



THE WAR GRAVES PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT



In Association
with the CWGC



News from the Front line

January 2014

Firstly, a Happy New Year to all our readers. Scorching in the Southern Hemisphere no doubt but a bit grey and damp here in Hampshire, UK. None of the seasonal snow yet!

Been a bit of a tense end of year here in the Rogers household. They say a week in politics is a long time but I also found out that a week in Shipbuilding is as well (my day job). As a few of you know, I left the Royal Navy back in 2007 after 32 years and managed to get a job in shipbuilding. So, instead of sailing with the 'Grey Funnel Line' I ended up building the ships so that future sailors had something to travel in to exotic lands as I did.

It was all going well for seven years but the Navy was reducing it's fleet and personnel (I did get a letter recently asking if I wanted to join up again!) so the writing was on the wall for a future in shipbuilding. However, in the last week of October we handed over a brand new Corvette to the Royal Navy of Oman only to be told, exactly a week to the day, that shipbuilding was to cease in Portsmouth! A long week.



Now that we move into 2014 and the start of the 100 year commemorations of the First World War let us think of those that thought the war would be over by Christmas. They joined up in droves so as not to miss the excitement of it all. How many of those, I wonder, survived to November 1918 and amid 'rumour control' in those final days experienced their own long week waiting for the Armistice to be declared. Records indicate that over 11600 died during the week up to 11th November 1918. A long week indeed which puts losing a job into perspective!

I'm now sorted by the way and did not sign up again!

Steve Rogers

Baby June – Harry Campbell

When reading the epitaphs on graves during photographic trips I am sure many will wonder what has happened to the 'Loving wife' or the children that refer to 'Daddy'. Some of these can be quite heart wrenching at times so it was good to find recently that one such 'Baby' mentioned on the headstone of Private Victor Harnwell came to light.

During a brief respite in the war in Italy in June 1944, Private Victor Harnwell wrote home seeking news of his first baby who he knew would be born early that month. He asked that if it was a girl could she be called 'June'.



'Baby' June

Victor had survived some terrible conflicts as the 2nd Battalion of the Kings Liverpool Regiment fought from Naples towards Florence. This included crossing the Rapido River and the battle of Monte Casino where the Battalion suffered many casualties.

Sadly he was killed near Arezzo on the 24th July 1944 and never saw his daughter who was born just six weeks before he died. By chance we came across TWGPP when researching family history and requested a photograph of the grave of Private Victor Harnwell. He was buried in the Arezzo war cemetery and we both had tears when reading the inscription "Always remembered by his loving wife Molly, baby June and Mam". Sixty nine years after he died my wife (June) found that she had always been part of the remembrance on her father's grave.



Students Uncover War Graves – Barnsley College press release

Barnsley College students have uncovered fifteen graves, including three war graves, at St Thomas' Church in Worsbrough. Over the past two months eight 'Learning for Living and Work' students have been helping The War Graves Photographic Project (TWGPP) to uncover graves which have been hidden by overgrown grass, bushes and foliage.

The uncovered war graves include an RAF Pilot, a Private who served in the Army and a family of three; a father and his two sons who were both killed in action during WWI. These graves have now been photographed and will be added to the projects website which offers the facility to search for individual casualties.

The War Graves Photographic Project works with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to record and provide photos or digital images of the graves or memorial listings of every service casualty since the outbreak of the First World War.

Geoff & Marsha Thorndike with students



Vicki Austin, Student Support Worker for the Learning for Living and Work department, said: “The students have been working really hard and there is still a lot more work to do but it is really exciting as we don’t know what else we will find.”

Learning for Living and Work student Michelle Cooper said: “I am really enjoying working on this project. It has made us all think about the war and the sacrifices that people have made for this country.”

Geoff and Marsha Thorndike from the TWGPP added: “We didn’t have the resources to uncover the war graves so the students have done a fantastic job and we wouldn’t have been able to take any photos without their help.” Work at the church is continuing where more graves are expected to be found.

A Bulgarian Adventure – Jim Foulds

The courageous WW2 exploits of the Yugoslav Partisans led by Marshall Tito and ably supported by allied liaison troops is well known and widely reported. What is not so well recognised is the extent to which similar attempts were made to extend such resistance activities into Serbia, Macedonia, Albania and Bulgaria. The intention was to support and to develop the infant resistance groups in those countries. In so doing this would help to de-stabilize occupying Axis forces and thus diminish the potential for their deployment into Russia, Italy and ultimately into Normandy.

