

Pegasus Yearbook 2020: West Berkshire Branch PRA

The pandemic brought us all a year like no other. But with the vaccine being rolled out as I write, we have surely turned a corner and may hope for a return to something approaching normality next year. Most of our annual Branch activities fell victim to the Covid19 restrictions. In particular, the comradeship of our monthly lunch meetings has been sorely missed and we can't wait for their resumption.

We were fortunate in that we got in our annual lunch in February, just ahead of lockdown. It was again held at Sandford Springs Golf Club, Kingsclere. We join up with neighbouring PRA branches for this event. It was well attended with over 70 sitting down to an excellent lunch. Scheduled for February again in 2021. How things will look then we can but wait and see.

All Branches will no doubt have shared our fervent desire to get through the year without any Covid fatalities among our members. We achieved this but did suffer the sad loss of stalwart Tom Wallis for other health reasons. Funerals have had very limited attendance but Tom's wife Carol invited three members (see photo) so we were able to parade both our Standards, recite the Airborne Prayer and deliver a eulogy. We always parade two Standards at all events: one for the Parachute Regimental Association, and one for the 101st Airborne, the Screaming Eagles, who were based in the Kennet Valley in large numbers during WW2.





We are usually very active during Poppy Appeal fortnight, but this fell victim Covid measures this year. Our Remembrance Sunday attendance at Burghclere was very much a pared down event. There was a ceremony at the cenotaph but no church service. Remarkably well-attended in the circumstances, with parishioners and villagers all complying with social distancing rules. There has been a change of vicar since last year. The retiring incumbent had an airborne connection in that his uncle jumped at Arnhem. The new vicar also has an airborne connection, albeit a very sad one. His wife's son, Joe Whittaker, served in 4 Para. He was attached to 2 Para in Afghanistan, where he was killed in action in June 2008 at the age of 20.

There was to have been a Branch attendance at Cheam School. for their annual Parents' Day and Remembrance service. Our Colonel-in-Chief HRH Prince Charles was a pupil there. Cheam is about a mile from Greenham Common and the school log records that in March 1945 all pupils were on the lawn watching hundreds of planes and gliders passing directly overhead carrying US Airborne troops on Operation Varsity. The Cheam service was on-line this year and our participation was a video recording. Our President, Lt Col Jon Fleming OBE, delivered the sermon on the foundation and history of the Royal British Legion. The Secretary gave an outline of the history of US and British airborne forces in the Kennet Valley during WW2.

We never forget our Branch widows. These currently total 13 and each gets a gift and visit at Christmas. This is normally delivered personally, but has had to be done by telephone call and post this year. Sadly, this exercise revealed that a couple of widows are no longer with us.

One of our members, Martin Taylor, came across a memorial bench whilst walking on the banks of the Kennet at Hungerford. The plaque read: "This Pegasus bench is in memory Albert Douglas Walter ("Wink") of Marsh Cottages, 10th Battalion Parachute Regiment died at Arnhem September 1944. This bench was given by his children, Una, Peter, Tommy, John & Margaret we all lived at the Marsh". On checking ParaData, "Wink" was in B coy 10 Para and was killed on the 19th Sep 44

aged 30 and is buried in the Airborne Cemetery at Oosterbeek. He left 5 children so must have been relatively old for an airborne volunteer at the time.

The bench is in a lovely spot overlooking the Marsh, but was sorely in need of refurbishment. Martin dismantled and painted it, and the local paper ran an article and follow-up recruiting letter.

In summary: 2020 was a year which we hope will prove to be uniquely unwelcome. Our PRA activities were severely curtailed but we look forward to the future with optimism.

Meetings: last Friday monthly at 11:30 hrs: Venue: The Fieldgate Centre, Kingsclere, RG20 5SQ

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