



SOKE MILITARY SOCIETY

Issue No. 60

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Website www.sokemilitarysociety.co.uk

Monthly Meeting

The next meeting is on Wednesday, 13 December 2006 when Victor Sylvester will tell us about his experiences as a World War II evacuee.

This is a change to the details previously given on account of the unavailability of Richard Ward.

No Picnic: The Battle for the Falklands

Captives

By Maj-Gen Julian Thompson

2 April 2007 at 2.30 pm

"A valuable, soldierly account of the war as seen by one of its key commanders." - Max Hastings, The Spectator

Outnumbered in the air and on the ground, the British soldiers sent to retake the Falklands were up against an unforgiving climate, a vigorous Argentine defence and all the odds of winning an amphibious campaign 8,000 miles from home. Commander of 3rd Commando Brigade, Julian Thompson speaks at the Museum to mark the 25th anniversary of the Argentine invasion and the subsequent fight for the Falklands.

Lost, and found - by your enemy. As prisoners of war, British soldiers have struggled to stay alive and well, to beat boredom and depression, and for some, to escape. A new interactive exhibition asks you to assess yourself - would you have been a help or hindrance to your comrades behind the wire?

An exhibition at the National Army Museum — opens 21 December 2006.

For details on these two items contact the Museum on 020 7730 0717 x2240.

Newsletter Editor

You will see from the top of the page that I have now reached Issue No. 60.

I have decided after five years of enjoyably producing the Newsletter each month to stand down and enjoy some retirement.

The Society therefore is looking for someone to take on this role. Not necessarily producing it in my style and format but using their own approach and information for inclusion.

If you would like to take on the role please give Roger a ring on 01778 349270 or myself for further details on 572245.

Belgium Clearing Shells

A Belgian team is clearing WWI ordnance near Chievres.

While much of the World War I ordnance unearthed near Chievres, Belgium, is being shipped to secondary sites for disposal, shells that are leaking are destroyed on site. Belgian air force Cmdr. Jan Savelkoels is overseeing the removal of a large cache of World War I ordnance from a field near Chievres, Belgium.

Since April 2006, a Belgian explosive ordnance unit has been working to clear World War I ordnance, some of which contains the elements of mustard gas, buried in a field near Chievres. The site is believed to be one of the largest of its kind unearthed in Belgium.

One of the Belgian explosive ordnance troops working the site is army 1st Sgt. Dirk Gunst.

In March 1918, a British intelligence unit set out to blow up a huge German ammunition dump in western Belgium. By all accounts, it was an audacious mission, one that involved a Catholic priest who headed up a local spy network and the clandestine use of a German plane for the daylight insertion of a demolition expert.

"We would prefer to lose 10,000 men than to lose this munitions site," Belgian air force Commandant Jan Savelkoels said, quoting a World War I German army general who was assigned to the region.

The mission succeeded, insofar as it effectively denied German forces use of that stockpile. But the saboteurs failed to destroy all the munitions, something a Belgian explosive-ordnance disposal team is now addressing nearly nine decades later.

Savelkoels, the team commander, estimates that the site contains at least 300 tons of munitions, and that roughly 6 percent of it is toxic. The list of undesirable agents ranges from phosgene and diphosgene to chloramine, all of which were used by both sides in "the Great War."

As far as Savelkoels knows, the site, near the U.S. air base at Chievres, is the biggest one of its kind from WWI. It alone will account for a normal year's worth of recovered munitions. In the interest of security, Belgian and U.S. officials asked that the exact location of the site not be disclosed.

"There are bombs I have never seen before," said Savelkoels, a career EOD officer.

That says a lot, given that the Ypres region is still peppered with all sorts of ordnance, much of it dating to that era. Savelkoels said Belgian explosive-ordnance units annually get at least 3,000 requests.

"To see rounds that you studied about in (EOD) school is awesome," said U.S. Army Master Sgt. Thomas Frankhouser, who recently visited the site and would be among those contacted in case of an emergency there. "We didn't know it was here."

For years, neither did members of the Belgian military, which lost or misplaced many of the documents pertaining to the ammunition site, Savelkoels said. Local residents brought the issue to the attention of Belgian authorities, but even then the details were sketchy.

The site was initially thought to cover about 130 square meters, Savelkoels said. But when his 12-man team began working the site in late April 2006, they found it was more than four times that size. What was estimated to be a month long effort has turned into a six-month project.

"With every (passing) year, it is more and more dangerous," Belgian army 1st Sgt. Dirk Gunst said.

After WWI, Belgian authorities began to work the site but lacked the expertise to handle it, so they buried it. A second effort commenced in the 1950s but it, too, was aborted.

The artillery rounds range in size from 7.7 cm to 25 cm, and the heaviest piece recovered so far checks in at 93 kilograms. Once the materiel is unearthed, it is either destroyed near the site, especially if it is deemed unstable due to leakage, or moved. Every day, Savelkoels' team checks the direction of the wind and other factors in the event an accident occurs and toxins get released into the air. So far, there have been no serious problems, though Savelkoels worries about complacency.

This is an extraordinary opportunity to get an extended view of a large cache of munitions nearly a century old.

POW Graves Saved

The graves of 206 Indian Prisoners of War who died in Germany during the First World War have been saved thanks to the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Zehrendorf Indian Cemetery in Germany has been completely rebuilt by the Commission over a three year period. The cemetery was rededicated in a special ceremony attended by His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, President of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, on 29 October 2005.

Following the Second World War, the Commission was unable to maintain the cemetery, which was located in the Soviet controlled zone of East Germany. Already badly damaged during the fighting, the cemetery fell into a state of disrepair and those buried there were commemorated on the Neuve-Chapelle Memorial in France.

