



Remembrance Day - Sunday, 11th November

This year marks 75 years since the end of World War 2

We thought in this month's newsletter it was appropriate to tell "One Soldier's Story" written by Saxby earlier this year before lockdown.

Also, we tell the story of Mary Leech who joined the Women's Land Army. Sadly, Mary passed away in August this year.

"Show Yourself Tommy"

The parishioners of Broughton will probably know Fred Ward. Whether it's in passing, you are old friends and neighbours or when you meet for a drink at the pub. But how many know of his wartime service? In a snatched conversation last year, I was given a small window into what Fred had been involved in and what he'd achieved. This was a man directly involved in the making of history and a far deeper conversation was required. Fred was only too happy to do this. In February of this year, he invited Sam and myself over for a glass of wine and he talked us through a very personal journey which is our privilege to share with you now.

The son of a Gamekeeper, Fred grew up with 9 other siblings near Roudham in Norfolk. In 1942 Fred was in his 17th year and without his parent's knowledge moved to Banbury to live with his sister. Life wasn't exciting enough for him in Norfolk! His sister was married to an airman who was based at Morton-in-Marsh and already deeply involved in war operations, as was one of Fred's brothers who was in the Navy based in Malta.

In 1943 at just 17 and a half Fred was called up and sent to Doncaster to train with the 68th Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery. Equipped with 5.5-inch Howitzer guns firing 100lb shells. Fred was assessed as having above average dexterity so was also designated to be a Bren Gun carrier which was an extra 19 lbs (8.6kg) to carry through a battle field.

Fred, like most soldiers of the time, knew that by the early part of 1944 something big was going to happen as training and movements had intensified. By late May when they were ordered to Tilbury Docks, they knew they were off to battle but had no idea where. When they had set sail there still was no real idea of where to, but slowly the realisation dawned that it was to be the Normandy beaches, the liberation of Caen and Northern France.

Fred's level of detail now intensifies as these memories are hard to forget. When they arrived late in the day, they had to drop anchor some distance from the beach as the tide was out but with a significant swell rocking the ships. They arrived the day after the main invasion and there was evidence of battle.

All around there was smoke, bodies and the general gruesome flotsam and jetsam of conflict. Although the giant German guns were silent, there was still the crack of sporadic fire as well as the Luftwaffe. Fred looked me in the eye when describing this and his eventual landing on dry land. "Whoever tells you German planes weren't there has it wrong. I watched Stukas bomb and blow up 2 supply ships next to us. A dreadful sight and we were still out to sea.

The next immediate challenge was to climb a rope net down the side of the ship which was very dangerous due to the swell. One minute you're next to the landing craft and the next it's 6 feet below you. I watched a few good men drown trying to jump. With full battle kit and gun, you sink like a stone. I did alright and all I lost was my metal helmet but there were loads on the beach going spare. We were dropped a few hundred yards from the sand beach so jumped into the cold water up to our chests and waded ashore. My gun was alright as you were taught to waterproof it with grease and lots of it so it was very dirty but at least I knew it would fire."

The men of the 68th were soon re-united with the 5.5-inch guns and moved in land with little resistance from the enemy. Fred continues, "the rations were hopeless but the good bit was the chocolate! The Americans and Canadians had really good ration kits and lots of them so they used to give us those if we saw them, but you still keep going with or without food. There was no other choice."





When moving inland they were ordered to dig in with the Howitzers due to pockets of determined resistance by the German forces and this is where Fred had the first of 2 very narrow escapes. An 88mm shell fired from a German gun landed next to him with a force that knocked Fred off his feet but didn't go off. On later inspection it was proved that it hadn't been armed when fired. A very close shave.

In August of 1944, the 68th found themselves near Falaise Gap (pronounced Fair-Lay as Fred pointed out) just after the allied forces had decimated the assembled German forces. An allied pincer movement had forced the enemy into a narrow area and the ground attack rocket firing Hawker Typhoons of the RAF had finished off what was left of the German army. Fred described the ugly scene.

"It was a shambles! Everybody looked like they had tried to leave or escape in a hurry. There were horses, people, trucks, waggons, wrecked army stuff and all destroyed and dead on the roads and in the hedges. This was the first time I'd ever seen such devastation and the smell of death. It never leaves you. Never leaves you. We got orders to move on so we had to drive through this landscape. It was awful."

The 68th then moved through Belgium and by the winter of 1944 was on the Dutch border. This is when Fred's second lucky escape took place. Whilst dug in they could see Doodle-Bugs (German V1 flying bombs) overhead with one dropping in their direction and heading right for them. It struck the ground and yet did not explode. Fred takes up the story, "when the fighting had died down, we went and had a look at it and took a couple of panels off. The wires had been cut; it had been sabotaged. A dangerous thing to do I suppose but we were only 19!"

Remember that during the whole time, Fred still had to carry a Bren Gun at all times and was dutied to be close support to his Captain. In one close battle on the Dutch border, Fred and some of the others from the 68th found themselves cut off and surrounded by an SS unit.

