



# SOKE MILITARY SOCIETY

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## Monthly Meeting

The next meeting is on Wednesday, 13 September 2006 when Gilbert Smith will tell us about the 'German Third Reich and Related Ephemera'.

## **My Grandfather's War**

**By Andrew Bell formerly of BBC Radio 4's Today programme**

At my parents' house there's a thick brown army ledger. It's the diary of my mother's father, covering seven months of his time on the Western Front in 1917. It was published in the early 1980s under the title *Some Desperate Glory*, and this year as part of the anniversary of the end of the Great War, I set out to visit some of the places mentioned in the climactic passages of the book.

The last days of the diary are filled with depictions of almost unimaginable horror. Wounded men drown as the shell-holes into which they have crawled fill with water. A soldier stops dead in the middle of an assault and announces quietly "I'm blind, sir," then turns to reveal his eyes stripped away by shrapnel.

The diary ends abruptly at the end of August 1917, when my grandfather takes a roll call and discovers that of the 90 men who had been under his command, 75 are dead, wounded or missing.

### **Ypres Salient**

I spent two days wandering the fields of the Ypres Salient in the company of a historian who had the kind of knowledge that can only come from years of obsession. Thanks to him and a trench map of the time, it was in fact surprisingly easy to locate many of the places recorded by my grandfather in

those awful days of August.

"Buffs Road", up which he marches to the offensive, today follows exactly the route, to every kink and turn, that it does on the trench map. It threads between perhaps half a dozen relatively small war cemeteries - 5,000 men lie in one - and on some of the headstones are names from my grand-father's regiment, the Royal Warwickshires.

### **German Block-houses**

One of the worst passages in the diary is the assault on a big German block-house which the British had named Springfield. It's after this attack that my grand-father's company is reduced to 15 men. There was nothing left at the site indicated by the trench-map, but the 80-year-old farmer living nearby solved the puzzle. He remembered playing in the block-house which had measured about 10 metres by 10, but it had been dynamited in the 1930's.

He showed us the spot where it had stood on a slight rise looking over boggy meadows. It was easy to pick out exactly the line that the attack had taken that day in 1917, when those meadows would have been an unbroken stretch of mud and shattered trees.

Nearby the trench map marked another German blockhouse, but this one is still there. It's known as Cheddar Villa, and has survived because it was too close to a re-built farm to be dynamited safely. Today the farmer uses it as a cattle-shed. It is a

huge construction of iron and concrete with walls ten feet thick. After the carnage at Springfield, my grandfather records going into this block-house which had become the Brigade HQ after the British had captured it.

As the rain pattered into the mud outside, I stood in the entrance and could picture him coming in exhausted and shocked, reporting to his commanding officer in one of the inner rooms now full of hay bales, and then sitting down to be plied with whisky by his comrades. He then left Cheddar Villa and headed back down Buffs Road out of the line to temporary relief.

On the last page of the diary he sits "drinking whisky after whisky and gazing into a black and empty future." He was not yet 20.

## HOUSTON RIOT OF 1917

In the spring of 1917, shortly after the United States declared war on Germany, the War Department, taking advantage of the temperate climate and newly opened Houston Ship Channel, ordered two military installations built in Harris County—Camp Logan and Ellington Field.

The Illinois National Guard was to train at Camp Logan, located on the northwest outskirts of the city. To guard the construction site, on July 27, 1917, the army ordered the Third Battalion of the black Twenty-fourth United States Infantry to travel by train with seven white officers from the regimental encampment at Columbus, New Mexico, to Houston.

From the outset, the black contingent faced racial discrimination when they received passes to go into the city. A majority of the men had been raised in the South and were familiar with segregation, but as army servicemen they expected equal treatment. Those individuals responsible for keeping order, especially the police, streetcar conductors, and public officials, viewed the presence of black soldiers as a threat to racial harmony. Many Houstonians thought that if the black soldiers were shown the same respect as white soldiers, black residents of the city might come to expect similar treatment.

Black soldiers were willing to abide by the legal restrictions imposed by segregated practices, but they resented the manner in which the laws were enforced. They disliked having to stand in the rear of streetcars when vacant seats were available in the "white" section and resented the racial slurs

hurled at them by white labourers at Camp Logan.

Some police officers regularly harassed African Americans, both soldiers and civilians. Most black Houstonians concealed their hostility and endured the abuse, but a number of black soldiers openly expressed their resentment. The police recognized the plight of the enlisted men, but did little to alert civil authorities to the growing tensions. When they sought ways to keep the enlisted men at the camp, the blacks disliked this exchange of their freedom for racial peace.

On the 23 August 1917, a riot erupted in Houston.

Near noon, two policemen arrested a black soldier for interfering with their arrest of a black woman in the Fourth Ward. Early in the afternoon, when Cpl. Charles Baltimore, one of the twelve black military policemen with the battalion, inquired about the soldier's arrest, words were exchanged and the policeman hit Baltimore over the head. The MPs fled.

The police fired at Baltimore three times, chased him into an unoccupied house, and took him to police headquarters. Though he was soon released, a rumour quickly reached Camp Logan that he had been shot and killed.

A group of soldiers decided to march on the police station in the Fourth Ward and secure his release. If the police could assault a model soldier like Baltimore, they reasoned, none of them was safe from abuse. Maj. Kneeland S. Snow, Battalion Commander, initially discounted the news of impending trouble.

