

Buckinghamshire and the British Expeditionary Force, 1940

An Online Exhibition



*The Bucks Battalion at Bren Gun firing practice at the last peacetime camp at  
Lavant near Chichester, August 1939*

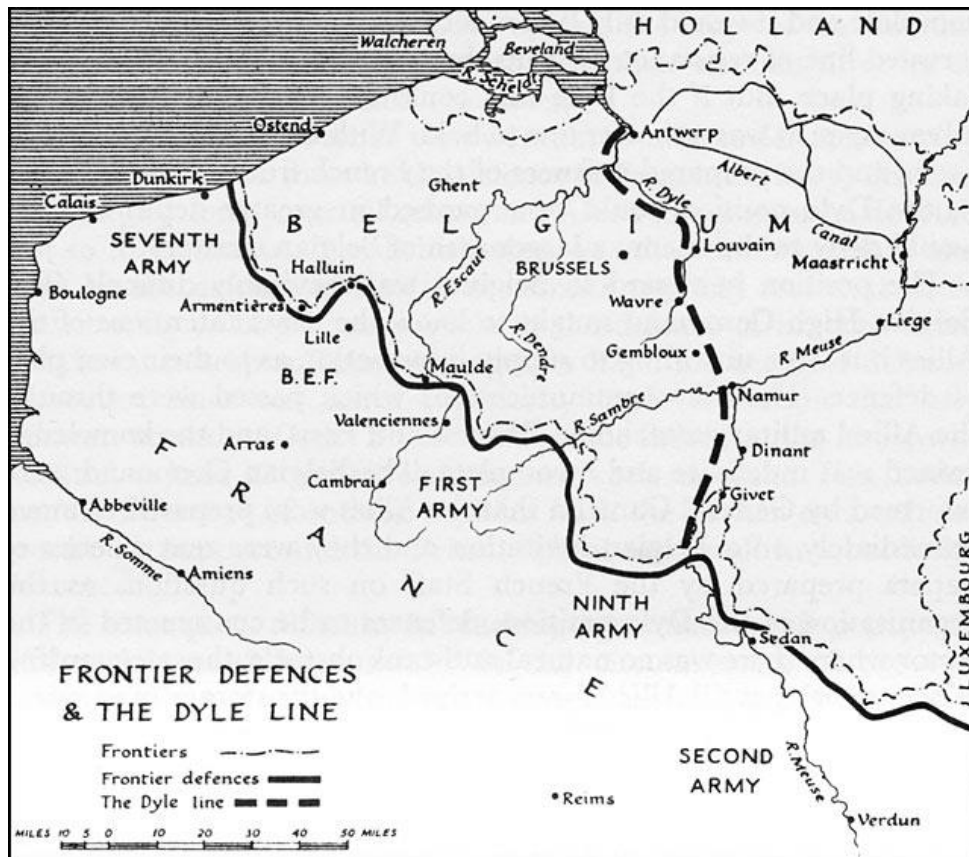
## The British Expeditionary Force (BEF)

With the declaration of war on 3 September 1939 advance parties of the BEF moved to France on the following day, four regular divisions (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>) being deployed along the French frontier by mid-October. The regular 5<sup>th</sup> Division arrived in December 1939 with three Territorial divisions (48<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup> and 51<sup>st</sup>) arriving in January 1940 and two further Territorial divisions (42<sup>nd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup>) in April 1940. Three poorly equipped Territorial divisions (12<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup>) were also committed as lines of communication troops in April but without the intention that they would become involved in combat. By 1 May 1940 the BEF had 237,000 troops in combat units and 156,000 in support roles.

The British army had suffered greatly from the financial constraints of the inter-war years, the priority for belated rearmament after 1934-35 being RAF fighter defence with successive governments unwilling to commit to the possibility of sending an expeditionary force to the continent until 1937-38. Modernisation of the part-time Territorial Army (TA) was a low priority when the regular army itself lacked so much. The unexpected doubling of the TA by the government in March 1939 in response to the German occupation of the rump of Czechoslovakia - already dismembered at Munich in October 1938 - caused considerable difficulties. These were exacerbated by the re-introduction of conscription in April 1939 with equipment of all kinds in short supply and a lack of instructors. In any case, pre-war training and the pre-war mind-set left the army unprepared for the pace of operations encountered in 1940.

Once in France, some battlefield training and exercises took place but a great deal of time was wasted in building a line of concrete blockhouses and anti-tank ditches to extend the so-called Gort Defensive Line along the Franco-Belgian frontier. Because Belgium had decided to remain neutral, there was a gap between the sea and the supposed strength of the French Maginot Line. In the event of an expected German advance into Belgium, the French strategic plan - to which the BEF was committed - was for the allies to advance to the line of the River Dyle rather than using the newly constructed frontier defences.

