



SOKE MILITARY SOCIETY

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Website www.sokemilitarysociety.co.uk

Monthly Meeting

The next meeting is on Wednesday, 9 August when Stuart Orme will tell us about Battlefield Ghosts as opposed to Peterborough's ghosts.

Assisi Heroes Honoured

On 17 June 2006 a ceremony was held at Assisi War Cemetery in Italy to mark the anniversary of the liberation on Assisi by Allied forces in 1944.

Assisi is the scene of an unusual adoption programme. An Italian war veteran, Vincenzo Cavanna, noticed that the Commonwealth War Cemetery had few visitors. The relatives of those buried there lived far away and found it hard to visit. He set up a scheme of adoption and local people have so far adopted over 300 graves. Priority was given to soldiers from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, as their families were least likely to visit.

Salute to Vietnam Veterans

The Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Australian War Memorial has extended an invitation to attend a range of ceremonies and events to mark the 40th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan and the national observance of Vietnam Veterans' Day from Thursday 17 August to Sunday 20 August. This is an opportunity to learn more about Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and to pay respects to those who served and died.

The battle of Long Tan was a defining event in Australia's longest war. It was one of the most intensive actions Australian soldiers fought in

Vietnam. On 18 August 1966, a rifle company of 108 men, cut off and outnumbered by at least ten to one, withstood repeated, massed Viet Cong attacks for four hours. The bravery and tenacity of the Australian soldiers became legendary.

FIRST ALLIED SHOT

The first Allied shot of the war in the Far East was actually fired over the bows of the Australian coaster *Woniara* (Captain F. N. Smale) from a 6-inch gun emplacement at Point Nepean, guarding the entrance to Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay. The 823 ton coaster had entered the bay at 9.15 pm on September 3, 1939 after a trip from Tasmania. Ordered to heave-to for inspection, the coaster gave her identity but continued on without stopping. A 100 lb shell, fired across her bow, soon changed her captain's mind.

By a remarkable coincidence, this was the actual, same gun that had fired the first shot of World War I when, hours after war was declared, it fired on the German Norddeutscher Lloyd 6,500 ton steamer *Pfalz* while it attempted to leave Australian waters on August 5, 1914. The *Pfalz* was then returned to Williamstown where the crew was detained. The captured vessel served out the rest of World War I as the Australian troopship *HMT Boorara*

Anglo-Egyptian War 1882

Although the actual war and invasion took place during 1882, its origins can be traced to 1869 with the opening of the Suez Canal. The Canal, initially dismissed as unworkable by the British, later became strategically important as a shortened trade route to her other great colonies in the East. Indeed, by 1875, the British Government had acquired a 40% joint ownership of the Canal, the other being the French, another regional colonial power. Further reasons for British involvement was the large and growing Egyptian Government debt owed to British interests and, to a lesser extent, the Sudanese slave trade to which the Egyptian authorities turned a blind-eye.

As a nation Egypt was in limbo. Although legitimately a province of the Turkish Empire it neither governed nor cared for Egyptian affairs, because of its own internal decline. Consequently, Egypt had been looted and misgoverned for decades by the Khedives, the Egyptian rulers, hence the huge debts. Since 1875, in order to protect their debt and its payments, the British and French governments had jointly managed Egypt's finances and internal affairs through a 'Dual Control' administration.

From 1881 however, Egyptian resentment grew against the European domination. This was particularly strong within the officer corps of the Egyptian army, which after a long simmering period eventually erupted into open revolt against the foreigners, commanded by the popular and nationalistic Colonel Ahmed Arabi. This led to violent civil disorder in the major towns with Europeans being attacked, their homes burnt, and in one incident in Alexandria the deaths of fifty expatriates. In a deteriorating situation and lack of governmental control Colonel Arabi seized power as virtual dictator of Egypt.

The British Government sensing further escalation of the rebellion ordered 61 ships to the area from Malta, Cyprus, Gibraltar, India and England. The French, already busy with their own colonial problems in Algeria and Tunisia, refused to participate in the campaign to re-establish order; therefore the British did it on their own.