Arising from family ownership of a rural Bulgarian holiday retreat we gradually became aware of such wartime resistance activities and subsequently, to our astonishment, we uncovered the story of a British hero still widely revered there. Major Frank Thompson.R.E. Our interest was aroused to seek more.

The control of Allied support groups aiding these resistance groups was, apparently, under the Special Operations Executive in Cairo; later in Bari, Italy. Under their direction small parties of trained Allied forces were dropped by parachute into occupied countries. Their subsequent actions were then directed from Cairo and supplies were sent in by parachute.



One such liaison group, trained at Cairo, was led by Major Thompson. A 24 year old intellectual educated at Winchester and Oxford. He was also a dedicated Communist and younger brother, E.P.Thompson a University lecturer was a Marxist, and dedicated anti-nuclear campaigner. Clearly, the Thompson brothers were unlikely to be favourites of the Establishment. At that time every volunteer for S.O.E was required to sign a declaration that he / she was not a Fascist or a Communist.(*When the names of Burgess, Maclean, Blunt, Philby, Cairncross and Vassall are recalled, this particular requirement failed to be rigidly enforced.*) Further to that, Churchill also had directed that all such intelligence groups were to be purged of Communist sympathisers. In Thompson’s case, it appeared that his beliefs aroused suspicions from authority but were ignored.

During his Cairo training, Thompson also taught himself to speak fluent Bulgarian and Russian. It was also known that the S.O.E Cairo staff included another dedicated Communist, Captain James Klugmann. It seemed, in retrospect, that from the outset Major Thompson would be operating under particularly fraught and dangerous circumstances. To our later involvement and interest, Thompson’s story became increasingly intriguing, worthy of closer scrutiny.

In Jan 1944, Thompson was parachuted into Serbia to join an established liaison team. They were attached to a Partisan group of Serbians and Bulgarians united in Communism. The area was also occupied by a large number of opposition troops of mixed German and local nationals of particular notoriety. During this period Major Thompson also met up with three British Army Sergeants who were to accompany him during the incursion into Bulgaria. Sergeant Scott was responsible for wireless, Sergeant Walker, Armaments / Explosives and Sergeant Munro, a Canadian / Croatian, as interpreter.

In May 1944, these four joined the infant Bulgarian 2nd Sofia Partisans. In addition to their military equipment all such liaison groups were provided with a quantity of gold sovereigns. They were for use in purchasing food and possibly for bribery of corrupt locals. In such areas of unbelievable poverty the actual possession of gold could itself be hazardous. In other Balkan countries, liaison officers had actually been murdered for their hoard. Thompson had 50 sovereigns and Walker had 10.

From the outset of their march Eastwards into Bulgaria, en route for Sofia, they travelled across severe and mountainous terrain. The supply drops they called for by wireless were, at best, unreliable; at worst, failed to arrive. Real hunger was a problem despite the supply of meagre rations from locals. The Partisans of their group, critical at the failure to get the promised arms and food, became fractious. Throughout their trek whilst under constant harassment from Fascist Royal Bulgarian troops, some Germans and even local Police eventually their precise location was betrayed. Surrounded in the subsequent assault, Sergeants Walker and Munro were shot and killed-as were many Partisans. The remaining Partisans and Major Thompson were all captured.



All were savagely beaten in interrogation efforts during their brief capture and were then put on public "trial" in Litakovo, N.E of Sofia, by a member of the Royal Bulgarian regime. The underlying intention was to "persuade" others thinking of supporting Partisans to think twice. The plan had the reverse effect. All of the locals present became increasingly supportive of Major Thompson's bravery and demeanour during the trial. Speaking in Bulgarian he responded to questions only with his name, rank and serial number. As a member of the British forces, wearing his uniform, he demanded treatment in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Amongst the crowd an aged peasant woman stood up and harangued the "judge" for his behaviour and publicly applauded Major Thompson. For her stand she was savagely beaten. During the trial a Gestapo officer arrived from Sofia and took Sergeant Scott back with him for interrogation. Inevitably all the defendants were sentenced to death. All were duly shot and barbarously, the Partisans were all beheaded before being buried in an unmarked grave along with Major Thompson's body.