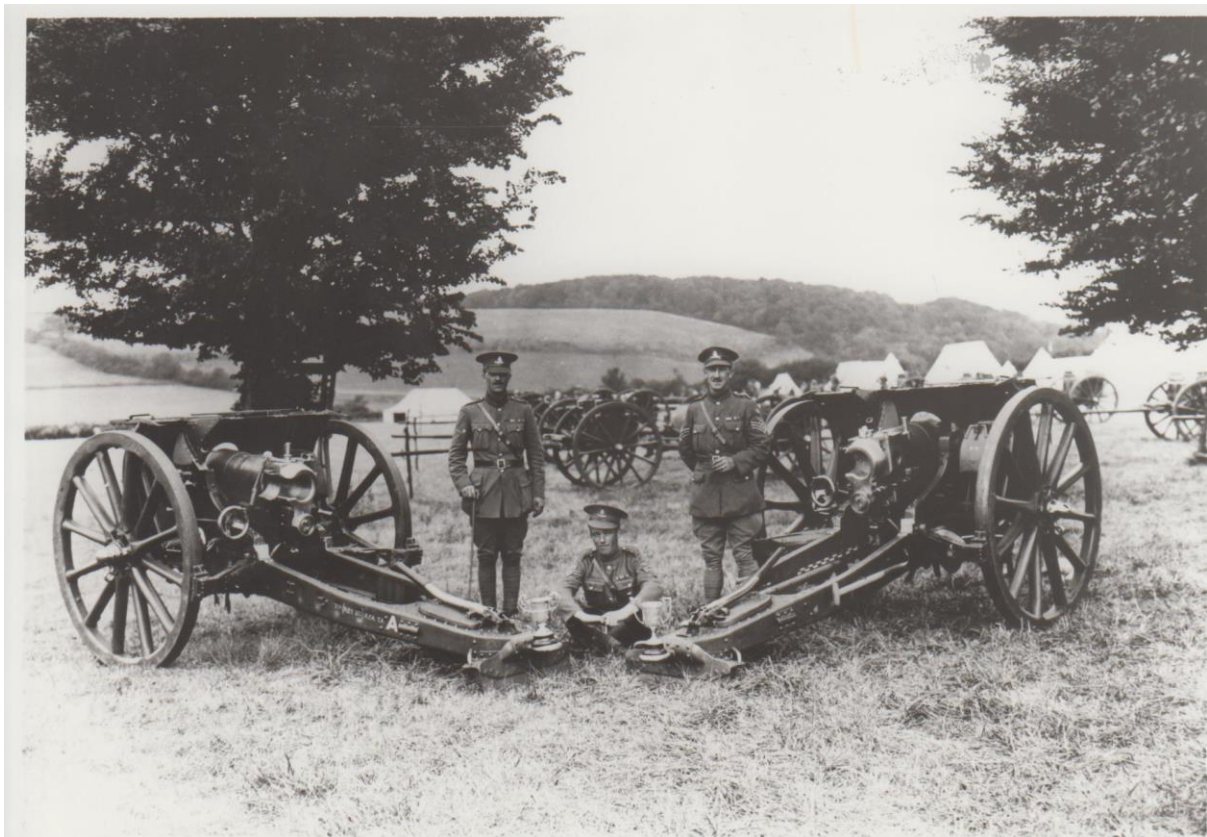
The Germans attacked in north-east Belgium from the direction of Maastricht on 10 May 1940. However, their main *Blitzkrieg* strike was to the south through the weakly defended Ardennes, which the French supposed impassable by armoured vehicles. Breaking through around Sedan, the Germans made for the Channel coast, quickly threatening to isolate the British and French forces that had advanced into Belgium. Faced with the rapid French and Belgian collapse, there began an inexorable fighting withdrawal towards the Channel coast. On 25 May Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, Field Marshal Lord Gort, resolved that he had no alternative but to retreat towards Dunkirk. Operation Dynamo to evacuate the BEF began on 26 May 1940.



Important defensive stands were made throughout the retreat, buying time for the BEF to consolidate a perimeter around Dunkirk. The defence of Boulogne (22-25 May) and of Calais (22-26 May) were such stands. So, too, were the defensive stands of 6 Infantry Brigade of 2<sup>nd</sup> Division supported by 99<sup>th</sup> (Royal Bucks Yeomanry) Field Regiment RA (TA) at Haverskerque and St Venant on the La Bassée Canal (27 May), and that of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion (TA) of 48<sup>th</sup> (South Midland) Division at Hazebrouck (26-28 May).

### The 99<sup>th</sup> (Royal Bucks Yeomanry) Field Regiment, RA (TA)

The 99<sup>th</sup> (Royal Bucks Yeomanry) Field Regiment formed part of the artillery support of the 48<sup>th</sup> (South Midland) Division on mobilisation in September 1939. It was then decided that TA divisions should receive at least one regular battalion per infantry brigade with regular divisions receiving between one and three TA battalions in return. Similar arrangements pertained to divisional artillery. Thus, the 99<sup>th</sup> (Royal Bucks Yeomanry) replaced 18<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment RA in 2<sup>nd</sup> Division with the latter posted to 48<sup>th</sup> Division. Having crossed to France with 48<sup>th</sup> Division, the 99<sup>th</sup> joined 2<sup>nd</sup> Division in February 1940.



*A pre-war photograph of 393 Battery (RBY) at camp*

Quads - a 4x4 artillery tractor powered by a Morris EH 4-cylinder engine and designed specifically to pull a 25-pounder gun and crew into action - had been received before embarkation but the armament remained Great War era 18-pounders for 393 Battery and 4.5" howitzers for 394 Battery. Each battery had 12 guns sub-divided into three troops each of four guns. Like the Bucks Battalion, much of the men's time was spent in the bitter winter weather digging defences that would never be used.

After training around Bapaume in the spring, the 99<sup>th</sup> moved forward to the Ottenbourg area in Belgium on 11 May as the BEF was advanced. When the

first withdrawal was ordered on 15 May the Quads were too far back and nine of the guns of 393 Battery had to be abandoned, the breech blocks being removed. Moves had to be by night to avoid bombing. Men got very little sleep as a result. The 99<sup>th</sup> found itself supporting 6 Infantry Brigade on several occasions over the next few days with a number of men becoming casualties, 'D' Troop of 393 Battery suffering badly from air attack on 16 May. A stand was made first on the line of the Escaut Canal on 20 May, by which time 393 Battery had only the three guns left and 394 battery was also much depleted. A crucial action was fought at St Venant on the La Bassée Canal on 27 May 1940 as 2<sup>nd</sup> Division - holding a 20 mile front along the canal - was attacked by three Panzer divisions and elements of three others.



*26 May 1940: The general position of 2<sup>nd</sup> Division is just north of Béthune at the south west corner of the map with St Venant to the north-west of Béthune*

### Haverskerque and St Venant, Monday 27 May 1940

With 6 Infantry Brigade coming under heavy attack from German tanks, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Royal Berkshire Regiment was deployed to Haverskerque with the remaining three 18-pounders of 393 Battery of the 99<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment in support in newly dug gun pits in an open field between Haverskerque and St Venant. They came under heavy fire from shells, mortar rounds and air attack. They disabled two tanks engaged over open sights but another gun was put out of action as the infantry began to withdraw through their position. One gun crew was delegated to hold as long as possible to cover the brigade as it retired through the Forest of Nieppe. The fighting seemed to pass to the left and the gun was successfully withdrawn until once more deployed on one of the forest roads until dusk. Meanwhile, 394 Battery was similarly heavily engaged, one troop taking a wrong turn during the withdrawal and being captured.

