

WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION

Herts & Beds Branch

NEWSLETTER January 2012

NEXT MEETING: FRIDAY 13 JAN

The Basra CWGC War Cemetery & the Memorial to the Missing – World War 1 to 2005.

During the summer of 2005, whilst serving in Basra, Iraq, Vern Littley, a serving soldier, had the opportunity to visit both the Basra War Cemetery and the Memorial to the Missing. His presentation will describe both what he saw and the impact that it had on him, both as a soldier and as a battlefield tour guide.

Vern Littley recently retired from the Royal Artillery as a WO2 after completing over 25 years' service (1985-2011). He now works as an NVQ and management assessor in a Higher Education college in the Midlands. He saw active service in Northern Ireland, the Gulf, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. Vern's Guild of Battlefield Guides profile can be found at - http://www.gbg-international.com/guide_21.htm.

DECEMBER MEETING REPORT

Perhaps it was the thought of a talk on the underground war, or perhaps it was the lure of Mary Cobb's mulled wine and mince pies, but our Christmas meeting was the best attended for a long time, with nearly fifty attending and the call going out for more chairs!! Historian Simon Jones described the development of mining warfare, which although a very ancient art (there are records of it as far back as the 9th century BC) was somewhat out of fashion by 1914. With the Western Front solidifying during 1915, the Germans were rather ahead with their efforts but the BEF caught up by drawing on civilian mining talent, and eventually there were 28 tunnelling companies, each with 300 diggers and 600 ordinary troops to carry away the spoil. At first the army recruited troops with mining experience, but then men were obtained direct from the mines. It is at Vauquois that you can still see considerable galleries and craters, and it was here that the army set off the largest mine of the war in May 1916 – 50 metric tons. Tunnelling work was of course intended to destroy enemy strongpoints, but attempts to disrupt enemy tunnels was also important and it is not surprising that tunnel work was hard, stressful and dangerous. Tunnelling required skill and technical ingenuity. Carbon monoxide poisoning was a threat and breathing apparatus was developed. The allies also developed the "geophone", a stethoscope-like device which enabled the tunnellers to hear what the enemy was up to (so sensitive was it that a tunneller's own heartbeat could register.) Less successful were attempts made to produce tunnelling machines. Probably the most famous mine explosion of the war, because it was filmed, was that under the Hawthorn Ridge on the first day of the Somme battle, but although spectacular it happened ten minutes before zero hour and was not well integrated into the battle plan. The Messines attack on June 1917 was more successful because the 19 mines (some had been started in late 1915) were part of an overall plan involving artillery as well, but this was the high point of mine warfare as the war became more fluid after that and mining was an irrelevance. A superb talk delivered to a large and appreciative audience. Note that next November's meeting returns to this topic.

NEWSLETTER QUIZ

Answer to quiz 219: London Irish Rifles, Battle of Loos. Chris Collier won and sets quiz 220: What connects the fictional agent James Bond to the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, the first Territorials in action on the Western Front?

UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

All WFA members are welcome at the *Remembering the First World War* event to be held on Tuesday 17th January from 5-8 p.m. at the University of Hertfordshire, de Havilland campus, Hatfield, AL10 9EU. This free event is open to all those interested in commemorating the history of Hertfordshire during the war. They will be hosting workshops and talks on a variety of subjects led by members of both the university and external institutions, including Frances Casey from the Imperial War Museum who will outline the work that she has been involved in on mapping war memorials around the country, and Daphne Knott from Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies who will talk on the Making Memories project. In addition, researchers will give talks on their latest findings on the Hertfordshire experience of the war. A member of the Twisted Events Presents Company will also be working with stories that people have unearthed to show how they might be dramatised. If you have a story that you wish to share then please send it to Dr Julie Moore at j.p.2.moore@herts.ac.uk or use the university's website at <http://rememberingthefirstworldwar.weebly.com>.

LORD KITCHENER

Sad to note that one of the WFA vice-presidents, the 3rd Earl Kitchener (great-nephew of the 1st Earl) died recently, aged 92. As he had no male descendants, the title now becomes extinct.

DONATION

Please note we ask for a donation to branch funds of £3.50 with effect from January's meeting.

BRANCH DIARY

17 Feb: *Nurse Edith Cavell*. Diana Souhami.
23 March: *The Dead Man's Penny*. Julie Dunne.
27 April: *Stepbrothers in Arms: Battlefield Replacements and Unit Cohesion*. Tim Lynch.
25 May: *Verdun: A Multi-Layered Landscape*. Matthew Leonard.
29 June: *War Hospitals for Indian Troops in Brighton During the First World War*. Dr Samiksha Sehrawat.
7 Sept: AGM & Members' Evening
12 Oct: *HMS Caroline: the Last Survivor of the Battle of Jutland*. Katy Swainston.
16 Nov: *The Glory Hole at La Boisselle*. Jeremy Banning.
14 Dec: *Fishermen Against the Kaiser*. Douglas d'Enno.
Venue: Room SP101, 1st Floor, Sports Hall, St George's School, Sun Lane, Harpenden, AL5 4EY. Doors open 7.30pm, 8.00pm start. Requested donation min. £3.50. Refreshments provided. Note: park in the main school car park and walk round to the Sports Hall at the back.

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NEXT ISSUE

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