Once the Red Army arrived in Bulgaria their recognition for local Partisans was, at best, dismissive despite Communist sympathies. The 'Iron Curtain' descended. No amount of subsequent effort by the Thompson family, over many years, could unearth the truth of Major Thompson but the local Bulgarians were determined that his name should not be forgotten. A small town, near Litakovo was renamed Tompsan (Thompson) as were the railway station and several streets in local villages

Sergeant Scott survived his Sofia interrogation at Gestapo hands and eventually returned to England. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Shamefully, for Major Thompson, there was no official recognition. The two bravery medals awarded him by the Bulgarians were officially refused. Major Thompson was written off by the Establishment. However, eventually in 1994, 50 years after their execution in Litakovo, Major Thompson and the Bulgarian Partisans were exhumed and interred properly. A Memorial park on a nearby hill summit with imposing approach steps and a granite obelisk was created. In an official Bulgarian Government ceremony and in the presence of the British Ambassador the justice and freedom for which all had fought was honoured. To identify themselves with their British hero an estimated 50000 crowd of locals thronged the hilltop. Separately, the CWGC also created a special garden of honour to Major Thompson in their Sofia Cemetery.

My son and I were determined to seek out the Litakovo Memorial park to honour the brave Major Thompson. Despite our ignorance of the Cyrillic alphabet and the vagaries of Eastern Europe satnav we successfully located Litakovo. There the local Post mistress, delighted to meet English visitors anxious to find the Memorial, effectively abandoned her official duties and joined us in the village square to direct our way up the hill. We found the location and duly honoured Major Thompson with a Remembrance Poppy Cross, and saluted his Partisan friends. Before we left the district, we also visited Tompsan, the railway station and not least found a Major Thompson Street.



Accessing The last will of fallen soldiers

The last wishes, thoughts and concerns of more than 230,000 soldiers who died on the front line during World War I are now available online from HM GOV.

Final handwritten wills were kept by troops in their pocket service books and tucked into their uniforms.

Now those original paper records that survived are preserved in 1,300 boxes inside a temperature-controlled warehouse in Birmingham.

The wills, which are owned by Her Majesty's Court and Tribunal Service (HMCTS), and were digitized into PDF documents.

The huge online archive is also as part of a larger project to make all war wills publicly available, dating from the Boer War to the Falklands

John Hurst, who helps TWGPP in Liverpool, has ordered a copy of his grandfathers will as he was intrigued to see what they looked like and its content. Probably very similar to everyone that completed one.

“In the event of my death, I give the whole of my effects to Mrs J Hurst of...”

Joseph was killed 9th April 1917.

127

INFORMAL WILL.

W.O. No. E/8546 55/1 DOMICILE, *English*

Record No. *269/472 446 7/18*

The enclosed document dated *14/10/16* and signed *J. Hurst*

Name *Joseph Hurst*

Regtl. No. *49243* and Rank *Private* appears to have been written or executed by the person named in the margin while he was "in actual military service" within the meaning of the Wills Act, 1837, and has been recognised by the War Department as constituting a valid will.

Regt. *Liverpool Regt.*

Died at *France*

Date of Death *9-4-17*

WAR OFFICE. *P. Palmer*
for the Assistant Financial Secretary.

Date *16-6-17*

H. 167205

Remembrance 'V' Environment ! – Steve Rogers



There has been much publicity over the past few months highlighting the condition of many of the cemeteries in the UK where Commonwealth casualties are buried. I know that our volunteers often mention the poor state of some of the more urban cemeteries but the articles emphasis the problem is not just confined to larger city cemeteries.

I recently gave a presentation to the group TCV – The Conservation Volunteers so it was interesting to hear their view when it comes to conserving local cemeteries near Portsmouth.

Although the illustrated abandoned car (above) which is in St. Pancras, London would be considered inappropriate in a cemetery it could be construed as an ideal home to a den of foxes. Therefore, it would not necessarily be removed from a cemetery designated as environmentally friendly. Ivy, which I have always considered to be one of life's nuisances when covering a headstone, so preventing me reading it, is considered as a means of protecting the infrastructure of the stone face. To that end it is recommended that it be left in place even if there is no way of reading the headstone!

In my personal view, I am content that some village churchyards are left to meadow grass and natural flowers in the Summer months providing they are 'managed' and not left to nature totally taking over .

Many of our re-visits are being conducted because, in the past, volunteers have found headstones totally obscured by brambles like these on the right at Lofthouse Church Burial ground in Yorkshire.



Before and After

In this centenary of WW1 let's hope that more local groups take on the clearing of totally overgrown cemeteries as mentioned on page 2 and 9 of this newsletter. I'll still keep my secateurs in my back pocket!

Post war tragedies and the effect on one family - Virginia Locke

Whilst researching my family tree I uncovered the tragic story of my second cousins' family, unknown to my immediate family. These stories and the loss of my grandfather, five great uncles and many cousins during WW1 are what fired my passion for our servicemen and the privilege I feel in finding and photographing war graves for TWGPP.