6 Infantry Brigade and 2<sup>nd</sup> Division generally had suffered such heavy losses: in the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Berkshires, only seven officers and 67 men returned to England. The division was withdrawn directly towards Dunkirk on 29 May to the surprise of the 99<sup>th</sup> as they were not aware of the overall situation. Non-essential vehicles and some guns were destroyed as the Dunkirk perimeter was reached with the remainder - one 18-pounder and five howitzers - handed over to the 46<sup>th</sup> Division at La Panne: a few men of the 99<sup>th</sup> stayed with the guns until they were all destroyed on 29 May.

Some 20 members of the regiment were killed in the Dunkirk campaign. Three officers and 50 other ranks were captured. Gunner Jim Lawrence, one of those captured, escaped successfully from a work camp in Poland in January 1945, and with the help of the Czech resistance, reached advancing US forces. The 99<sup>th</sup> received 2 MCs, 4 MMs, an OBE and one mention in despatches for its role in the 1940 campaign.



### Major-General the 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Burnham

Born in June 1890, Edward Frederick Lawson, later 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Burnham, was commissioned into the Royal Bucks Hussars in 1910 serving at Gallipoli and in Palestine and taking part in the celebrated charge of the regiment at El Mughar on 13 November 1917. It was very much a family regiment with his father William Lawson (later 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Burnham) commanding the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Royal Bucks Hussars during the war and his uncle Harry Lawson, later 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Burnham, commanding the 3/1<sup>st</sup> Royal Bucks Hussars having previously commanded the regiment from 1902 to 1913.



*Burnham in the full-dress uniform of the Royal Bucks Yeomanry*

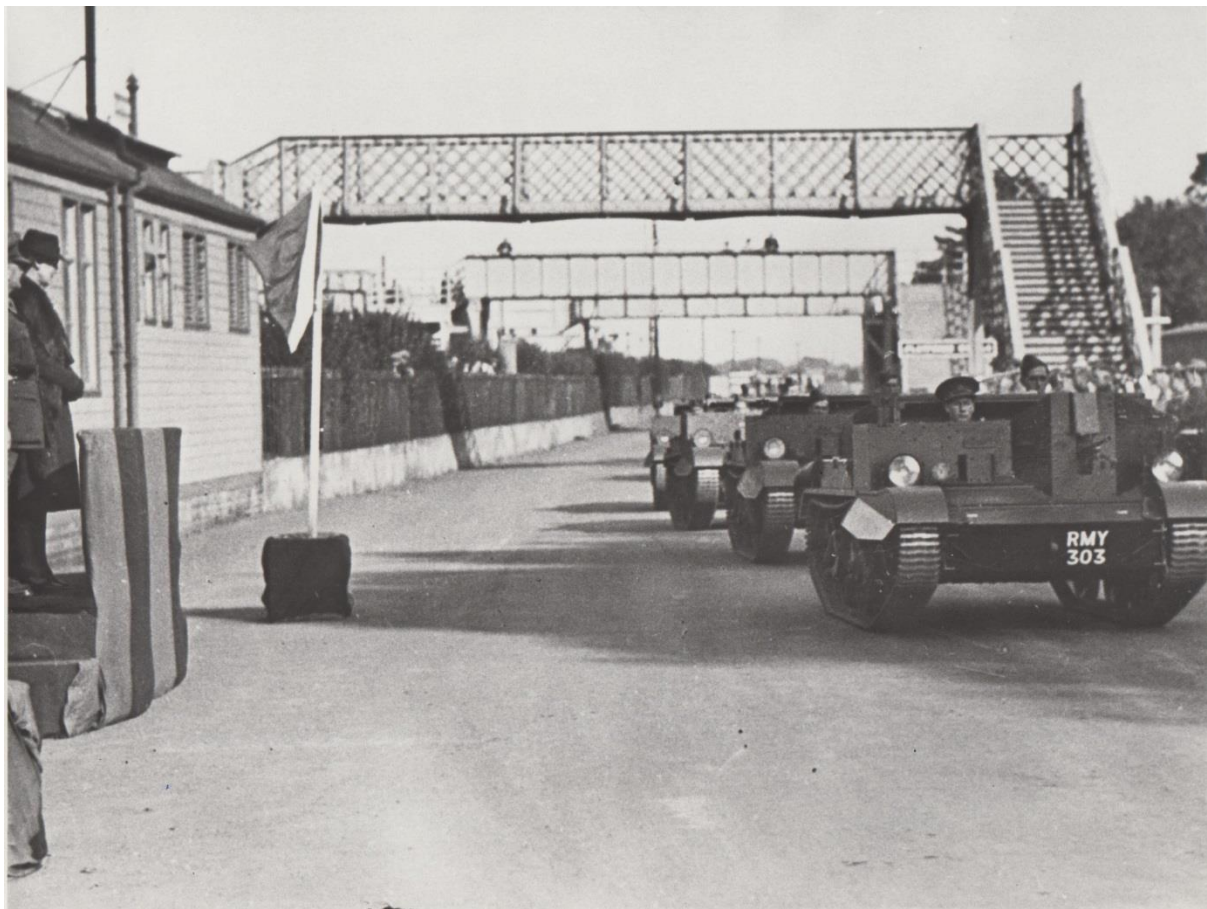
Fred Lawson continued with the regiment after the war, succeeding to command of what was then designated the 99<sup>th</sup> Field Brigade from 1929-33. In 1936 he was appointed Commander, Royal Artillery (CRA) to 48<sup>th</sup> Division with the rank of brigadier. In 1939 and now promoted to major general, he deployed to France. It was a source of sorrow that the 99<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment was then transferred to 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. Even Lawson had little idea of what was happening elsewhere in May 1940 and was particularly surprised to be told at one point that he was commanding 'X' Force. The very next day 'X' Force was dissolved and Lawson was ordered to rejoin 48<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters at Bergues without any role as command of the artillery had now been devolved to brigade level. Lawson and his staff were then 'lent' to III Corps and he was ordered to hold the canal line on the Dunkirk perimeter from Bergues to Nieuport. Lawson was responsible for posting what troops were already in the area and filling out the defence line as more men arrived. His improvised force of artillerymen and engineers fighting as infantry crucially pushed back the Germans from Nieuport on 28 May, winning enough time for elements from II Corps to reach and consolidate the perimeter.

Fred's son William, serving with 99<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, met his father by chance as he came into the perimeter: 'He [William] had not chosen badly for his walk to the beach, having his troop gunsights, the battery chronometer and three bottles of whisky.' Fred Lawson then commanded the Yorkshire County Division of the home defence formations before becoming director of public relations at the War Office from 1943 to 1945. He succeeded his father as 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Burnham in 1943. He died in July 1963.



