



# SOKE MILITARY SOCIETY

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Website [www.sokemilitarysociety.co.uk](http://www.sokemilitarysociety.co.uk)

**HAPPY NEW YEAR TO EVERYONE**

## Monthly Meeting

The next meeting is on Wednesday, 10 January 2007 when Tony Stubbs will tell us about more Divisional, Regimental and Private Memorials.

## Programme of Speakers 2007

<u>Date</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Subject</u>
14 February	Stuart Orme	Towton 1461 – Britain's Bloodiest Battle. illustrated and with object handling.
14 March	John Chester	Unknown Soldier's)
11 April	Martin Middlebrook	Military Quiz Night
9 May	Alan Berrisford	Philatelic display relating to WW2 Russian and Polish items.
13 June	Air Commodore Michael Burton OBE FRIN	Experiences of life in the RAF 1949—1987.
11 July	David Gray	Peterborough and the Two World Wars.
8 August	To be advised	
12 September	Roger Negus	The life of the First World War Poet Rupert Brooke.
10 October	Ben Robinson	Peterborough's Military Remains from Prehistory to the Cold War – An Archaeologist's Perspective.
14 November	Alistair Goodrum	The RAF at Sutton Bridge in peace and war.
12 December	To be advised	

## Suez War

If you have an interest in the Suez War and have access to a computer a 25 minute film can be seen provided by the National Records Office at [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/films/1951to1964/filmpage\\_suez.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/films/1951to1964/filmpage_suez.htm).

Copy and paste the link into the address bar of your web browser.

Dating from 1960, this film concerns the controversial Suez Canal Crisis in 1956. Explaining the background to the abortive British and French intervention of the canal, the film tries to dispel myths and exorcise humiliating ghosts from four years earlier.

The loaded terminology throughout this film defending Britain's actions clearly suggests this was propaganda, especially since it does not offer an Egyptian 'perspective'.

Britain's status, limitations and dependency on American military assistance were all exposed over the Suez Canal in 1956. Indeed, the reckless actions in 1956 by Conservative Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden, severely weakened and jeopardised the coveted US/UK 'special relationship' with the deployment of British troops in Egypt.

When the Soviet Union threatened to intervene on behalf of Egypt, the United States feared a larger war and forced the British and French to withdraw. The Crisis resulted in the resignation of Eden a year later, but also marked the shift in the global power from the traditional European powers to the two superpowers; the United States and the Soviet Union.

## Ancestral Tourism reaches India

The 150th anniversary of the Mutiny sees increasing visits from family historians.

The growing trend of ancestral tourism is now spreading to India. Next year is the 150 anniversary of the Indian Mutiny, increasingly known as India's 'First War of Independence', when sepoys rebelled against the British East India Company.

Numerous companies in both Britain and India have been organising mutiny tours of the battle sites and cemeteries, and the Indian government is keen to foster this new strand of tourism. The north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh is sprucing up selected cemeteries to attract tourists.

'There are estimated to be two million Europeans buried in the Indian subcontinent, and there is

definitely an increased interest in Mutiny tours to India. Some descendants of people who fought in the Mutiny will be present during one of the trips in September 2007.

## Remembering Black War Dead

A new educational resource aimed at promoting awareness of the role played by black troops in the First World War; Let us die like brothers is now available from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Produced for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Let us die like brothers tells the story of the SS Mendi which sank in the English Channel on 21 February 1917 while carrying 800 members of the South African Native Labour Corps to France. 600 of the men on board perished. Aimed at upper primary and secondary schools, the resource investigates the aspirations and treatment of black troops and the legacy of their sacrifice.

Her Excellency Lindiwe Mabuza, South African High Commissioner to the UK, said, "There is a significant lack of information available to young people, both in the United Kingdom and South Africa, which deals with the involvement and sacrifices made by black people during the two world wars. Let us die like brothers aims to redress some of this imbalance."

Vice-Chairman of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Sir Peter Squire said, "Let us die like brothers is an exceptionally moving and resonant presentation and I hope that it will engage young people in the importance of remembrance as well as raising awareness of the huge sacrifices made by black service personnel."



**One of the New Zealand Maoris at the Menin Gate 11 November 2006**

## Ninety Years of the Tank

**They made a boggy debut in the Somme but rose to play a vital part in the World War II. September 2006 saw the 90th anniversary of the first use of the tank - but are they a still a weapon of choice?**

Tanks. The very word conjures up an image of armoured monsters emerging from the smoke of war or morning mist, trundling their way across the battlefield, turrets searching for targets. Or perhaps long columns of panzers clattering along tree-lined French roads in that long, hot, disastrous summer of 1940.

Leonardo da Vinci first conceived of some kind of armoured battlefield chariot and HG Wells wrote of steam-driven "land ironclads" in 1904.

But tanks have been with us for less than a century - their 90th anniversary is on 15 September 2006, when they were first deployed against German troops during the latter stages of the battle of the Somme.

They looked very different then, and had an altogether different purpose.

Several people had a hand in their development, particularly once the fighting was constricted by trenches and barbed wire. An agricultural manufacturer came up with the idea of an armoured trench-crossing tractor, moving on caterpillar tracks, but the Army rejected it.

