



*Quarter Four 2014*



## *Creeping Barrage*

Updates & Notes  
from the Herts &  
Beds Branch

### **NEXT PRESENTATION:**

**'EMPIRE, FAITH & WAR: THE SIKHS AND WORLD WAR ONE'.  
AN ILLUSTRATED TALK BY PARMJIT SINGH, UK PUNJAB HERITAGE  
ASSOCIATION**

**ST. GEORGE'S SCHOOL, SUN LANE (SPORTS HALL ROOM SP101),  
HARPENDEN AL5 4TD**

**14 NOVEMBER 2014 AT 8:00PM**

Although accounting for just 2% of the population of British India at the time, the Sikhs made up more than 20% of the British Indian Army at the outbreak of hostilities. By the end of the war around 130,000 Sikhs saw active service fighting in nearly all theatres of war. From the Somme to Gallipoli, and across Africa and the Middle East, Sikhs fought alongside their British and Indian counterparts to serve the greater good, gaining commendations and a reputation as fearsome and fearless soldiers.

DONATION AT THE DOOR £3.50

[www.westernfrontassociation.com](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com)

## Zone Call - A Few Notes from Geoff Cunnington, Acting Chairman and Branch Secretary



**A very warm welcome to 'Creeping Barrage' – the re-styled occasional notes and updates from the Herts & Beds Branch of the Western Front Association. I trust that you will enjoy the new offering. Please let me know if you have any suggestions or comments as to the content and format.**

As many of you will be aware, our Chairman, Andrew Gould, has stepped down after serving the Branch as Chairman and Deputy Chairman since the turn of this century. Our thanks and gratitude is made to Andrew for all his efforts and contribution to the Branch during this time. We especially shall miss his welcoming remarks and introductions to the speakers as well as his hard work behind the scenes, particularly in judging the annual 'Trench Diary Competition'.

No successors for the position of Chairman came forward for election at the AGM in September. Notwithstanding the absence of a formally elected Chairman, the key Branch Committee members are keen that the Branch continues to function. We have a strong set of speakers lined-up for 2015

and sufficient funds in the Branch bank account. Attendances are down, that is true, but this has been a recurring theme for many years. With your support and impetus in encouraging your friends, relations, neighbours and colleagues to come to our meetings, the Branch can continue for the foreseeable future. Do you know someone who is interested in local history – mention the WFA to them and the wide spectrum of subjects we cover; get them to come along to the next meeting.

With this background, and coupled with my long stint as Branch Secretary since 2007, I have taken up the position of Acting Chairman until such time as a permanent successor can be found. I look forward to your assistance over the coming months.

Thank you for your support.

Geoff Cunnington, November 2014

### BRANCH CONTACTS

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## Previously at Herts & Beds 10<sup>th</sup> October 2014 “In A Hole in the Ground: Tolkien and the Trenches” - John Garth



### Committee Member, Simon Goodwin writes:

I'm sure that I'm not alone in thinking that Geoff Cunnington, our Branch Secretary, organises a good variety of talks for us in the Branch each year, led by some excellent speakers including many who are published authors or academics in the fields they come to talk to us about. But, at the same time, I'm sure we would all admit that there are certain subjects that are of particular interest for each of us. This talk was just such an evening for me when it matched my general interest in WW1 with a childhood fascination of mine with the work of JRR Tolkien. I, like many others, read "The Hobbit" before moving onto "The Lord Of The Rings" (which I have read more than once), "The Book Of Lost Tales" and "The Silmarillion" (although I never quite finished this last book).

So, this evening had been circled in my diary ever since the list of talks came out at the start of the year and I wasn't disappointed.

Our speaker, John Garth, has worked as a journalist as well as a tutor at Oxford University and he is now a freelance writer, editor, speaker and researcher, based in Oxford. In 2003 he won the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for his book "Tolkien And The Great War: The Threshold Of Middle Earth". Of this work A.N. Wilson in the Evening Standard wrote ....