NORMAN MACQUARIE SIDDINS was born in 1893 in Leichhardt, Sydney, Australia. He was employed as a wine and spirit traveller and an accountant. He enlisted in the AIF on 11 May 1915, aged 22 and was allocated as Private 3rd Infantry Battalion 1 to 12 Reinforcements. He embarked from Sydney on 16 June 1915. Norman served in France and Egypt and earned promotions to Warrant Officer Class 1.

Norman was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal and was gazetted on 18 January 1919 in London. The Medal was awarded for "Meritorious service & devotion to duty in Flanders and France, throughout the period 25th February to 16th September 1918. He showed untiring energy & devotion to duty and his work is worthy of special recognition".



Norman returned to Australia on 17 August 1919 and was discharged from the Army on 17 October 1919. The AIF's "Medical Report of an Invalid" form was completed and signed by Norman on 18 August 1919 stating "I am not suffering from any disability due to or aggravated by War Service, and feel fit and well". Indeed, there was not one instance of injury or hospitalisation on Norman's Statement of Service.

Sometime after his return Norman moved into a boarding house, run by Margaret, (known as Min) de Clouett (nee Myers). On 6 September 1897, Min was discovered by her husband to have been in an adulterous relationship. He shot her once through the side of her head, behind her ear and another through the base of the skull. Though, seriously injured, Min miraculously survived with only the loss of one eye. Min left her husband and began running the boarding house where Norman came to live.

Norman was diagnosed with Tuberculosis in the early 1920's (war related??) and the family story goes that Norman, being a true gentleman, married Min so that she could receive his war pension on his inevitable death. Other than Norman's mother and one brother, Norman was shunned by all, least they also succumb to TB. Min however, was a devoted, caring wife to Norman who died in Randwick Hospital on 11 February 1928, his death notice reading "Dearly loved husband, brother and son".

WALTER LESLIE BEER (Syd) enlisted in the AIF on 22 March 1918 aged 19 years, his parents having given written permission for him to enlist whilst he had been working as a junior clerk. Syd embarked from Sydney on 19 June 1918 and was allotted to the 13th Battalion and later transferred as a gunner to the 102nd Howitzers. Syd still hadn't left training in England when he was hospitalised with influenza from 18-26 October 1918. He then proceeded to France.

On 7 March 1919 Syd was transferred to Hospital in Rouelles with trachoma (conjunctivitis) and eventually was transferred back to Lewisham Military Hospital in England.

Syd returned to Australia and the "Medical Report of an Invalid Form" completed in Australia on 14 November 1919 confirmed Syd for discharge noting that his double trachoma (both eyes) occurred in Belgium in February 1919 and was directly attributable to war service. Furthermore, that it was little improved with treatment.



Syd returned to work as a clerk and in 1922 married Norman Macquarie Siddins' sister, Sarah Macquarie Siddins.

Syd became increasingly concerned about his eyesight which continued to deteriorate. Doctors advised him he would eventually lose all sight. The duties of his clerical position were also becoming increasingly difficult and Syd feared he would lose his employment at the Railway Commissioners'.

On 13 June 1926 in a very depressed state, in the bedroom of his home, Syd shot Sarah through the back of the head and through her left cheek. Their 3 year old daughter, Joan, was shot through the left ear whilst laying in her cot.

Finally, Syd shot himself through the right side of his chest and then again through his right temple. His pyjamas were alight when his body was found. All three, of course, died.

Such an incredible tragedy. Syd must have been loved though as Sarah's mother wrote in his death notice "Beloved son-in-law" even though he had taken the life of her daughter and grandchild. Sarah's mother paid for the family grave in which she, her husband, shunned Norman, daughter Sarah, granddaughter Joan and Syd are all buried together.

That is forgiveness and unconditional love. She must have well understood the damaged hearts, minds and bodies of our returning servicemen.

New Memorial to Flight Lieutenant Richard Carew Reynell By Peter Butt

Peter Butt has sent in some images of a new memorial that has been erected in memory of Flight Lieutenant Richard Carew Reynell. The memorial is situated on Point Hill, near Blackheath road, overlooking the City of London.

Richard Carew Reynell originated from Reynella in Australia but came to England to attend Oxford University in 1929. He joined the University Air Squadron and was commissioned in the RAFO in March 1931. In September 1931 he joined the RAF on a short term commission and was posted to No 5 FTS Sealand before joining 43 Squadron at Tangmere, Sussex in March 1932.

In the period before the war Reynell flew from various bases and became an instructor before returning to his home of Australia.

