 1914, Mark Fenner and his Sheffield friends immediately flock to Kitchener's call. Amid waving flags and boozy celebration, the three men - Fen, his best friend Locky and self-assured Frank, rival for the woman Fen loves - enlist as volunteers to take on the Germans and win glory. Through ramshackle training in sodden England and a stint in arid Egypt, rebellious but brave Fen proves himself to be a natural leader, only undermined by on-going friction with Frank. Headed by terse, tough Sergeant Major Bold, this group of young men form steel-strong bonds and yearn to face the great adventure of the Western Front. Then, on one summer's day in 1916, Fen and his band of brothers are sent to the Somme, and this very ordinary hero discovers what it means to fight for your life.

Stirring told from the down-to-earth view of everyday soldiers, 'Covenant with Death' is acclaimed as one of the greatest novels about war ever written.



'The Russian Front' - Phil Tomaselli

Well known historian and author Phil Tomaselli talks about how events on the Russian Front intimately influenced strategy in the West. In 1914 the early Russian advance into East Prussia pulled crucial German units out of Belgium. In 1915 they fought a retreat across Poland and their 1916 offensive helped save Verdun. The 1917 revolution freed German troops for their 1918 offensives in France, but thousands of British troops were still fighting in Russia in late 1919. A fascinating talk, not to be missed

Our Events Programme.

February 17th - MK WFA AGM and quiz.

March 17th 'The Russian Front' - Phil Tomaselli

April 21st 'Jig-a-jig Tommy' - Bruce Cherry

May 19th - 'I shall hope to try an officer and at least one corporal for cowardice' - Michael de Cicero

June 16th - 'Now the War is Over' - Dr Daniel Weinbren

Meetings are 7.30 - 9.30.at Wolverton Working Men's Social Club, 49 - 50, Stratford Road MK12 5LS

Committee members are...

Stuart Macfarlan - Chairman (macfarlan87@gmail.com)

Anne McIntyre - Secretary/historical events co-ordinator (annefmmcintyre@gmail.com)

Ian Wright - Talks organiser

Caroline Wright - Treasurer

Jim Barrett - Seminar and visits co-ordinator

George Maby - Wolverton Town Council liaison (Twinning and Albert French commemoration)