An engineer officer with vision, Lt-Col Ernest Swinton, took a similar American design to First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, known for his fondness of wacky military gadgets.

Headed by Churchill, a Landships Committee of soldiers, manufacturers and politicians was formed in 1915 to design a "mobile machine-gun destroyer".

Needing a code name to conceal their real use from the Germans they were labelled "mobile water tanks for Mesopotamia" (the campaign in what is now Iraq) and the name stuck. They did indeed resemble a water tank - large and box-like, made from boiler-plate and peppered with rivets.

Early tanks came in two varieties - Male, with a naval cannon mounted on each side and no turret, and Female, with machine guns. The crew of eight had to communicate by hand signals, so loud was the 105hp Daimler engine inside.

General Douglas Haig soon found out about the proposed weapon. Once their role had been modified to trench-crossing, barbed-wire crushing and machine-gun destroying, he ordered 150 for delivery as soon as possible.

With losses on the Somme mounting, Haig and his Generals were in a quandary - should they use the new weapon as soon as possible, or wait and attack with all 150 Tank crews trained in great secrecy (labelled as part of the Machine Gun Corps), but no one else was in on the secret. In the end, 50 were shipped over, labelled "With Care - Petrograd" as a further ruse.

In the event, the launch was bizarre: the tanks were spread along the front line and attacked in "penny packets" - deployed in small groups. Of the 49 delivered, 31 broke down before or just after the attack started; of the 18 that rolled into action that morning at a stately three mph, six bogged in the cratered ground, eight were hit by shellfire and two caught fire.

But the remaining two broke through; one captured a strongpoint and the other waddled through a nearby village, behind German lines. A British biplane reported back "a tank is walking up the high street of Flers with the British army cheering behind it".

It was not the wonder weapon the newspapers first claimed, but it showed promise and the public was curious to see one. The War Office refused to release a picture, but the Daily Mirror published the first photograph a month after the attack, on 22 November 1916, for which they paid the unprecedented sum of £1,000 (over £35,000 today).

With the secret out, tanks became a common sight and the French also produced them. On 20 November 1917, the British changed tactics and launched 476 of them on a narrow front against the Germans at Cambrai.

The Germans later counter-attacked, but the initial breakthrough proved that a concentrated tank force could punch its way through almost anything. In April 1918 the first tank-v-tank encounter took place, the Germans coming off the worse.

In 1939-41 the Germans conquered much of Europe using massed tank formations. The Western Desert campaign revolved around tank clashes, and D-Day in 1944 launched the Allies back into Europe with many specialist tanks.

Peter Caddick-Adams

## Hook of Rorke's Drift

Barry C Johnson

Henry Hook was a working man, born in rural Gloucestershire without the slightest advantage in life. He became famous after winning the VC at Rorke's Drift; but he also won an entry in Who's Who and was featured in two cigarette card series. At his death in 1905, he was given a funeral fit for a Field-Marshal; and forty years later, his granddaughter became Birmingham's first woman MP.

Hook was exceptional in serving in all three branches of the land forces of his day; the Regular Army, the Militia in Monmouth and the Volunteers in London. In civilian life, he was a woodman, a groom, a book duster and umbrella caretaker at the British Museum – the only VC winner in the Museum's history.

His early years have always been mysterious. Was he married before he enlisted? Did his wife (legal or common law) think that he had been killed by the Zulus and sell his property? And if so, who was this 'mystery' wife and did she bear Hook's children? These problems are finally settled in this biography, in which Hook's life can be seen in detail and 'in the round' – his ancestry, his family and friends, his civilian jobs, as well as his very varied military career. It can be seen at last how and why he became the most famous Private soldier in the annuals of the British Army.

## The Battle of Quebec 1775

While General Washington with the Continental Army was blockading Boston, Montgomery led an attack up the Lake Champlain route into Canada while Arnold took his force across country through Maine. The purpose of the invasion of Canada was in part to bring the Canadian population into the war on the American side.

Fort St John and Montreal were captured by the Americans. In late October 1775 Arnold arrived on Point Levis across the St Lawrence from Quebec, having lost a substantial part of his force on the punishing journey from New England. Maclean, hearing of Arnold's arrival, force marched his recruits from Sorel to Quebec, being joined later by Carleton.

On 13th November 1775 Arnold took his force across the St Lawrence, climbed onto the Plains of Abraham and summoned the garrison to surrender or come out and fight. The garrison did neither. Arnold launched a night attack that was beaten back.

On 31st December 1775, with the addition of Montgomery's troops, Arnold launched night attacks at either end of the city in a snowstorm. The garrison alerted by premature feint attacks on other parts of the city perimeter. Montgomery's assault was repelled with heavy grapeshot and Montgomery was killed. Arnold's attack penetrated the city wall but he was wounded. Maclean arrived from dealing with Montgomery's assault and led the counter attack. The American troops who had penetrated the walls were captured and the assault was driven off.

## Newsletter Editor

I said last month that I am standing down as Editor of your Newsletter. Although occasionally a struggle to find items I have enjoyed producing a copy each month this is my last copy.

The Society is still 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.

I shall still be visiting your meetings from time to time. Thank you for your support over the years.

## 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 7<sup>th</sup> of each month, for inclusion in the following month's newsletter.

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