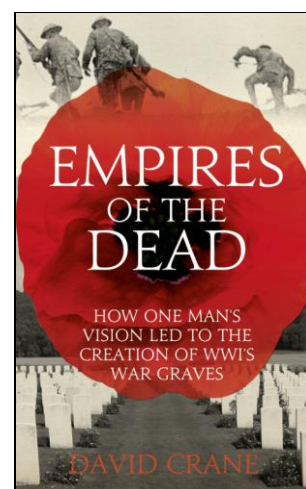


At the outbreak of WW2 he returned to the UK and became a test pilot at Hawkers but in August 1940 he was attached to No 43 Squadron at Tangmere, flying Hurricanes, with a role to determine how they operated in aerial combat. He proved their capability by shooting down one enemy aircraft and a number of 'probable's' in the two weeks he was there.

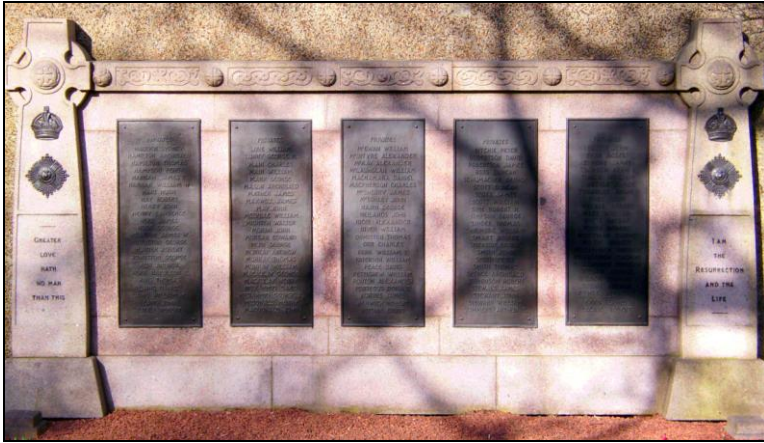
On the 7th September he was due to return to Hawkers to replace another pilot that had been killed but decided to complete the day with the Squadron he was attached to. That afternoon the Squadron of 12 Hurricanes was 'scrambled' to engage an enemy force of over 100 aircraft heading for the first raid of the London Blitz. They engaged the enemy from Beachy Head and followed them to the skies above London where he was shot down at 17:00. His aircraft was blown apart in the sky so he was not able to open his parachute and subsequently died. Richard was buried in Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey and left behind his widow Enid Marjorie and a baby son.

Empires of the Dead

I am writing this a couple of days before Christmas so probably too late for a stocking filler but for those who got a book token from Santa you might consider a new book titled 'Empires of the Dead' by David Crane. It is about Fabian Ware's vision to create the war cemeteries we all visit now around the world and the struggles he had in ensuring all were remembered equally. 'Rumour control' has it that it might be in my stocking! - Steve



William Allan – Gretna Casualty found by Andrew Grant



The 22nd May 1915 will live long in the memory of Leith and its residents. Some 225 members of the 7th Royal Scots who were on their way to Liverpool to board a troopship for the Dardanelles campaign never made it out of Scotland. They died following a collision of the troop train they were on and a stationary passenger train near Gretna and then with a further collision with an express train travelling towards Glasgow. This event is well reported on various web sites and elsewhere.

The majority of the casualties were returned to Leith and were buried in a communal grave in Rosebank Cemetery in Edinburgh and commemorated on a screen wall. A number however are buried elsewhere in the city and at other locations. One of those who was buried in a family grave was Sergeant William Allan. Although not killed in the collision he died as a result of the accident. He was buried in Warriston Cemetery, Edinburgh, in the family grave.

A couple of years back I was invited to speak on the Gretna Disaster at a local Rotary Club lunch. Following the presentation I was approached by a lady, the wife of Richard Allan, and a grandson of the deceased, asking if I could find out anything about this burial or the grave. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission in their records noted Sergeant Allan was interred in the communal grave at Rosebank which the family disagreed with. They had a number of records regarding the funeral namely a photograph of his military funeral, a letter from the local cemeteries authority with a grave reference and critically a receipt from the undertaker who arranged the funeral. I was asked if I could get the record changed and the correct burial noted and if I could find the grave. I researched further and in the local newspaper, "Leith Observer", that the funeral had taken place as indicated by the family. Copies of these documents I forward to C.W.G.C. and requested a memorial be erected at the grave. I duly received a response asking for a death certificate and 'a letter of his death from his commanding officer!' before the change could be investigated.