The sight of the British fleet offshore precipitated a threatening reply by Arabi's army who began installing two hundred artillery batteries along the Alexandrian shoreline. After rejecting a British ultimatum on the 11th July to remove those guns, war began with a ten-hour bombardment from the nineteen British warships of its Mediterranean fleet, destroying all the batteries. This led Arabi to set up a new camp further west at Tel-el-Kebir,

between Cairo and the Canal, to make a final defence against the British invasion.

In overall command of the invasion was Lieutenant-General Sir Garnet Wolseley who commanded 40,000 regular troops. The first objective was to secure the Suez Canal, which was duly achieved without a shot being fired. The rest of the offensive to regain British control would take a little over two months.

With the Canal secure, the land phase of the war commenced on 28th August 1882. The main British forces pushed on from Ismailia, half way down the Canal, east of Tel-el-Kebir to engage with Arabi. Another force of 2,000 men, landing at Alexandria, westwards of Tel-el-Kebir, acted as a diversionary tactic and decoy to confuse Arabi. This force was met at Mahuta and twice at Kassassin with weak resistance to stop their advance. Notable from the first Kassassin engagement was a brilliant charge of the Household Cavalry and with sabres flashing quickly had the Egyptian forces scattered. The second Kassassin attack took place on the 9th September, this time the 13th Bengal Lancers distinguishing themselves. Unable to stop the British advance the remainder of Arabi's forces withdrew to join their comrades at the heavily defended camp of Tel-el-Kebir, totalling 20,000 Regulars, 6,000 Irregulars and 75 cannons of different calibre.

The decisive battle of the war commenced on the night of 12/13th September with the main British force of 17,500 men and sixty guns crossing the desert towards Tel-el-Kebir. British intelligence had learned that Egyptians did not fully maintain their defences after dark, hence the night march. The whole five-mile crossing was undertaken without a sound above a whisper since surprise was imperative as Arabi believed that this force was still near Kassassin.

The attack went in at dawn led by the Highland Brigade on the left, the Guards Brigade in the centre and the Royal Irish Guards on the right. They quickly entered the outer trenches and with fixed bayonets carried out hand to hand fighting and soon had overwhelmed the Egyptian defences. British losses were 339 men, with 243 alone from the Highland Brigade, whilst Egyptian dead amounted to many hundreds. Arabi and the remains of the Egyptian army fled to Cairo, where Arabi was caught by the British Cavalry the next day. Arabi was tried and sentenced to death, but commuted to exile in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). With Arabi caught all other Egyptian resistance crumbled.

With Colonel Arabi removed Egypt became a British protectorate for the next seventy-two years, with its own later conflicts. However, a more immediate difficulty presented itself. Having acquired Egypt, Britain also gained Sudan, Egypt's own problematic dependent territory. With one crisis resolved an even greater one was about to begin.

EMBARRASSING SWASTIKA TREES

In 1937, a local businessman, an ardent follower of Adolf Hitler, planted a 60 by 60 metre area of Larch trees in a forest near the town of *Zernikow*, about 110 km north of Berlin. The trees were planted in the shape and format of a Swastika and could only be seen from the air. During Autumn, when the Larch trees changed their colour to orange and yellow they stood out strikingly against a green forest of surrounding pine trees.

Discovered many years after the war, this long-forgotten symbol of the Nazi era was finally removed by cutting down 27 of the 57 trees that made up the Swastika design. This was done in 2001 by the Brandenburg State Forest authorities. Local farmer, Joachim Schultz remarked "*It was quite embarrassing, we were afraid that it would become a pilgrimage site*"

Displaying the Swastika symbol is forbidden in Germany today, as is owning a copy of Hitler's book 'Mein Kampf' a copy of which was presented to all newly married couples.