## The 1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire Battalion

The 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion moved to France with the remainder of 145 Infantry Brigade in 48<sup>th</sup> Division in January 1940. The battalion had only received its first Bren Gun Carrier at the last peacetime summer camp at Lavant in August 1939 while the anti-tank platoon had no anti-tank weapons. Each company had only one Bren Gun, one 2" mortar, one Boys Anti-tank Rifle, one carrier and four trucks. Officers received no revolvers until May 1940. One private recalled exercises for which no thunder-flashes or blanks were available so an officer jumped about striking matches, shouting "Bang, you are all dead".



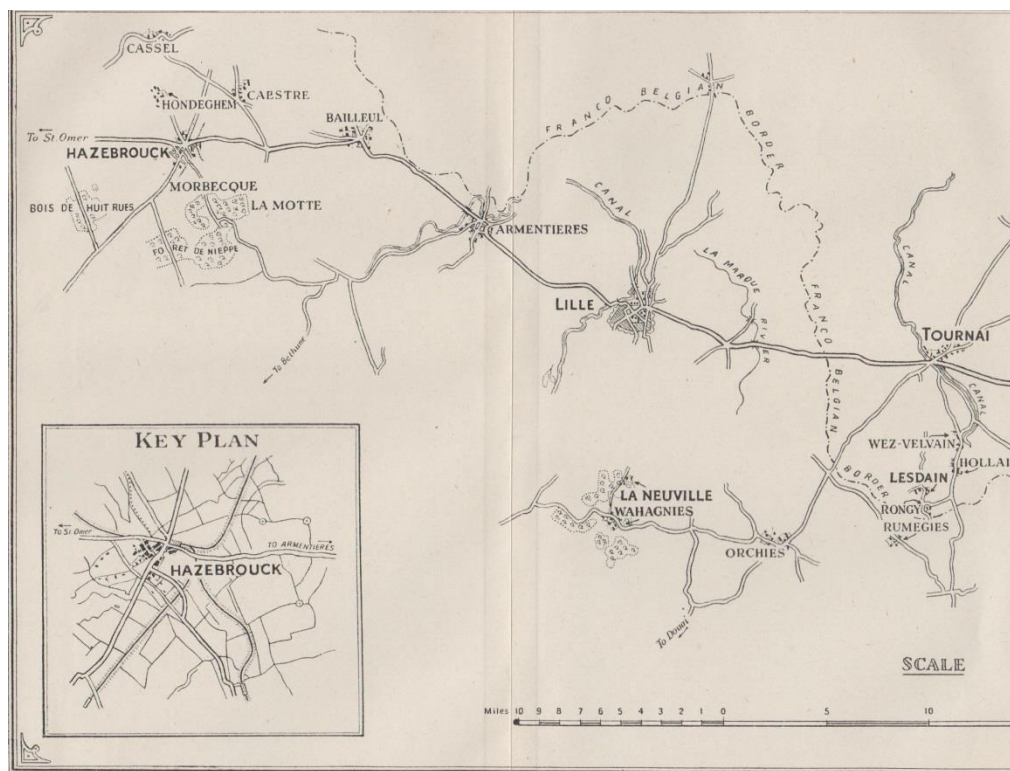
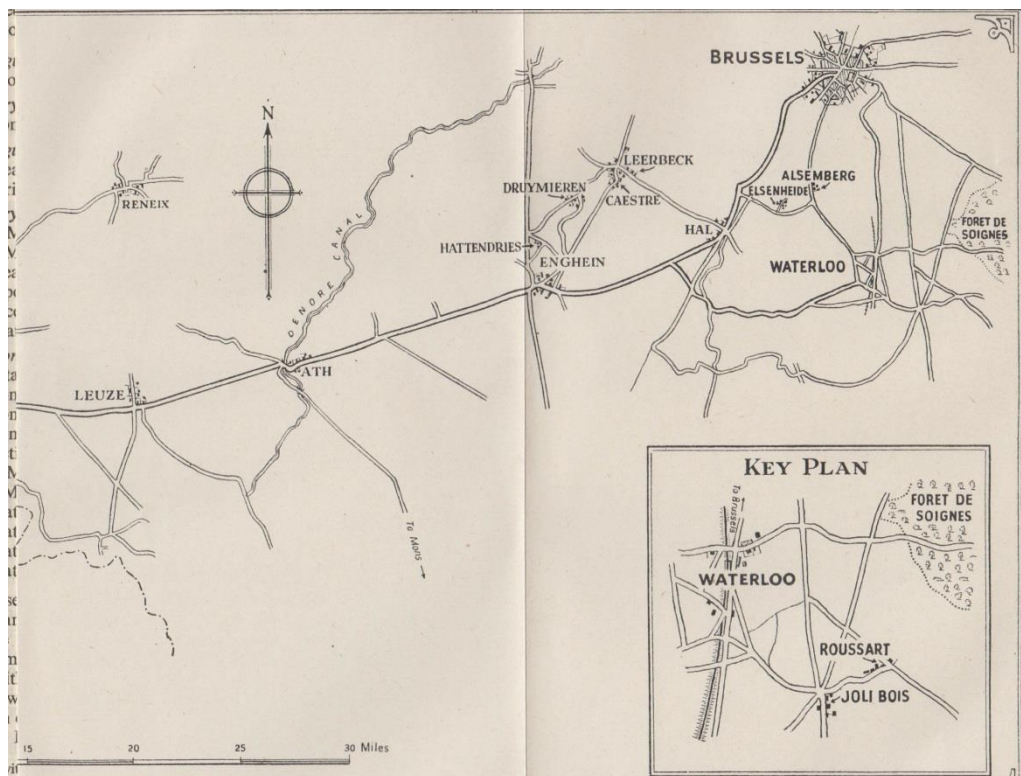
*Bren Gun Carriers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion passing the regiment's honorary colonel, Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent (seen at left) at Newbury, December 1939*

Three days' anti-paratrooper training was given before the battalion moved into Belgium on 14 May 1940 and took up a position close to the battlefield of Waterloo. One 3" mortar was placed at the base of one of the memorials. Withdrawal began three days later with seven successive positions being dug and then abandoned. An estimated 71 miles were covered in the first 48 hours, the retreat often interrupted by air attack with no rations issued for three days and men scrounging what they could from the fields or deserted shops.