Warriston Cemetery is located in the northern part of the town and covers an area of some 14 acres. It was designed in 1842 with funerals commencing a year later. The graves of many notable people are to be found in the cemetery and many of the monuments are of architectural significance. The cemetery was in private ownership until 1994 but by this time, and since, the major part has been left largely unattended and it is a wilderness of overgrown shrubbery, weeds and tree growth although pathways through the cemetery still exist. Of the monuments and headstones many have been vandalised and toppled and in many cases they are hidden underneath the vegetation. Scattered throughout the cemetery there are, according to C.W.G.C., 72 WWI, 27 WW2, one Belgian and one other war graves and a screen wall with seven names of individuals who are buried in the cemetery in unmarked. Many of the family headstones have commemorations to casualties from these wars who are buried 'in a foreign field.'

Following a visit to the cemetery some seven years back I was horrified to find many of the war graves were overgrown and started to clear the undergrowth from them. Since then I have managed to keep them from being swamped again by vegetation.

The Scottish maintenance team from the C.W.G.C. have also visited these graves and help to keep them clear. In recent times they have also erected an additional four C.W.G.C. headstones on previously unmarked graves. In addition to this work I assisted in photographing all the war graves and numerous other headstones with commemorations for the War Graves Photographic Project.

It was as a result of my involvement that the request regarding Sergeant Allan was made. The family had tried to locate the grave with no success. The cemetery authorities also stated that it is likely the headstone had been damaged or was non-existent. I took up this search and after many hours clearing ivy and other vegetation I felt that they may have been correct. However, I continued my correspondence with the C.W.G.C. trying to get this grave recognised. Then, in April of this year, I received notification from the Commission that they were to change their records and intimate that Sergeant Allan was indeed interred in Warriston Cemetery. In addition the maintenance crew and cemetery workmen went and cleared away some five feet of overgrown ivy at the site and there, undamaged, stood the family memorial. I received a photo of the headstone and noted that the inscription did not give any indication that William Allan was a war casualty.



It was with great pleasure on my part and even greater on the members of his family when I told them of the 'discovery'. I paid a visit to the site and cleared it further and agreed to take William's grandson and his wife to see it. On the day and time arranged two cars drew up and not only was there the grandson and his wife, but great grandchildren and great- great grandchildren of William Allan present. We made our way through the tangle of undergrowth to the grave site. It was a poignant moment but then Richard started to give details of other family members noted on the headstone. The delight of this being found was obvious.

About the same time a meeting was held in a local church hall to create a voluntary group called 'The Friends of Warriston Cemetery'. They have taken it upon themselves to clear the overgrown vegetation and open up the cemetery so that it is once again returned in a small way to its former state. Some one hundred names have been signed up for this project and it is hoped in time that the graves of the many notable and not so notable individuals will be seen once more. Perhaps this work may in some way reflect on the commemoration of the Great War and the names those who lie in the cemetery are again revealed.

Another Scot found in an Album

Dave Donatelli, who now lives in Canada, has been going through an old photo album given to him by an ex Seaforth Highlander by the name of Tommy Byers. In it he has come across a number of men who were friends of Tommy. Some of these survived the war but others did not. An example is young James Ganly Marks (pictured on the right) who survived until 23rd March 1918 and died aged 22. The photo, from the album, taken in 1914 shows James (Jim) aged just 18. The picture is probably the first he had taken in uniform.

James, who was commissioned to a Lieutenant, now lies in Lebusquiere Communal Cemetery Extension, in France.



Can't find that one in my Michelin Guide?

David Milborrow spends a considerable amount of his time photographing war graves and memorials for the project. He has now started revisiting a number of sites in France and Belgium to update the archive as all the original cemeteries have now all been covered. You can imagine his surprise when visiting Ridge Wood cemetery to find in a field opposite another war cemetery that seemed to have sprung up over night.

Further investigation revealed a mock up of a WWI cemetery in which all the headstones were engraved with Private J Mc Ghee of the Lancashire Fusiliers. This was obviously a set for a TV or film production (we think it might have been for Poirot?).

For those of us 'in the know' there were quite a few discrepancies between this and a 'normal' war cemetery but for artistic license not a bad effort.



Volunteer Reunion, Saturday 5th July 2014: National Memorial Arboretum - Pauline and Jim Pedersen

If you are still only thinking about joining us for this special occasion make it a definite 'yes' and send in your cheque now! You will be very welcome. Our numbers are now nudging 40 including two overseas volunteers who will be in the UK that weekend.