An 18 pdr gun, its crew stripped to the waist in the sunshine, putting over curtain fire from Carnoy Valley, 30 July

MORE ACTION! at The Tank Museum Every Thursday in July, Every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday in August, and every Thursday in September (except the 28th)

Tanks In Action is a major 45 minute display of armoured fighting vehicles held in the Museum arena, complete with pyrotechnics, and mock battle in which the public is able to take part.

Museum spokesman Nik Wyness said; "Without question, our Tanks In Action displays are a massive draw for our visitors - most of whom are on holiday in the area. But we want to see more local people sharing the excitement of our trademark display, so this August we are holding Tanks In Action on Sundays as well as on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Tanks In Action displays commence at noon, and is included in the admission ticket price, which even gives the opportunity to return free* (terms and conditions apply). as often as you like for a year!

The sleepy quiet of Sundays will be broken by the sounds of tank warfare this August.

For the first time this year, The Tank Museum is hosting its explosive Tanks In Action display on a day traditionally associated with rural tranquillity in Bovington.

Nik said; "Tanks are a common sight on our TV screens but very few people come face to face with the real thing in their lifetimes – and this is what makes our displays of such interest to our visitors.

"Tanks are big, noisy and dirty machines and unlike other forms of military transport, such planes and boats, there is no civilian equivalent of the tank. This creates a natural curiosity and fascination.

"Between displays, the public are able to experience for themselves the thrill of riding in a tracked vehicle as it thunders around The Museum arena in a specially converted vehicle able to hold 16 at a time.

"I hope we will see more local people at The Tank Museum this summer. Not only will they thoroughly enjoy our displays, but when they purchase their admission ticket they will be able to visit The Museum at no extra cost as many times as they like for a full year.*

A FAMOUS CHURCHILL SPEECH

In a memorable speech, Churchill asked America "Give us the tools and we will finish the job." But America wouldn't 'give' anything without payment. After two years of war, Roosevelt had drained Britain dry, stripping her of all her assets in the USA, including real estate and property. The British owned Viscose Company, worth £125 million was liquidated, Britain receiving only £87 million. Britain's £1,924 million investments in Canada were sold off to pay for raw materials bought in the United States. To make sure that Roosevelt got his money, he dispatched the American cruiser Louisville to the South African naval base of Simonstown to pick up £42 million worth of British gold, Britain's last negotiable asset, to help pay for American guns and ammunition.

Not content with stripping Britain of her gold and assets, in return for 50 old World War I destroyers, (desperately needed by Britain as escort vessels) he demanded that Britain transfer all her scientific and technological secrets to the USA. Also, he demanded 99

year leases on the islands of *Newfoundland, Jamaica, Trinidad and Bermuda* for the setting up of American military and naval bases in case Britain should fall.

Of the 50 lend-lease destroyers supplied to Britain, seven were lost during the war. The first was taken over by a British crew on September 9, 1940. After 1943, when no longer useful, eight were sent to Russia, while the others were manned by French, Polish and Norwegian crews. These destroyers were renamed when they arrived in Britain. All were given the name of a town or city, hence the term 'Town Class' destroyer.

During the course of the war, Britain had received 12 Billion, 775 Million dollars worth of goods under the Lend-Lease program.

Is there some similarity with the US today as to who is in charge?

Website

There is now an opportunity for Members to buy and sell through the site.

Also it will be changed as regularly as possible. However if you have any suggestions that you think will improve it please let David and Roger know in whatever format is easiest.

Annual Exhibition

A date to now put in your diary.

The Annual Exhibition has been arranged for the week-end of the 14 and 15 October 2006.

Further details will be announced nearer the time.

Notices

Teas and coffees are on sale at the Meeting each month at a cost of 25p a cup.

Please send any articles/notices as soon as possible and in any case before the 7th of each month, for inclusion in the following month's newsletter.

Secretary: Roger Negus 01778 349270
Treasurer: Ted Gray 01733 769434
Newsletter Derek Lea 01733 572245 email: dereklea@ntlworld.com
Address: 10 Thornton Close, Peterborough, PE4 7UH