Around 8 P.M. Sgt. Vida Henry of I Company confirmed the rumours, and Kneeland ordered the first sergeants to collect all rifles and search the camp for loose ammunition. During this process, a soldier suddenly screamed that a white mob was approaching the camp. Black soldiers rushed into the supply tents, grabbed rifles, and began firing wildly in the direction of supposed mob. The white officers found it impossible to restore order.

Sergeant Henry led over 100 armed soldiers toward downtown Houston by way of Brunner Avenue and San Felipe Street and into the Fourth Ward. In their two-hour march on the city, the mutinous blacks killed fifteen whites, including four policemen, and seriously wounded twelve others, one of whom, a policeman, subsequently died. Four black soldiers also died. Two were accidentally shot by their own men, one in camp and the other on San Felipe Street.

After they had killed Capt. Joseph Mattes of the Illinois National Guard, obviously mistaking him for a policeman, the blacks began quarrelling over a course of action. After two hours, Henry advised the men to slip back into camp in the darkness—and shot himself in the head.

Early next morning, 24 August 1917, civil authorities imposed a curfew in Houston. On the twenty-fifth, the army hustled the Third Battalion aboard a train to Columbus, New Mexico.

There, seven black mutineers agreed to testify against the others in exchange for clemency. Between 1 November 1917, and 26 March 1918, the army held three separate courts-martial in the chapel at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio.

The military tribunals indicted 118 enlisted men of I Company for participating in the mutiny and riot, and found 110 guilty. It was wartime, and the sentences were harsh. Nineteen mutinous soldiers were hanged and sixty-three received life sentences in federal prison. One was judged incompetent to stand trial.

Two white officers faced courts-martial, but they were released. No white civilians were brought to trial. The Houston Riot of 1917 was one of the saddest chapters in the history of American race relations. It vividly illustrated the problems that the nation struggled with on the home front during wartime.

### **Australian Army War Diaries, Vietnam**

The Commander's Diaries for the Vietnam War have been digitally scanned in full colour and can now be read on-line. For example you can follow the Narrative Operational log (AWM95 77/6/5) of D Company, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, in the battle of Long Tan as recorded in Vietnam on 18 and 19 August 1966.

## **MOD ARCHIVE**

Records of Military Personnel for release to The National Archives

Report by Joe Kelly of the The National Archives

At the moment, what we have in the National Archives at Kew is broadly described as "all surviving service records to the end of the First World War". For Army personnel, what that means is the records of all whose service had ended at that time.

The MOD Archive used to store Army officers' files in a numerical sequence. When the transfer of files for the First World War era was being planned in the 1980s, the introduction of a new system of service numbers, in 1921/22, provided a convenient break in that sequence. Other ranks' records had traditionally been archived by year or period of discharge, and then in alphabetical order. As with the officers' files, a break at the year 1920 made the decision easy in the 1980s.

Government departments retain their records for as long as they need to refer to them in the conduct of normal departmental business. For the MOD, the aftercare of its former Service personnel means keeping records for their lifetime. Traditionally, MOD kept Service personnel records for around 75 years. Now, Data Protection Act guidance promotes the idea of retention to the subject's notional 100th birthday.

A decision in principle has been taken that, once MOD use has ceased, records of all who served in the interwar years and in the Second World War should be preserved by the National Archives. And the argument is strong for extending that to 1960 (thus including all National Servicemen). The Army's share of all that is a run of files filling around 20 miles of shelving. That is probably a little over one thousand tons of paper. MOD's use will cease, bitbybit, over the next few decades, so at least we will not have to deal with it all in one go!

MOD and TNA are currently exploring the scope for making future transfers under a date of birth regime, taking records as the subject passes their notional 100 th birthday. If we were able to do this next year, the first batch would be all personnel born before 1906 (and would of course include the records of all the First World War veterans who served on beyond 1920). But it will be a huge transfer and it is too early in the planning to forecast when it might actually take place.

And that planning must also consider whether we should make the paper records available, or instead create digital surrogates and provide access on disks at Kew, and remotely via our website.

### **Casualty Records**

Alongside the individual service records, the MOD still holds also the Second World War files of each of the Services' Casualty branches, whose role it was to locate missing personnel, or

if dead to establish the circumstances of death.

For the Army these comprise several series of files, such as: a particular unit and a theatre of war (e.g. "6th Norfolks in Malaya"); casualties from various regiments in a specific small operation or theatre; or from a specific incident (e.g. loss of a British troopship, Allied bombing of a POW transport ship, massacre at St Stephen's Hospital Hong Kong).

These files are currently being reviewed by MOD records staff and should be released during 2006.

#### **POW Records**

Debriefs completed by Allied personnel on release from enemy POW camps at the end of the war were transferred to Kew during 2005 our series WO 344. Earlier transfers of war crimes investigation records had already brought us some similar material.

TNA series WO 345 has record cards for Far East POW. The equivalent records for prisoners in Europe are in the pipeline, they too will reach Kew when resources permit.

And that of course is the "bottom line" TNA's resources, and those of the MOD Records Officer, are limited and already well stretched.

There is so much in the way of interesting records waiting to be "saved", but we can only do so much at a time. But, as someone's advertisement once said we're getting there! It will however be a long journey.

#### **Barefoot Soldier**

#### **VC hero Johnson Beharry speaks at the National Army Museum**

VC hero Private Johnson Beharry speaks at the National Army Museum on 11 October 2006, a week after the publication of his awaited memoirs, Barefoot Soldier.

Tickets for Johnson Beharry's Celebrity Lecture are available from the Museum Shop 0207 730 0717 extension 2240. £15.00 each.

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

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