The cost is £6.50 per person to cover room hire and refreshments on arrival. Admittance to the NMA is free. Cheques should be made payable to 'S Rogers' BUT sent to me at 27 Saxonwood Road, Cheswick Green, Solihull B90 4JN.

There have been many additions to the NMA since we were last there, not least the meadow flower field which is predominantly poppies and spills over on to the bank of the river Tame. Weather permitting it's supposed to be at its best in July.

Shot at Dawn Memorial- NMA





Not far from here is the Allied Special Forces Memorial Grove. It was due to be dedicated a few days after our visit in August which was something of a coincidence given that we'd been to the Violette Szabo Museum the previous week and when we got chatting to the gentleman working in the Grove it turned out he had quite an involvement with the museum too, for obvious reasons; seems he was retired SAS.

For anyone with walking difficulties there is a land train which starts not far from the restaurant and conference rooms and takes you to the nearest major sites.

See www.thenma.org.uk for more details. Further updates in the next Newsletter but any queries before then contact me on pauline@twgpp.org.

Violette Szabo – Pauline & Jim Pedersen

TWGPP volunteers never cease to surprise. After the write-up on this museum appeared in the October Newsletter we received two emails via Steve.

The first from Maria Choules, who has attended the annual picnic at Wormelow since the beginning. She says attendance has increased steadily over the years and the event is very moving.

Mary Proffit wrote to say that Violette was a prominent part of her childhood as her mother, a professional artist, did a portrait of her. She painted it in the 1960s and it was the first portrait she ever did. She hated it because technically it wasn't very good. Her father, however, loved this painting as he admired Violette greatly. Mary now has it.

James Ian Smith – In Remembrance

At this time of year especially it is sad to have to announce the death of one of our ardent volunteers, James Ian Smith, who most of us knew as Ian. Ian had served in the Army for a number of years but continued to support the RAF whilst employed by the Ministry of Defence. He has helped TWGPP since we started by taking many photographs with his wife Jen across Italy, France, Belgium and around Somersham where he lived. At every opportunity he would promote the work we do and will be missed by all in the project who came into contact with him. Our condolences go out to his family.



A Saviour Appeared – Ken Wright

Among the diaries and recollections written by those who worked on the infamous Burma-Thai railway many contained references to Boon Pong Sirivejjabhanda or Sirivejaphan as some writers' spell it. He was a provincial merchant who was contracted by the Japanese to supply the prison canteens right up the river as far as Tha Khanun about 150 kilometres from Kanchanaburi. Boon Pong played a role in the political life of Kanchanaburi serving more than one term as mayor. He had a strong personality; neither drank or smoked and was devoted to his family and running a successful business.

He was also a Captain in the Free Siam Army and belonged to the underground 'V' Organisation. Boon Pong's work supplying camps at the southern end of the railway enabled him to be the main contact between certain officers commanding camps along parts of the Thai section of the railway and the underground organisation in Bangkok.

One of the prominent references to Boon Pong is from Lieutenant- Colonel Philip Toosey, an outstanding British officer who had dealings with him. Toosey was the commander the 135th Hertfordshire Yeomanry regiment at the time Singapore fell and refused to leave his men despite an order from British High Command that he be evacuated to India. On 27 October 1942 Toosey and his men were sent to work on the Thai/Burma railway at a camp established at Tamarkan about 5 kilometres from Kanchanaburi. They were ordered to build two bridges, one wooden and one of steel and concrete over the Mae Khlong River [later renamed Khwae Yai River in 1960]. Here he worked courageously to ensure as many as possible of the 2,500 Allied prisoners under his command would survive. Initially Tarmarkan had 1500 British and a few Australians POWs but then in February 43, 1000 Dutch joined the camp. He endured regular beatings when he complained of ill treatment of prisoners but as a skilled negotiator he was able to win many concessions from the Japanese.



Toosey, unlike his fictional film counterpart Colonel Nicholson played by the actor Alex Guinness in the box office film hit, 'Bridge on the River Kwai' did everything he could to protect the men against the worst excesses of the Japanese during the construction of the two bridges at Tamarkan. He also tried to delay and sabotage both bridges construction without endangering the prisoner's lives. Toosey must be credited among other things for his stance against the Japanese which helped prevent deaths in Tamarkan. Although the film was a huge success and has become a 'classic' movie, it must be remembered that it is only a fictional account of the bridges construction, and certainly does not portray the horrific working conditions the officers and men had to endure. Also in the film, there is only one bridge which is blown up in spectacular fashion whereas in reality, the two bridges were in operation for two years before being destroyed by Allied bombing in 1945.