*"Very much the best book about J.R.R. Tolkien that has yet been written ... Even if you are not a Lord of the Rings fan, I commend this ... I have rarely read a book which so intelligently graphed the relation between a writer's inner life and his outward circumstances."*

Tolkien and three of his closest college friends all fought in the First World War and their story is told in another John Garth publication "Tolkien At Exeter College : How An Oxford Under-Graduate Created Middle Earth". John told us how Tolkien delayed enlisting in WW1 until after he had completed his university finals in July 1915. Thereafter he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers and arrived in Frodo's loss of his finger towards the end of the book might echo the injuries that almost all combatants carried by the end of WW1. Frodo's experience further mirrors the effects of war when, at the end of the quest, he fully expects to die and is surprised when he does not do so. Furthermore, Frodo's

France on the 4<sup>th</sup> June 1916. He immediately went to the Somme where he and his men took part in the attacks on the Schwaben Redoubt and the Leipzig Salient.

But John's talk wasn't solely about Tolkien's war service, which has been written about elsewhere, the subject he came to talk to us about was the apparent impact that Tolkien's military experience had on his narrative in "The Lord Of The Rings".

Tolkien was, of course, not the only writer or poet to be on the Front Line at that time and John also made frequent references to the writings of C.S. Lewis (who served at Arras), Edmund Blunden, Frederic Manning, Wilfred Owen and Philip Gibbs. The descriptions of war, as penned by these men, help support the assertion that Tolkien was writing of his trench experiences when describing Middle Earth as the language is often very similar.

John highlighted the landscape descriptions Tolkien uses and how certain bits are like the rolling green unspoilt lands of his Oxfordshire home and others are the blasted and pock marked battlefields of the Western Front. He demonstrated how, when Tolkien was writing of the time the four Hobbits were captured in a Wight Barrow, Frodo spoke of being disorientated and being unable to see or move freely for a green smoke that hung in the air, what a WW1 soldier might recognise as a chlorine gas attack. The origins of the creature Gollum might also be linked to the story, widely repeated amongst British infantrymen, that there were wild men who inhabited "No Mans Land" and who lived among the dead bodies.

Tolkien himself had said of the character Samwise Gamgee that he represented the rank and file British soldier and John showed how the relationship between Frodo Baggins and Sam changed over time from Sam acting under Frodo to the other way around as the journey progressed and it was Sam's fortitude that kept Frodo safe and the mission on track. This could be paralleled with a newly arrived Officer on the front line having NCO's reporting into him but, in the end, their experience and tenacity carrying him and the unit through.

feelings when he returns to the Shire are troubled and the conflict he has been through has clearly changed him in a way he cannot forget or come to terms with. Indeed, his only respite is to leave the Shire, via ship from the Grey Havens. There may even be some further symbology in the use of the

ship from the Grey Havens as Tolkien himself suffered from Trench Fever and was shipped home, via a Hospital Ship, in November 1916.

There were other similarities mentioned by John and I hope that all those who attended will agree this was an interesting

Simon Goodwin, October 2014

talk which moved away from a simple explanation of military actions and which, instead, showed how the soldiers experience helped shape a classic of twentieth century fiction.

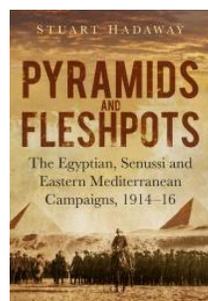


## Coming-Up at Herts & Beds 12th December 2014

### “Pyramids & Fleshpots: Middle East Campaigns 1914-1916” Stuart Hadaway, Senior Researcher, Air Historical Branch (RAF)