*Sergeant Didsbury of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion bargaining with a local trader at La Neuville, 11 May 1940 just before the battalion's move into Belgium*

Throughout the retreat, few had any real knowledge of wider events. Some skirmishing took place at Lesdain on the Franco-Belgian frontier after withdrawal to the line of the Escaut Canal on 19 May but few Germans were encountered thereafter. The elderly commanding officer - a Great War veteran of the battalion - had broken down under the strain on 17 May, being succeeded by Major Brian Heyworth.



*The route taken by the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion from Waterloo to Hazebrouck, 14 to 26 May 1940*



On 25 May 145 Brigade was tasked with the defence of a six-mile sector of the south-west perimeter of a sack forming the escape corridor to Dunkirk. It coincided with Hitler's celebrated 'halt order' for 48 hours on 24 May, which brought some precious preparation time for exhausted British troops to improvise defences. German tanks had outstripped their infantry and were running out of fuel and spares. German High Command had also been unnerved by a counter attack by a small British and French force at Arras on 21 May. At the tail of the withdrawal column the 1st Bucks Battalion was detached and ordered to hold the town of Hazebrouck in the hope of delaying the oncoming Germans, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment and the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were sent to Cassel. GHQ was leaving Hazebrouck as the battalion deployed, the large amounts of confidential files, including Lord Gort's complete order of battle left behind, being burned by the Bucks.



*28 May 1940: 2<sup>nd</sup> Division has now been pulled back while 48<sup>th</sup> Division is also shown back close to the Dunkirk perimeter belying the loss of much of it at Hazebrouck and Cassel*

### Hazebrouck, Sunday 26 to Tuesday 28 May 1940

The Bucks Battalion took up defensive positions in and around Hazebrouck on 25 May. The town was too large to be defended by a single battalion and was surrounded largely by open country, the only real obstacles being the local canal, and the embankment and cutting carrying the main railway line to Calais in the northern part of the town. The only option was to defend the edges of the town with isolated company strength positions. 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies were deployed around the perimeter with 'A' Company in reserve in a large convent school, the *Institut St Jacques*, and battalion headquarters in the *Fondation Warein* Orphanage opposite. 'B' Company defended the north and north-west of the town, 'C' Company the south-west and 'D' Company on the west side. The Carrier Platoon was initially sent forward on 26 May but ran into German tanks and those left were then used as anti-tank obstacles around the Orphanage.

The battalion was hopelessly under-armed and too thinly dispersed for the task before them. Although they were supported by an unfamiliar artillery regiment and some hastily-gathered anti-tank guns, when the Germans attacked with vastly numerically superior forces and two battlegroups of 8th *Panzer* Division on 26 May, the Bucks could resist with little more than rifles and hand grenades. There were no radios and communication between HQ and companies was by runner.



*A sketch of Elliott Viney as a POW and his tin helmet*

As the Germans fought their way through the defences and advanced into the town on 27 May 1940, the surviving rifle companies were soon overrun. Running out of ammunition and with no effective answer to the German infantry and tanks, the order to withdraw came too late to be followed. Remnants of the infantry companies left the town. Headquarters' men remained at the *Fondation Warein*, which by this time had been heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe and was in a ruinous state. Battalion HQ was eventually overwhelmed on 28 May after an heroic last stand, but only when the ammunition had run out. Heyworth was killed by a sniper while crossing the street to find an alternative position. The adjutant, Captain James Ritchie, was also killed attempting to breakout. Having managed to reach another house through the orphanage garden with the survivors, the second-in-command Major Elliott Viney was compelled to surrender the party when they were spotted by the Germans.



*The ruins of the Fondation Warein Orphanage after the battle*

The Battalion had held up the 8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* Division and the SS *Verfügungs* Division for 48 hours. Their valour was recognised in a German Army radio broadcast on 30 May: "We must recognise that the British fighters were magnificent. We must assume that these were their crack regiments. Each soldier was of marvellous physique and full of fighting spirit. At Hazebrouck our soldiers had to storm each house separately. The Castel (sic) took days to capture. Our men found nothing in it but a heap of ruins..." Similarly, a letter



written by Leutnant Werner Petri of *Panzerpionier Bn 59* of the 8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* Division on 31 May described 'tenacious' defence of hedgerows around the town and roadblocks within it by 'elite troops'. Of the Orphanage he wrote of bringing up two assault guns and a heavy field howitzer to fire directly on the building. 'The English clung to every tree, every room, every brick. The fighting inside the great building - the town's orphanage - was the fiercest I have experienced so far. Fighting from room to room with grenades and bundled charges. It finally ended when the great staircase and the whole floor of a great hall in the lower storey caved in, burying a part of the garrison in the cellars.... I will send you an English cap of the Buckingham regiment. The English soldiers fight like lions, they are our toughest foe...'

A total of 54 men were killed and over 300 became prisoners of war, of whom eleven died in captivity. Only 210 men eventually returned to the UK to fight another day. One of those captured, Private Bull, the mess waiter, had been captured by the Turks at Kut in 1916 and so became a POW for the second time. Viney remembered Bull making him a mug of tea while the Orphanage was under heavy shelling while the medical officer recalled Bull appearing with tea and saying, 'I've made you an omelette, Sir.' The regular RSM, Ted 'Scatty' Hawtin, escaped from Thorn in Poland and made it to Sweden with the help of the Polish resistance. Second Lieutenant David Stebbings, the Intelligence Officer, also escaped from his prison camp but was recaptured. A total of one DSO, one MC, one DCM, and 6 MMs were awarded the battalion for the 1940 campaign with an additional 10 mentioned in despatches.



*Elliott Viney's 1940 map case*

## POWs

For most fighting men, the feelings of shame and anger at capture or surrender were quickly followed by the shock of a long and difficult transit from battlefield to permanent POW camp. Although prohibited under the Geneva Convention, this typically began with German soldiers helping themselves to the personal possessions of new prisoners. For most it was impossible to resist this illegal plunder of war booty.