Fred and his mates were hiding in a disused trench with Fred still holding the Bren Gun. He looked to see what his comrades were doing only to find that they had managed to escape to the safety of a small wood. Fred is now alone. 'I didn't really know what to do next. There was no commanding officer to give an order. Then I heard a voice from an SS officer shouting "Show Yourself Tommy." I thought, shall I, or shan't I? In the end I thought I might as well fire the Bren in the direction of the German voice. I pulled the trigger but nothing happened. The gun had jammed as it was full of mud and dirt you see. That saved my life. If I had taken the shot they would have known exactly where I was and that would have been the end of me. After a long silent stand-off, they moved on and I returned to my mates without a shot being fired. That was close."

Fred has a lot of respect for the Dutch. "They helped us out whenever they could, food, shelter and were generally happy to see us. More so than the French but they had gone through far more during the war so kept themselves to themselves".

By early 1945 Fred's regiment ended up near Hamburg in occupied Germany and were posted to captured German barracks. After a week of doing nothing and with no instructions, they were ordered back to the UK which all happened rather suddenly. We went back across the land and then by ship home where we were given a week's leave. I went back to Norfolk to find my mother had passed away whilst I was in Holland. When I got back to the 68th I was told I wasn't needed anymore, so I went and transferred to the Wiltshire Regiment as they were going out to the Far East and I wanted to see some of the world and get some action. On the way, we were diverted to Burma but eventually ended up in Bombay. I was part of a 25-pounder gun crew. This was nothing more than a pea-shooter compared with what I'd been used to. It was here that I saw far more close-up violence than I had in Europe. People were using machetes to maim anyone they thought was an enemy. It was madness. Men, women, children. It was horrible and so common that after a while it almost became normal. Horrible.



We then moved to Puna, Darjeeling and Bengal. But my best memory from that whole time? Getting to play a game of cricket at the Calcutta (Kolkata) Ground in West Bengal. What a privilege. Such a beautiful place and what a grand building".

Sam and I could have stayed far longer and talked into the small hours but the clock was against us. We left Fred's house with the greatest respect and admiration for all that he'd experienced first-hand.

This year is the 75th anniversary of VE Day. The end of this European conflict. Fred's experiences with the people that he fought alongside must never be forgotten. Everybody had a story and everybody had a part to play.

Without doubt, Fred has many more stories to share with us, these we will save for another time. Thankyou Fred, thank you very much.

Saxby and Sam

“Memories of a Land Girl”

By Mary Leech



I lived at Leamington Spa when I joined the Land Army in July 1943. From there I was sent to Shipston on Stour to a hostel with about 40 girls. We slept in one long room in “double decker” bunks. There was a dining room with one coal fire. We had a warden, another lady (Miss Harte) who allocated the jobs, a cook and her assistant. We had to make up our own sandwiches every day. We were given our uniforms, which consisted of breeches, green jumpers, cream shirts, knee stockings and stout shoes. We also had working dungarees, cow gowns (tunics with buttons down the front), boots and wellingtons.

On my first day I was transported by van (there were no seats and I had to sit on the floor) to Whichford, to Mr Beauchamp's farm. He was a lovely man, short and tubby, and he only had one eye. I had to hoe in a field of peas. By the end of the long day my hands were covered in blisters, but with no time off, they soon toughened up!

I went to many different farms, doing things like potato picking and swede cleaning and also threshing. The thresher was drum shaped, like a hat on wheels, powered by a traction engine. We had to throw the sheaves onto the drum and they were fed in by the farm hand. The worst job was “chaff and cavings”, where you were under the drum and had to rake out the debris onto a big cloth. It was dirty, and when it was barley, very itchy!

I was fortunate to go to Mr Beauchamp's for my final years in the Land Army. His son, Harold, had rheumatic fever and he asked if he could keep me. I was taught how to milk cows by hand and to drive a tractor to plough, roll and scuffle the field. The cows were milked in the byre at the top of the hill and the milk had to be carried in two big cans on a yoke on the shoulders to the farm, which was quite a distance away. We used to deliver the milk every morning in a horse and trap. The milk was in a big churn with a tap on the bottom. There were quart, pint and gill measures, and people came out of their houses with jugs and cans. The older people liked to chat. We worked for long hours – we had double summertime and worked until 11.00 p.m. when harvesting. We had to stook the sheaves and had two shire horses pulling the cutter and binder.

I had moved to a small hostel at Long Compton at this time, which was an old army hut with walls lined with asbestos. There were only six of us and a lady from the village was our warden. We had lovely food but we had to go through the kitchen and outside to the bathroom. **(Mary is in the middle in this photograph with two of her friends).**



I met my husband just before the war ended. He had been a pilot in the war and had been shot down in the Mediterranean. He was finally picked up by the Germans and taken to Sicily as a prisoner of war. Towards the end of the war he was marched from Stalag Luft 3. They met up with our army and were sent home. We married in 1946 in my home county of Durham and came to live in Charlbury during the bad winter of 1947. Bill worked in the offices of 22VRD at Ramsden Heath. I enjoyed my time in the Land Army and have been happy to live in Charlbury with my two sons, Michael and Clive. Michael now lives in Worcester with his wife, Barbara, daughter Heather and son Richard. Clive lives in Broughton with his wife, Sue and son Simon.

Mary Leech 2007.

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