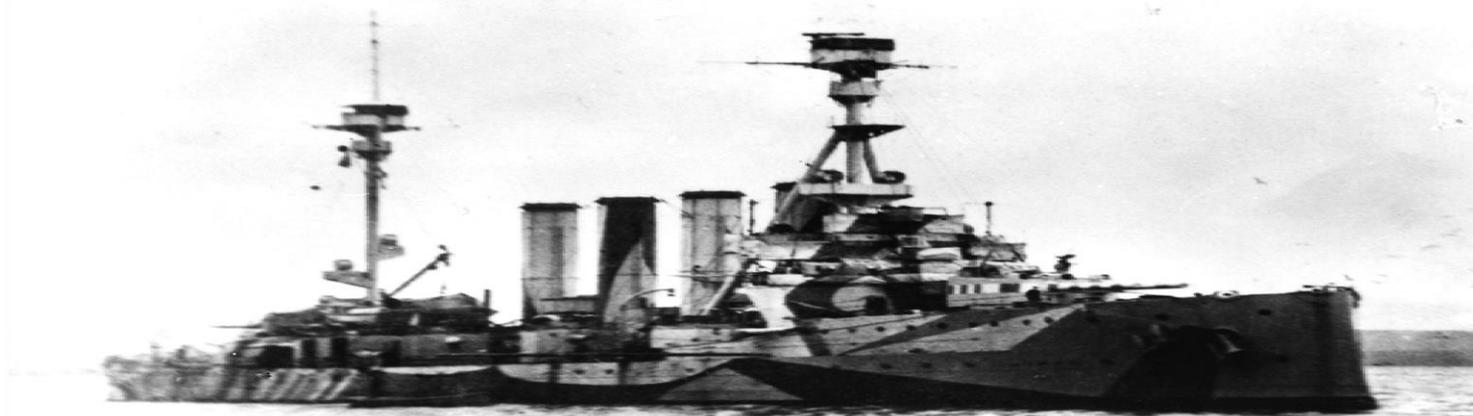
Personnel serving in Egypt in the Great War often complained that the popular impression of the campaigns, still widely held, was that it was a sideshow, with troops enjoying a holiday among the pyramids and the 'fleshpots' of Cairo. Actually they faced appalling heat, abrasive sand, poor rations and water shortages. In the desolation of the Western Desert they fought the Senussi, an Islamic sect supported by the Ottomans in a reversal of Lawrence's later work with the Arabs, while in the

Sinai Desert they countered German-backed moves to dominate this strategically important area. Meanwhile, the Royal Navy fought to keep the supply lines to Gallipoli open, and keep men and material flowing to France from India, Australia and New Zealand. This talk will tell the true story of their experiences and achievements in fighting a determined enemy to protect the Suez Canal - the lifeline of the Empire.



## THE BIG PUSH 2015 – ON THE HORIZON

FUTURE BRANCH PRESENTATIONS AT ST. GEORGE'S SCHOOL, SUN LANE (SPORTS HALL ROOM SP101), HARPENDEN AL5 4TD. ALL MEETINGS START AT 8.00PM. TEA, COFFEE & BISCUITS INCLUDED IN £3.50 MINIMUM DONATION ON THE DOOR.



The 'Art of Dazzle Painting' in January 2015 - *HMS Minotaur* leads the way.

**9 January**

### **The Art of Dazzle Painting**

Cultural historian **Robert Hewison** explores the history of World War I naval camouflage, and its connection to avant-garde art.

**20 February**

### **Black Poppies: Britain's Black Community and the First World War**

Author **Stephen Bourne** lectures about the black soldiers who fought in the Great War, conscripts who signed up in Africa, the Caribbean or at local British recruitment centres. Sometimes they were allocated separate regiments such as the British West Indies Regiment, or they were integrated. Sometimes they were allowed to fight on the front line, other times they were given ancillary roles. Bourne tells us that black recruits were allowed in all branches of the armed services although not as officers. Footballer, Walter Tull, commissioned as a second lieutenant, was the only black man to break the colour bar, and then only because of his fame. He was killed in action in France in 1918.

**20 March**

### **Espionage during the First World War**

Secret intelligence was a growth industry during the Great War, in Britain and other countries. Between 1914 and 1918 both military and civil

authorities deployed agents throughout the world to gather information (and spread disinformation) that might help to win the war. Some of these are famous, like Mata Hari or Lawrence of Arabia, some less so; sometimes it was the less famous who were most effective. In addition, thousands of civilians put their lives at risk in order to collect intelligence for the war effort. Former Chief Historian of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, **Gill Bennett's** talk will cover both the major organisational and technical developments that took place during the war, and some of the extraordinary personal stories of spies professional and amateur, invaluable and inept, working alone or together; as well as their portrayal in literature by the many writers, from John Buchan to Somerset Maugham, who were involved in secret intelligence themselves.