Sir Peter Squire, the Commission's Vice-Chairman, said, "During the past three years, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has worked tirelessly to restore this cemetery to its former glory – a task that would have been impossible without the generous support of the local authorities and community. It is extremely gratifying that today, the fruits of that labour mean that Zehrendorf has once more become a fitting tribute to the men whose sacrifice is honoured here."

Honouring the Fallen With Light

On Christmas Eve, a Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands is the scene of an unusual act of gratitude by Dutch schoolchildren.

Every Christmas Eve, children from the Dutch town of Deventer light candles and place them on each of the 1,394 graves in Holten Canadian War Cemetery. The ceremony was conceived in 1991 as a way of expressing gratitude to the men and women of the Allied forces who liberated the Netherlands in 1945.

A spokesperson for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission which maintains the cemetery said,

"At a time when most people are focused on the festivities of the season, these youngsters give freely of their time to reflect and remember the sacrifices made by a previous generation. They are deserving of our highest praise"

Medal Cards to be Scanned

Details emerge at last of scanning service to make vital WWI records more accessible

Ever since the future of the World War I Medal Index Cards was thrown into doubt in early 2005, various people and organisations have been campaigning for them to be saved and made accessible. The Western Front Association took the cards on last spring, and there's been little news since, but it has been announced that facilities are in place for scanning individual cards.

The six million cards are the only complete record from WWI left. Around 40,000 women's cards were taken on by the Imperial War Museum, but the remainder — filling 143 tall filing cabinets — were threatened with destruction until the WFA agreed to look after them. Scans of their fronts are available through The National Archives, but a small percentage has crucial address information on the back.

On Remembrance Day, the WFA's chairman Bruce Simpson announced a service enabling members of the public to apply for scans of both sides. Meanwhile, on the same day at a secret location in the West Country, an army padre conducted a service inside the storage facility and laid a wreath on top of the cabinets.

We have secured funding and acquired equipment to enable full colour scans to be made," said WFA spokesman Clive Harris. "Lt Col Graham Parker has been appointed project manager, and he already has a team of 45 eager volunteers."

He was also hopeful that the whole collection could be scanned. "We're in negotiation with a scanning company, but it's now very feasible that every card will be scanned in the next few years," Mr Harris said. He added that: "If a large institution with the right resources were interested, we'd certainly look at the situation." Time for a big player such as Ancestry.co.uk to step in?

In answer to criticisms that the WFA has been silent for ages about the cards, Mr Harris explained: "It's only part of our business — this year we've had the 90th anniversary of the Somme taking up a lot of our time, as well as various administrative changes. We're a charity run by volunteers, who give their time free." He added that a lot of time has been spent improving storage, and the cards are now in secure, fireproof conditions, guaranteed for at least 10 years thanks to an unnamed "generous benefactor".

Military historian Paul Reed commented: "I am disappointed that the WFA has taken so long, but it is pleasing to hear that the next stage is being headed by Graham Parker, a much respected member of the Association, who I'm sure will move

things forward. Preservation has been achieved — now we all need access.”

The fronts of the cards are already available, but the WFA promises to supply scans of the backs, some of which carry unique address information.

How to get hold of Medal Index Card scans.

The fronts of the cards have long been available via the Documents Online service at The National Archives www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline - images can be viewed for £3.50.

The Western Front Association's new service will provide colour copies of both front and backs of a specific card — even if the back is blank — for a £5 donation to the WFA [a registered charity]. In most cases only officers' details, if any, are on the back of the card. Scans will be sent by email or by post. At the moment applications should be made by post to: WFA, PO Box 1918, Stockport, SK4 4WN. A web-based application form at www.westernfront.co.uk is currently under development.

The cards fill more than 140 filing cabinets — once kept in an MOD corridor at Hayes. They have now been arranged in proper order.

F-117 Stealth Fighter

Less than two decades after the world first got a look at the F-117 stealth fighter, the first aircraft built specifically to elude radar is scheduled for retirement by the American Air Force.

The reasons for shelving the plane that played a key role in the first Iraqi war are to make room for such aircraft as the F-22 Raptor, which has been under fire for being too expensive. But the American Air Force has reasoned that the F-22 can do what the F-117 does, and more.

The decision is puzzling to some, as not all the American Air Force's older aircraft are headed for the scrap heap. Other fighter planes that were

conceived prior to the F-117 are still flying and are expected to endure well into the 2020s.

There are also such durable aircraft as the B52 bomber, which made its debut in the early 1950s and is expected to keep flying for several more decades.

One reason maybe is that no follow up versions of F-117 have ever been commissioned. While the B52 is working on its sixth decade in service, it remains in the fleet because several versions have been commissioned over the years. So far there have been 744 B52s built.

Only 59 F-117s were produced, with many saying that was because it is a high maintenance aircraft.

Throughout Desert Storm it was claimed that the plane hit 80% of its targets. Specialists consider the figure was nearer 40% — 50%. It was also billed as a plane that did not radar jamming aircraft accompanying it, but several were used alongside the F-117 in Iraq.

Unlike its more expensive sister aircraft the B-2 stealth bomber, the F-117's costs were kept down. The cost for research and development, plus the entire lot of 59 planes was \$7 billion. That is about the cost of three B-2 bombers.

The F-117 was used from parts from other existing planes. One knock against the facet-shaped plane, which resembles a cut diamond, was that it was unstable due to the radar evading design.

The F-117 is considered by specialists as being far inferior to the B-2 and F-22 in terms of stealth capabilities.

In its day it was impressive but not by today's standards.

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.

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