The men captured at Hazebrouck were force marched across France and Belgium before being entrained in cattle trucks to Germany and Nazi-occupied eastern Europe. Initially moved to a temporary collecting centre, they were then moved to a transit camp (*Dulag*) usually in Germany, where they were evaluated and often roughly interrogated, before transfer to a permanent *Oflag* (*Offizierlager*) for officers or *Stalag* (*Stammlager*) for other ranks. Once in a *Dulag*, they were officially registered as POWs and recorded by the Red Cross who would inform the Allied governments and they in turn, their next-of-kin. The Red Cross also supplied postcards for men to send direct to their families.



*A group of POWs including many from the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion at a camp in Poland in 1942*

Many prisoners suffered real hardship on their journey to captivity. Weakened and hungry from weeks of defensive fighting, they were deliberately deprived of food and water and had to endure atrocious, confined transport conditions of three or more days to Polish camps.

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<b>Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben</b> <b>Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Stalag XXA</b>																									
<b>Name:</b> DURLLEY. <b>Vorname:</b> ALBERT HENRY DORMER <b>Geburtsort und -ort:</b> 15.7.1915. WHITCHURCH. <b>Religion:</b> EVGL. <b>Vorname des Vaters:</b> ALBERT. <b>Familienname der Mutter:</b> SHUFFIL.													<b>Staatangehörigkeit:</b> ENGLANDER. <b>Dienstgrad:</b> SOLDAT. <b>Truppenteil:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> BUCKS. BN. Komp. ufw. 145. <b>Zivilberuf:</b> ZIMMERMANN. Berufs-Gr.: 16c <b>Matrikel Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates):</b> 538 4940. <b>Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum):</b> 30/5/40. CASSEL. <b>Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert:</b> GESUND.												
<b>Nachbild</b> 													<b>Nähere Personalbeschreibung</b> <b>Größe:</b> 181 <b>Haarfarbe:</b> SCHWARZ <b>Besondere Kennzeichen:</b> KEINE. <b>Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen:</b> MR. ALBERT DURLLEY. HIGH STREET. WHITCHURCH. Nr. AYLESBURY. BUCKS												

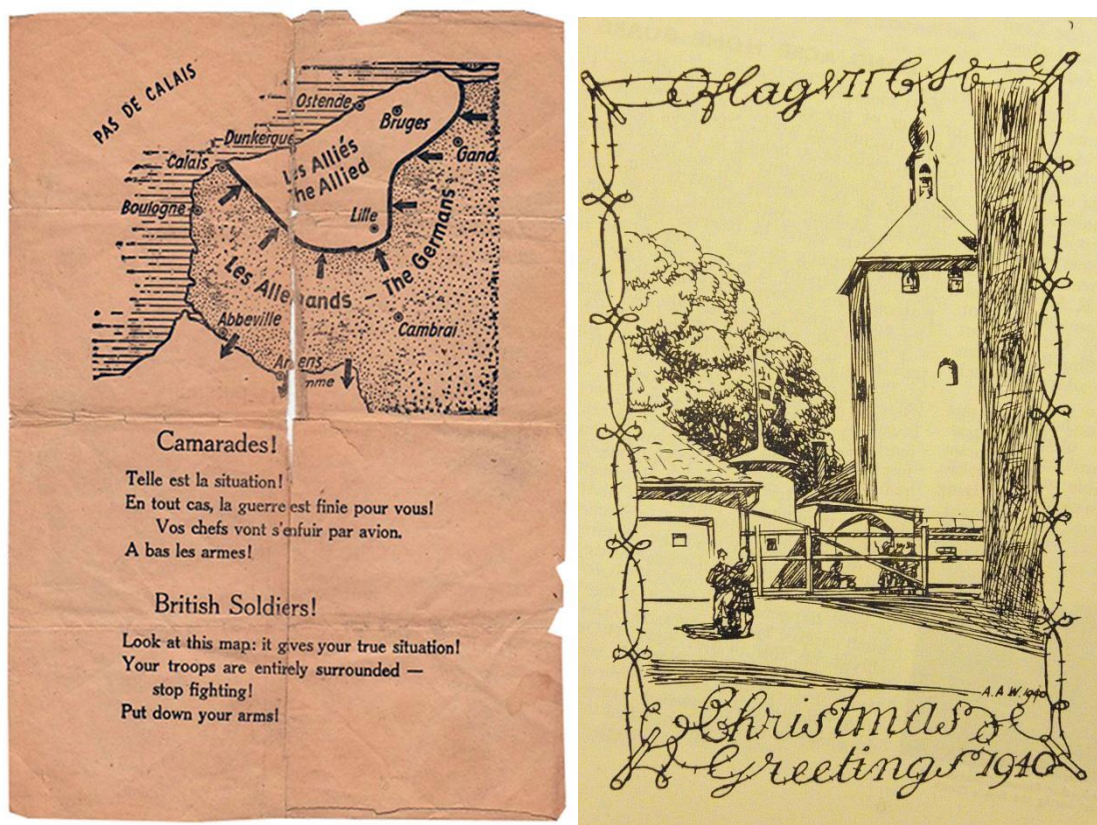
The POW identity card issued at Stalag XXA at Toruń in Poland to Private Harry Durley of 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks Battalion captured on 30 May 1940. He was held in the Bau und Arbeits (BAB) 40/3 Work Camp from September 1940 to March 1943, when he was sent to BAB 20 Work Camp at Heydebreck (now Kędzierzyn-Koźle) in Upper Silesia, Poland (later designated E794) working on the construction and maintenance of an I. G. Farben chemical plant until November 1944. He was moved to Stalag XXA from whence the prisoners were forcibly marched westwards in January 1945 for 13 weeks to Stalag VIIA at Moosburg in Bavaria, from which they were liberated by US troops in April 1945.



All prisoners of war had a duty to escape should a reasonable opportunity present itself. To do so successfully needed spirit and physical fitness, and the back-up of a large team of fellow prisoners to provide food, money, clothing and counterfeit documents, as well as sharing in creating the way out, such as digging a tunnel. Much of this was facilitated by the secret wartime organisation MI9, which provided clandestine maps, money, intelligence and advice to aid escape.

The level of escape activity would almost certainly have been impossible without the active collaboration of many German camp guards who either did so selflessly as opponents of the Nazi regime, or as a result of bribery and blackmail.

Escaping for some was just another antidote to the boredom of camp life and was treated as a risky adventure. A serious downside to a successful break-out was German reprisal which usually came down on those remaining behind. Unsurprisingly, most prisoners lacked the will or resources to escape.



*German aerial leaflet dropped to allied forces in 1940 (left) together with a Christmas card sent from Oflag VII C at Laufenslager in Bavaria, December 1940*

## Regimental Sergeant Major Edward Hawtin MM, MSM

Recorded as a “real fire-eater”, RSM ‘Ted’ Hawtin served in the Territorial 1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire Battalion. He fought in the last stand at Hazebrouck defending the Dunkirk perimeter in late May 1940, where he was seriously wounded. Ted Hawtin was captured by the Germans and sent to a POW camp ‘*Stalag XXA*’ at the fortress of Thorn in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Originally enlisting in 1919 into the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Ted Hawtin served in India and then Ceylon. In 1938 he was posted to the Territorial 1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire Battalion to enhance their training and experience, being one of only three regular army soldiers on mobilisation in 1939.

In January 1944, after three and a half years in Thorn, Ted Hawtin escaped aided by his fellow prisoners and the Polish Resistance: ‘We arranged with Padre Wild that he would converse loudly with the sentry giving Radzynski and me a chance of opening the heavy outside gate without being heard. All went according to plan and we were out of the camp by 17.16 hours. [MI9 Interrogation Report on RSM Hawtin 2 March 1944.]

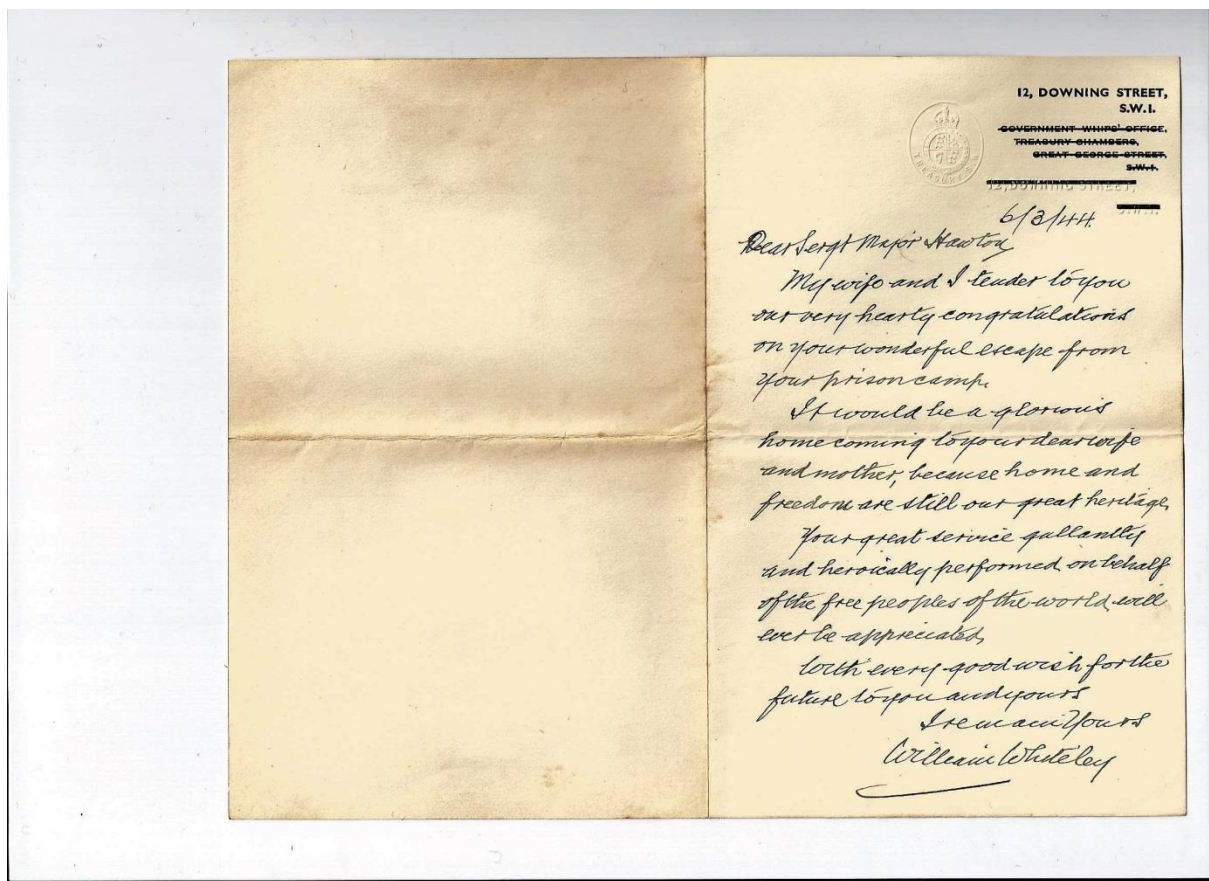


*Hawtin (left) and the telegram home announcing his arrival in Sweden*



Hawtin made his way to the port of Gdansk where he stowed away on a Swedish collier working across the Baltic to neutral Sweden. The British legation in Stockholm flew him to Scotland in a commercial Mosquito aircraft with neutral markings.

RSM Hawtin was mentioned in despatches for his bravery at Hazebrouck and decorated with the Military Medal for his daring 'home run' from his German POW camp. He died peacefully at his home near Buckingham in 1985.



*Letter of congratulation to Hawtin on his escape from William Whiteley MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, 6 March 1944*



### After 1940

The 1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire Battalion was reconstituted in England with large drafts from the Somerset Light Infantry so that only a third remained Bucks men. It had a series of stations in Devon and then Lincolnshire. In March 1943 it was selected as the infantry battalion of No 6 Beach Group, the latter designed to land and manage men, vehicles and stores across hostile open beaches in the early days of a seaborne invasion. The Bucks landed on SWORD Beach on D-Day, 6 June 1944. Their initial task was to land amongst the first assault waves and to maintain two divisions for 48 hours, and thereafter to land up to 4,000 tons of supplies a day.

By 22 June 1944, 6 Beach Group's function had been fulfilled and the 1<sup>st</sup> Bucks was returned to its true roll of an infantry battalion, moving inland to defend the locks at Ouistreham. It seemed destined to be disbanded as drafts were sent to other regiments. Then, in February 1945, it was designated as a 'T' or Target Force Battalion intended to forge ahead and seize and hold installations of special military and technological interest as the allies advanced into the Netherlands and Germany itself. This role continued until December 1945, the battalion being put into suspended animation in June 1946 and wound up in August 1946.



*Bucks Battalion 'T' Force at the liberation of Delft, 8 May 1945*

The 99<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment was also reconstituted in England and, with the rest of 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, sent to the East Riding where it remained until moving to Tewkesbury in December 1941. In March 1942, however, the division was sent to India. After training in the Deccan and at Poona, it was committed to the Arakan in support of 6 Infantry Brigade in January 1943, an operation that showed that much still needed to be learned about fighting the Japanese in the jungle. Intensive jungle training was undertaken through the course of 1943 and when the Japanese launched a new offensive into Assam, 6 Infantry Brigade with the 99<sup>th</sup> again in close support spearheaded the relief of Kohima in March and April 1944. There was often vicious hand to hand fighting before the Japanese were driven back in May 1944. The 99<sup>th</sup> took part in the advance into Burma in December 1944, being withdrawn back to India after the fall of Mandalay in March 1945. Most returned to England in November 1945 but a small cadre remained until the regiment passed into suspended animation in August 1946.



*A 3.7" howitzer of 393 Battery being manhandled into position on the road to Imphal, June 1944*



## The Wahagnies Trombone

In January 1940 the Bucks Battalion was billeted in the village of Wahagnies (pronounced “Warknees” by the English soldiers) on the France/Belgium border. On 14 May 1940 Corporal Stan Fowler of the Bucks Battalion Regimental Band had asked the elderly French landlady in his billet if he could hide 13 of the Regimental Band musical instruments in her house and she agreed.

On 28 May the German 2nd Battalion 497 Regiment commanded by Colonel Hocker Heinrich entered Wahagnies and executed 17 civilian Frenchmen as reprisals for local French Resistance activity. The elderly French landlady’s house was searched for weapons by the German troops but she did not disclose the hiding place of the instruments despite being threatened and charged as a collaborator with the British army. The rest of the band’s instruments hidden elsewhere were discovered.

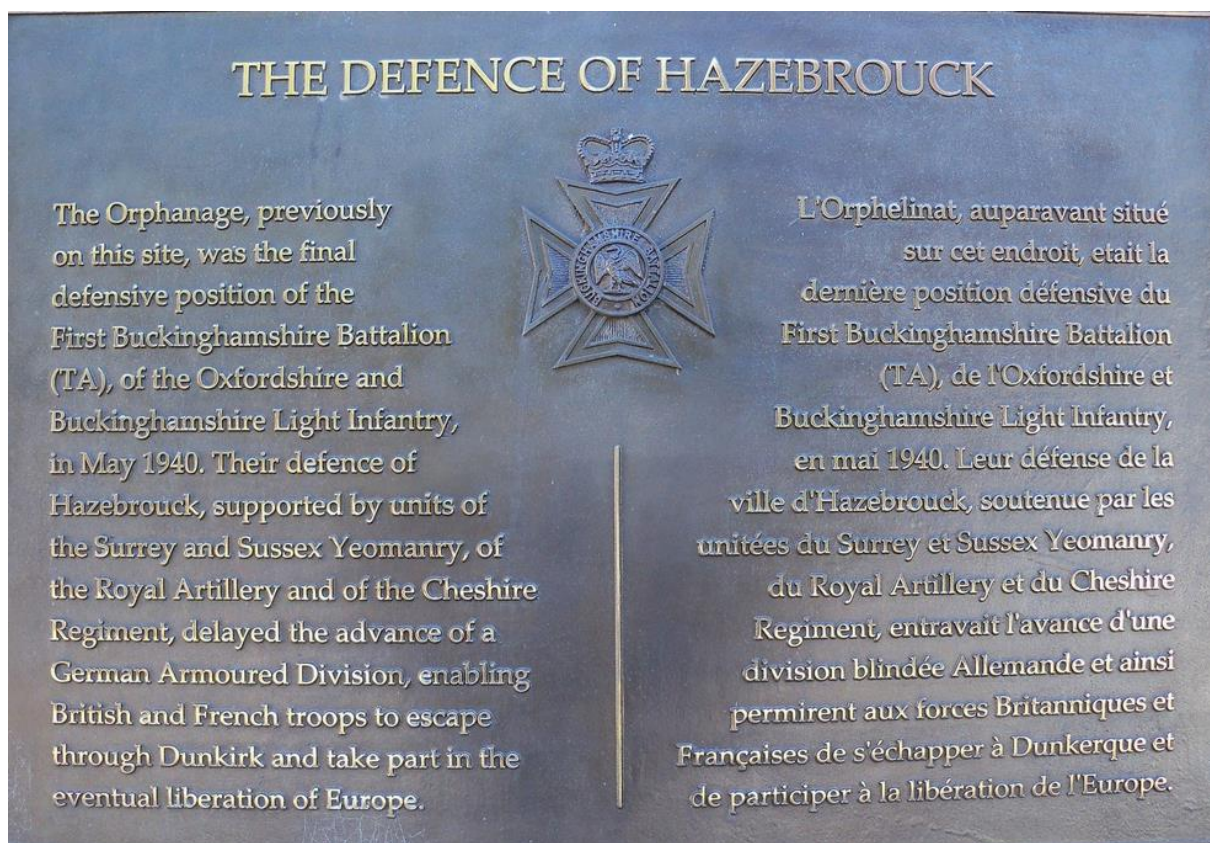
In October 1940 the battalion’s Honorary Colonel Lord Cottesloe set up a County Subscription Fund and bought a replacement set of reconditioned silver-band instruments for the Band and Bugles.



*Fellow bandsmen, Sergeants Carr and Fowler (Right), pictured at Waddesdon*

The now Sergeant Fowler returned to Wahagnies on 3 October 1944 and collected those band instruments from his former landlady who had kept them hidden under the cellar floorboards. The instruments were returned to Aylesbury and were played by the Royal Artillery Band when the joint honorary colonel, H.R.H. Princess Marina, visited the Bucks Battalion Old Comrades Association in 1956 with four of the 1940 Bucks Battalion Wahagnies bandsmen still on parade with the Band.

In 2014 a brass trombone stamped BUCKS BATT was handed into The Rifles Oxford Office by SSAFA. The Boosey & Co. records show it was made in 1924, and, therefore, it was one of those hidden at Wahagnies. It now forms part of the BMMT collection.



*The commemorative plaque unveiled on the site of the orphanage at Hazebrouck, July 2007*