**24 April**

### **Domestic Women on the Home Front**

Professor **Maggie Andrews** will focus on how the war caused shifts in the role of women looking at changes in domestic responsibilities, the impact of food shortages, letter writing, gardening and charity work which facilitated the more well-known areas

of women's wartime contribution such as nursing and working in munitions.

**22 May**

### **The Camps at Cannock Chase**

**Stephen Dean** is a Principal Archaeologist at Staffordshire County Council. His presentation will review the two divisional-sized Great War camps constructed on Cannock Chase during late 1914/early 1915, their infrastructure and the range of services provided by the camps. Discussion will also focus on the recent excavation of the Messines terrain model, built by the New Zealand Rifle Brigade with the assistance of German PoWs in early 1918. This model is thought to be unique to the United Kingdom for this period and is one of only a handful known from the Western Front.

**26 June**

### **The Angels of Pervyse: Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm**

Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm spent most of the War saving hundreds of soldiers' lives by giving basic first aid just a hundred yards from the German trenches at Pervyse. They received 17 medals for their bravery and became known as the 'Madonnas' and 'Angels of Pervyse': they are two of the iconic women of the Great War in the company of Edith Cavell and Mata Hari. A project is underway with the aim to

unveil a statue to mark the centenary of the arrival of the women in the village. This talk by **Diane Atkinson** will describe their lives, their works and the project to commemorate them. Diane taught history at secondary schools in London before moving to the Museum of London, where she worked as a lecturer and curator, specialising in women's history.

**9 October**

#### **Public Schools and the Great War**

**David Walsh** will analyse the contribution of British public schools and their alumni to the war effort and examine the effect of the war on those institutions during the war itself and subsequently. David Walsh taught history at Tonbridge School in Kent, retiring as Deputy Head in 2009. He has

subsequently written two books - 'A Duty to Serve: Tonbridge School and the 1939-45 War' (TMI 2011) and 'Public Schools and the Great War: A Generation Lost' (Pen and Sword 2013) with Anthony Seldon. He is a member of the WFA and occasionally takes groups of friends on battlefield trips.

**13 November**

#### **The Battle Bus Project**

A 100-year-old London bus has been converted into a First World War 'battle bus' for a commemorative tour of Western Front locations in Belgium and France. During the Great War, more than 1,000 London buses played a vital role transporting troops to and from the front lines, removing the wounded and those due rest periods,

and bringing in new soldiers. They would often travel at night, in convoys of more than 70 vehicles, and many of the drivers were the same men who had driven them in London. Before the breakout of war, the 'battle bus' served on route nine from Mortlake garage in south west London, and took passengers from Barnes to Liverpool Street. **Tim Shields**, project manager of the restoration project, will describe the conversion of the bus which was made possible by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant; additional funding was provided by the London Transport Museum Friends and public donations.

**11 December**

**To Be Confirmed**

### Tail Spin - You Might be Interested In.....



## THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE GREAT WAR

**With** the start of the Centenary of the First World War this year it is likely that a new or renewed interest in all things Great War will be ignited; Schools are already planning their activities for 2014 through to 2018. Media companies are planning films and documentaries. Many diverse organisations are planning a variety of educational and commemorative activities. Some of these will take place on the actual battlefields of the Western Front but many people will not be able to make that journey for a variety of reasons, including cost. Many school children will make the journey to the battlefields of the Somme and Ypres, many more though will be staying at home. **Lest We Forget** plans to develop a Great War experience centre in the

UK where visitors can interact and learn about the soldiers' lives. How they lived day to day and how technology and training helped them survive one of the most dramatic periods of European history. 8.9 million British and Empire soldiers went to the Great War, 8 million survived. With the help of historical advisors, interpreters and re-enactors we hope to provide a Great War "living history" experience for all our visitors which will help them more fully understand and appreciate the conflict on the Western Front both on the strategic scale and also on the personal scale of the individual soldier in the trenches.

Find out more at [www.lestweforget.eu.com](http://www.lestweforget.eu.com)