Boon Pong Sirivejjabhanda

Toosey's meeting with Boon Pong was quite unexpected. In June 1943, a team of Japanese officials made a visit to Tamarkan from Chungkai. They were accompanied by an interpreter who managed to get Toosey by himself and told him that the nearby hospital at Chungkai was receiving outside help from sympathetic Thais who were supplying medicine and money to the prisoners. He said he was prepared to put Toosey in touch with the organisers. All he needed was his name, rank and serial number which he would pass on to the relevant people. Naturally, Toosey suspected a trap but eventually decided after discussing the matter with the Australian doctor at Tamarkan, Major Arthur Moon, it was worth the risk if there was any possibility lives could be saved. A meeting was arranged and Toosey managed to get permission to go into Kanchanaburi with the ration truck that picked up the camp supplies. While the Japanese guards were distracted, Boon Pong introduced himself to Toosey. From a tape recorded speech in 1974, Boon Pong said, 'I have your number, name and rank. I'll do what I can to help you. The way I will do it is this; in the basket of vegetables you will find packages of medicine so please go through the vegetables very carefully' Toosey had found a saviour. Money was also handed over and smuggled into the camp by Corporal Johnson, the truck driver, under his 'Jap happy' [loin cloth] This liaison was to last until November 43 when the camp was handed over to Lt Col Anderson VC and Toosey went to Nong Pladuk. Boon Pong's premises in Kanchanaburi were subjected to searches by the Kempeitai, Japan's dreaded military police but nothing was ever found. His prices were the lowest and his profit the slightest. He hid duck eggs, sulphur drugs, tinned pilchards, tobacco, newspapers and money in vegetables which he delivered to most of the river camps. His wife, daughter and sister also took great risks and smuggling radio batteries into the camps under their skirts.

When the war in the Pacific ended on August 15, 1945, Lt Col Toosey had been transferred to the officer's camp at Nakhon Nayok. It was here that Toosey and his fellow officers heard the unofficial news. Boon Pong rode past the camp several times on his bicycle shouting, 'War finish-war finish'.

The British Government awarded Boon Pong the George Cross, the civilian version of the military Victoria Cross and the Dutch Government awarded him the Orange Nassau Cross. In 1947 information reached Britain that Boon Pong had fallen on hard times. Three ex-camp commanders, Toosey, Knights and Lilly launched an appeal among former Thailand POW's. The appeal raised 38,000 pounds enabling Boon Pong to start up the Boon Pong Bus Company in Bangkok which became very successful. The English Far Eastern POW [FEPOW] Association together with the Borneo Company and the Anglo-Thai Corporation clubbed together and bought him a tractor. After the bus services were nationalised, Boon Pong set up a bus repair shop called, 'Dents Done by Boon Pong.' He died 29 January, 1982 aged 72.

New film release – The Railway Man

On the same theme as the article above, there is a new film being released in January 2014 called The Railway Man.

Review by Jes Fenton - War films are always important, especially when based on true stories - the constant reminder not to repeat the past is vital, but much like feeding a child food they don't want, it's all about the presentation and approach.

The film 'The Railway Man', based on the book of the same name, is the first-hand account of railway engineer Eric Lomax, who was serving overseas during World War II when he was captured by the Japanese. He and his troop were forced to work on the Thai-Burma railway - a feat so difficult and deadly, the idea alone was previously abandoned by the British due to the ungodly effort and conditions required for its completion.

The film picks up when Eric (Colin Firth), a railway enthusiast who memorises train timetables, meets Patti (Nicole Kidman) when they're both riding the rails one day.

The pair have an instant connection, fall in love and marry. On the night of their wedding, Eric's PTSD manifests itself, and so the destruction and downward spiral begins. Not willing to let go of the man she loves, Patti turns to Eric's friend and fellow veteran Finlay (Stellan Skarsgård) for answers as to what happened to her husband all those years ago. Matters are complicated when it's revealed that Takashi Nagase (Tanroh Ishida and Hiroyuki Sanada), the man who tortured the young Eric (Jeremy Irvine), is still alive and serving as a tour guide at the now infamous location.

Beautifully shot and a stellar cast delivering masterful and delicate performances. Still a fascinating and heartbreaking story, its ultimate theme of redemption wins out and makes this one worth the watch.

[I've booked tickets but I can imagine it will be a difficult one to watch for anyone with relatives buried in Thailand or Burma – Steve]



Articles for the next newsletter, due in April 2014,
should be sent via e mail to steve@twgpp.org



THE WAR GRAVES
PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT