

# **THE MERCIAN REGIMENT**

**Quarterly Newsletter - Q1 2021**

## **1 MERCIAN UPDATE**

*Capt T PrettyJohn*

The 1st Battalion is now fully deployed, standing firm on operations in Estonia as the NATO enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup. We are embedded within the 1st Estonian Brigade based at Tapa Camp in the north of the country, our mission: to deter any aggression against our Baltic allies on their eastern border with Russia. After a series of integration exercises we are now at full readiness to strike hard against any threat to NATO collective security. The Estonians have been impressed not just by our determination to overcome the challenges of our deployment, but our humility and willingness to learn from them about their history fighting for their freedom in the dense forests and marshes that range across the country.

To maintain our readiness in this role against the backdrop of COVID-19, we are committed to a robust programme of contact tracing and isolations while in country. This can be frustrating for our soldiers who want to get out, train and experience everything Estonia has to offer, but we place our mission first and must ensure our credibility and professional reputation amongst the Estonian people is of the highest order. We look forward to more tough training alongside our allies during the major Exercise SPRING STORM, when we rehearse the defence of Estonia across the entire country, and travelling to live firing ranges in Latvia to train with other NATO partners.

## **2 MERCIAN Ex ASKARI STORM**

At the beginning of the year our 2nd Battalion deployed to Kenya on Ex ASKARI STORM. The exercise aims to put soldiers to their limits by exposing them to harsh temperatures in an arid environment.

Below are a series of images showcasing the Bn's efforts in Kenya over the first quarter of the year. As of writing the 2nd Battalion have returned to Weeton Barracks.

Watch online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejesCHxe534>

## **4 MERCIAN B (MALTA) COMPANY**

*Capt Matt Styles, Coy 2IC*

During the last three months, the company has continued to support Op CABRIT with personnel mobilised and deployed and had personnel attend Exercise SAXON SHIELD in Otterburn.

We have recently welcomed back Ptes Sanderson, Goldsmith and LCpl Turner from operations in Estonia where Pte Sanderson is to be commended for his excellent performance on the Potential Junior Non-Commissioned Officer course, outperforming many of his Regular counterparts. Well done!

As the company prepare to welcome back the OC, Major Bowden-Williams, in May we saw Privates Stanley, Kirby and Stafford all deploy on the next cycle of Op CABRIT where they continue to fly the B (Malta) Company flag on operations deployed with our regular counterparts.

Members of the company deployed on Exercise SAXON SHIELD in Otterburn in early March which was hastily arranged following the late notice Covid-19 induced cancellation of our planned Live Firing and Tactical Training Exercise. Exercise SAXON SHIELD was a Mandatory Annual Training Test week, covering the core functions of soldiering, but completed within a tactical exercise. Despite the tactical scenario, Cpl Simpson still managed to bask in the sunshine on the ranges during a break, it's a tough life as the Company's Chef!

As we look forward to Covid-19 restrictions being eased, we are looking forward to physical training as a company again and having the opportunity for our annual families day to say thank you in person to the families of our soldiers, who have again been steadfast and unwavering in their support during these unprecedented times. On behalf of the B (MALTA) Coy command team, thank you and know that your support has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated!

#### **4 MERCIAN C (KOHIMA) COMPANY**

*Maj Gareth Dixon, OC C Coy*

The first quarter of 2021 has been a challenging time for C (Kohima) Company, with the impact of the national lockdown curtailing much of our face-to-face training. Concentrated efforts across the company and wider Battalion did net an innovative delivery of virtual training, with online lessons being delivered by our more technologically adept troops. However, there has been continued success in our recruiting efforts and we continue to grow in the face of this adversity.

We have welcomed Capt Ben Athow-Frost as the Company 2IC and attested a good number of new recruits into our family. Key to maintaining our operational resilience and readiness was our contribution to Ex SAXON SHIELD, ensuring that the soldiers of C (Kohima) Company remain current and competent always ready to support our Regular Army colleagues on operations.

#### **RECRUIT TRAINING IN A COVID ENVIRONMENT**

With the typically inventive approach to getting things done by our Recruit Mentor Team, our recruit training has continued apace. During the latest lockdown period, the team have successfully delivered weekly training through a combination of virtually hosted media and socially distanced face-to-face training. This has been critical to ensuring that our recruits developed and maintained the skills necessary to complete Phase 1 and the Combat Infantry Course.

Continuing this output under the imposed restrictions has been challenging but the team have managed to recruit and put five personnel through the entire recruit process this year with a further 24 in Phase 1 or 2 training and a healthy number in the recruit selection pipeline – a great achievement given the circumstances.

#### **4 MERCIAN C (KOHIMA) COMPANY ON Ex SAXON SHIELD**

*2Lt Emile Mackney*

Exercise SAXON SHIELD was a 10-day annual training exercise that enabled troops from 4 MERCIAN and a contingent 5RRF to complete Military Annual Training Tests

(MATTs) in a tactical scenario. This mandatory training is designed to maintain Reservist's currency, competency and allows the Battalion to remain ready to support our Regular counterparts on operations and deployments.

The week started on the ranges where troops completed their Weapon Handling Tests (WHTs) and fired the Annual Combat Marksmanship Test (ACMT). Most had not fired for up to a year prior to this exercise so it was a well needed refresher for troops to regain confidence in their use of the personal weapon. Soldiers did not only undertake the IW SA-80 A2 WHT but also the opportunity to train in the GPMG and the Glock pistol weapon systems on the day.

Over the course of the week, the Battalion undertook some physical training sessions and despite the reduction in opportunities to train due to COVID-19, all members of the Bn made great progress and completed the training in the allotted time.

The troops also took part in a fire team strength, day and night navigation exercise while being tracked by a 'hunter force'. This tested individual map reading skills and fitness whilst incorporating elements of SERE. Counter explosive ordnance, Diversity and inclusion, CBRN and battlefield casualty drills finished off the MATTs aspect, with everyone looking forward to a short confirmatory exercise in the field.

#### CONFIRMATORY EXERCISE

*2Lt Ben St Clair Gray*

The confirmatory exercise phase of Ex SAXON SHIELD saw a culmination of all the skills that had been learned throughout the week, aiming to apply them to a tactical scenario. A platoon of soldiers, as well as a Company Headquarters deployed to the training area tasked to disrupt and destroy enemy forces. The tactical insertion was followed by the establishment of a platoon harbour, seeing the return to the basic skills and drills that are fundamental for good soldiering. The next morning was marked by a visit from Commander 20th Armoured Infantry Brigade and the Brigade Sergeant Major who spent time talking to the troops and answering questions. Their presence and words sharpened the minds of the fighting troops as they prepared to conduct a recce and night ambush on an enemy weapon and IED exchange point.

As dawn broke, the enemy used IED chemical irritants against the platoon, leading to a challenging extraction in full CBRN PPE, Dress State 4 (Romeo) to a decontamination lane. Just as we were catching breath, two casualties were inflicted upon us and the exercise was concluded with a gruelling CASEVAC extraction back to camp and ENDEX.

#### **4 MERCIAN D (DRAGON) COMPANY**

*Maj Will Rose, OC D Coy*

Variety of experience has been the theme for D Coy personnel for the last three months. We have, to a degree, been restricted to remote 'zoom' lessons and self-recorded fitness sessions but have still been active where possible. Sgt Birks has remained deployed on the "Eastern Front" with 5 RIFLES on Op CABRIT, enduring severe cold and deep snow whilst Pte Dawson remained mobilised providing admin support to the Covid response.

LCpl Adams attended Section Commander's Battle Course (Junior Brecon) alas Covid-19 disappointingly stopped LCpl Britton from joining him and Cpl Tristram attended the Machine Gun Platoon Commander's Course. D Coy also provided a contingent on Ex SAXON SHIELD which took place in a wintry Otterburn, where the tough terrain tested all and we saw Ptes Alcock, Lymer and Goodall dragging the OC around the day and night navigation exercise! Ptes Latham and Boyes completed BRAVOs and congratulations go to Pte Dulson who passed the Combat Infantry Course (R).

A stalwart of the coy, LCpl Grant is congratulated on becoming a father for the first time, our best wishes go to him and his family; and long serving Pte Rushton is also due to become a first time father as this article goes to press!

This year will see circa 40 members of D Coy qualify for their Certificate of Efficiency (Annual Bounty) despite Covid-19 and we are very much looking forward to returning to normal training in Spring 21.

#### **4 MERCIAN HQ COMPANY SECTION COMMANDERS BATTLE COURSE**

*LCpl Jack Harley*

When we arrived at IBS Brecon in January, the full extent of the weather had not quite hit, however, the ground was still littered with snow. We were all prepared and keen to push through the weather and to get stuck into the real meat of the course, section attacks. Having had lessons on the Section Quick Battle Orders slate (QAOS card), we started with a TEWT from our DS, who talked us through the fundamentals of the attack from a section commander's point of view. Following this, we went straight into two days of attacks where each of the section members took turns in leading an attack as commander and then in the 2IC role. The attacks went well as we pushed through difficult ground and difficult weather conditions to take the positions from the dug in enemy.

We learned so much about the role and gained valuable experience from the course. After the section attacks, we moved onto complex terrain, namely urban operations and trench clearing, the latter being completely new to me. The trench phase was one of the most enjoyable experiences I have had with the army to date. The trenches provided a valuable insight into a lesser known aspect of warfare from my perspective.

Moving onto the orders process, we were given a set of orders and had to extract from them the detail required to write our own set of orders. The process, while at first quite alien to me, soon made much more sense as we broke it down into stages and focused on the main effort of them. During the course we learned a great deal from our instructors, who all took the time to show us the proper way of doing things and gave us all incredibly useful knowledge from which we could use in our future careers as section commanders.

#### **4 MERCIAN HQ COMPANY QM's PLATOON**

*Maj Brian Johnston MBE (QM (V))*

Despite continuing to support our mobilised Reservists on Op CABRIT in Estonia, 4 MERCIAN QM's Department has remained committed to supporting various events throughout the year with company and Battalion training. Unfortunately, it was not possible to carry out the planned Ex WARHAMMER Live Firing Tactical Training (LFTT) camp due to the national lockdown, however, the Battalion has been able to complete an Annual Continuous Training (ACT) exercise - Ex SAXON SHIELD, in Otterburn Training Area. All this with the added challenge of ensuring that we adhered to the Force Health Protection measures designed to protect our personnel during COVID 19 restrictions.

The QM's Department is close-knit team who have consistently proved their ability to deliver first class logistic support to Battalion training. Ex SAXON SHIELD has been no exception. With the short notice change of plan, the QM's Platoon adapted their plan to support Ex WARHAMMER to Ex SAXON SHIELD and ensured the battalion focused not only on their field training but also Equipment Care.

Concurrently, day to day activity continued, enabling the Battalion to function and pass all external logistic inspections.

On completion of Ex SAXON SHIELD, the QM's Department are already planning for the Battalion overseas training exercise (Ex SAVA STAR) taking place in Croatia during Sep 21.

Ex SAXON SHIELD was also the final exercise for the Reserve RQMS, WO2 Kev Pratt, who enlisted into the Army Reserves in November 1984 and has completed over 37 years of loyal service. During his career, he has given selfless commitment and exemplary service to the Army and his Regiment. He has served on operations in Iraq, Short Term Training Team tasks in Kazakhstan and Uganda and most recently Op RESCRIPT in support of the UK response to Covid-19. A well respected and popular member of 4 MERCIAN, we wish Kev well in the future and look forward to his visits as a full time civilian.

#### **4 MERCIAN QM's DEPARTMENT - 60th BIRTHDAY PRESENTATION**

Mr Adrian Lewis joined 4 MERCIAN as the civilian fitter in October 2016, a post that had been gapped for more than a year. He joined us without any previous knowledge of working with the Army and quickly set about getting the green fleet back on the road in his usual friendly and nothing is too difficult manner.

He has instrumental in ensuring that the unit has delivered consistently high results during external inspection (LEA) and is a much-valued member of the Quartermaster's Department and 4 MERCIAN.

Ade recently celebrated his 60th birthday and as a small token of our appreciation for all that he does, the G4 team presented him with a Landrover and trailer and a Mercian Regiment themed cake made by our own Ms Vicky Shipton. The presentation was made in a small, socially distanced gathering of the staff that were in the office at the time, with several others joining us remotely via skype to wish him many happy returns.

#### **4 MERCIAN VOLUNTEERING IN KENYA - MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

*Pte Alex Boyer, HQ Coy*

I went to Kenya in January 2021 and my experience there could be summarised as the best month of my life. I joined 4 MERCIAN in August 2020 in order to achieve a fruitful and worthwhile gap year before going on to university in 2021, and I wanted to add some variety to my experiences. My sixth form provided me with a list of gap year suggestions such as apprenticeships, scuba diving in Australia, becoming a nanny and building churches across the world, but a company called Africa & Asia Venture (AV) provided me with exactly what I needed; volunteering as a teacher, an unfamiliar country, a difficult task with plenty of scope for personal development. After much deliberation on which country to go to, I settled on Kenya.

Despite the third lockdown in the UK, I arrived in Kenya on 15th January 2021, along with 10 other volunteers and we lived amongst the locals in an Islamic town, which is made up of lots of smaller villages, called Msambweni. Kenyan people are the nicest and most welcoming people I've ever met. Army routine helped me settle in quickly unlike some of the other volunteers who really struggled during the first few days. On day four we were taken to our designated schools and mine was called Vingujini Primary School. I met the Head Teacher and the more 'scary' Deputy Head, a wise woman who had undoubtedly been through a lot in her life. As I am going on to study History at University, I managed to convince the Deputy Head into allowing me to teach Kenyan Social Studies (a combination of Kenyan History, Geography and Culture) with English and Physical Education to mainly the year 5 age group. School days lasted from 0815hrs until 1510hrs, with lessons only lasting 35 minutes due to the constant yet beautiful 30+ degree heat. Once a week I'd even attend the local Kenyan Scouts group and help them perfect their drill, the effort and enjoyment they put in was impressive. After school, we would relax for a bit on the beach that was 20 seconds away from our house in Mwambe Village, a stark contrast to life under lockdown in the United Kingdom at the time. During my relatively short stay I would organise weekend and evening activities, such as fishing, exploring, fitness, football with the locals, safari, trekking and we even attended a two day long Muslim wedding celebration.

All lessons in Kenyan schools are supposed to be taught in English as it is the official language of Kenya (Kiswahilli being the national language), however the majority of the children did not speak English fluently. This meant that all their textbooks were also in English and what really shocked me was that the English terminology that they were learning in year 5. I was teaching words and definitions that I had learnt when I was doing my GCSEs, such as population density, foreign exchange market and subsistence farming. Consequently, it was little wonder that children were constantly held back in Kenyan schools. One boy in my class called Abdullah (who tried really hard) was 16 years old and had been in school for ten years and was in a class whose youngest was 9 years old (In fact the oldest at Vingujini Primary school is 24 years old). Motivating the children who had been held back for so long was also an instrumental task. After all, 'who was this '\*Mzungu' who came all the way from rich England to teach them about their own country'? Testing knowledge throughout the lesson was initially futile, as when I'd either pick on someone to answer a question or ask the whole class, there would be silence or a clueless face. These children knew how to play the game as they are taught by Mzungu volunteers almost every year. I

had to quickly think of a strategy to counter this problem, so that I wouldn't be torn apart. Therefore, good communication was a major challenge when teaching my 60+ strong class of crammed Kenyan children of mixed ages.

Despite all the fun I was having, I had to mitigate the challenges I was facing during teaching. Chai (a brew) brought in a flask kept me going through the heat. And when it comes to teaching complicated English, there is a simple solution: slow it down. If I thought they were not understanding what I was saying, I'd take a step back, wait for a few seconds and simplify the sentence further whilst getting them to repeat to me what I had just said so that they would internalise the information. I'd keep them on their toes by testing their knowledge, this was made easier by rewarding them for putting in effort. Bribery with sweets and Bourbon biscuits worked brilliantly, however making the rest of the class congratulate the effort, or a simple "well done" also went a long way in motivating the students to be courageous in answering questions.

In PE lessons, I'd create competition within the class by making competitive mixed teams. I'd work each team up before the match and have them screaming that their team is better, which resulted in some of the best football I've ever witnessed from 10-14-year-olds. If the class had behaved well in the previous lesson, I'd allowed them to continue the game into their breaks and after school (some of my favourite memories are from penalty shoot outs between teams Simba and Pumba after the school day had finished). Trying to control the class proved difficult. However, I knew that shouting and punishment is not the way to do it and rewarding good behavior is. After the first week, all I had to do was pause for a few seconds and the class would settle down, the hardworking students would tell the chatterboxes to 'kimya' (shut up), which would be accompanied by a slap on the back of the head (from them). Another effective tool for controlling the class was simple Swahilli phrases, which would shock the children each time I came up with a new phrase. It also created an illusion that I knew what they were whispering during my lessons, resulting in them getting paranoid, and ultimately completing their work. Teaching is challenging; however, that made it all the more rewarding, I loved every minute of it, and I miss the children the most. I now understand how difficult I made the lives of my teachers at school!

Although I did not want to leave, I managed to achieve everything I wanted during my time in Kenya. My confidence has grown from the challenges of an unfamiliar environment, and I fell in love with a country within a continent that I'd never experienced before. Teaching, while tough and something I don't aspire to do as a career, has rewarded me with developing my leadership, communication and organisational skills. I can't wait to go back.

*\*Mzungu - An East African term for a white person.*

## **THE BAND OF THE MERCIAN REGIMENT**

*CSgt Jake Lees (PSI)*

Although face to face training has been limited by the ongoing pandemic, The Band of the Mercian Regiment has had a busy period focussing on CPD, CEQ training, and establishing a new structure and administrative roles, implemented by the Director of Music, to see the Band move forward.



In a particularly cold and wet January weather spell, Musician Kasjan Kryszczuk completed his Basic Training Bravo course at ATR Grantham. This will enable him to fulfil his ambition of a reserve to regular transfer. Musician Kryszczuk proved himself to be a determined and efficient rifleman - a different choice of "weapon" to his usual French Horn! This quarter also saw Musician Mikey Cooper sit and pass his CEQ3 General Musicianship papers 1 and 2, in a socially distanced, Covid-19 safe, exam room. The CEQs are the professional qualifications that Army Musicians work towards and cover all elements of musical theory and practice. Congratulations!

In February, CSgt Marc Wheeler joined 'Watchman' in visiting and providing some 'pomp and ceremony' to the celebrations for Pte Arthur Rollins, a South Staffordshire Regiment Veteran, who turned 104 years old. Pte Rollins has a fascinating service history within our Regimental family and looked like he very much enjoyed his day.

Members of The Band of the Mercian Regiment have been using the training time available to them to engage in musical CPD. Over the past few weeks, the Musicians have been exploring and engaging with the new CPD package that is now available to all Army Musicians. This is specific training based around skills such as aural training, elements of theory and active listening, and it is designed to build on the knowledge used in the CEQ training and assessments. This resource also means Musicians have access to a wide variety of recordings, analysis and essays from a specially set up library of resources. As well as musical CPD, Musicians have also been completing their MATTs, working on maintaining and advancing their personal playing skills, and joining in with Battalion PT to maintain their fitness levels.

The Band has recently established a new structure and administrative roles for our musicians. This will allow opportunities for leadership, development and progression for our musicians of all ranks as well as establishing responsibilities and a training review. The virtual training platform has meant that there has been time to establish these roles and to start many projects and virtual collaborations that will come to fruition when face to face training resumes. Lockdown does not stop the music, or the team spirit – but there is no denying that we are looking forward to being back together again!

#### **4919934 Pte ARTHUR ROLLINS - 1st Bn, SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE REGIMENT 1939-1946**

On 4th February 21, Arthur Rollins celebrated his 104th birthday at his residential care home in Worcester, surrounded by family and friends. Representation from the Staffordshire Regiment's 'Watchman' and the Band of The Mercian Regiment helped him celebrate this momentous occasion.

In December 1940, Arthur was involved in Operation COMPASS, the first large military operation of the Western Desert Campaign during WW2. In 1942 he was involved with Field Marshal Montgomery's 8th Army in other major battles in The North Africa campaign such as Tobruk and El Alamein and in 1944, he was sent to serve as a member of an Air Landing Unit during the 2nd Chindit Expedition operating behind Japanese lines in Burma.

In March 1944, a glider was to pitch Arthur into the thickest of hand-to-hand combat with enemy forces constantly at no more than bayonet's tip away. Fighting over

mountains, in dense jungles and waist deep water, close personal combat was the order of the day.

Arthur remained in Burma until the end of the war. In 1946 he was posted to India where the Battalion trained as a parachute Battalion. 1946 saw Arthur return to the UK where he went back to work at Royal Worcester Porcelain, he was made foreman and remained employed there until he retired. Retirement however was not for him, and he became a gardener for many years at the Diglis House Hotel which still stands on the banks of the River Severn today.

## **DERBYSHIRE ACF LORD LIEUTENANT CADET INVESTITURE**

*SSI Chadwick, PRO*

On Monday 25th January, members of HM Lord-Lieutenants Office, The Army Cadet Force and The Air Training Corps came together to invest this year's HM Lord-Lieutenant's cadets.

The evening began with Col C Doyle welcoming everybody to the meeting to officially present the newly appointed cadets to the Lord Lieutenant, Mrs Elizabeth Fothergill CBE. He remarked that the cadets that have been chosen have shown the qualities of a remarkable cadet highlighting the exemplification of the Cadet Forces aims and initiatives.

This year's Army Cadet Force Lord Lieutenant's cadet is Cdt CSgt Claudia Gration, from Alfreton Detachment, B Company, who has had her tenure extended for another year due to the current Covid - 19 pandemic. Cdt CSgt Gration discussed being fortunate to attend parades and events at the beginning of 2020 before the lockdown was imposed and gave thanks for her tenure extension, highlighting that she is looking forward to another more successful year as the ACF's Lord Lieutenant Cadet for 2021.

The Lord Lieutenant concluded the evening by thanking those cadets who showed exemplary commitment during their tenure last year. Mrs Fothergill CBE spoke of the qualities they had shown as being honourable and a tangible recognition of their qualities and abilities. Mrs Fothergill CBE congratulates those appointed for this year and encourages them to grasp every opportunity possible.

Finally, the investiture closed, with the Lord Lieutenant thanking all officers and adult volunteers in both cadet forces, for ensuring their engagement with cadets throughout the lockdown, hoping that they will return to face-to-face training as soon as the restrictions permit.

## **STOCKPORT BRANCH CRA & MVRA THE MERCIAN REGIMENTAL ASSOCIATION COVID-19**

The Coronavirus pandemic has obviously continued to have a huge impact upon proceedings. However, we have embraced technology to facilitate both Committee Meetings, and also full Branch Meetings. The Branch Meetings have had members logging in from Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Newcastle on Tyne and even Preston! We are now looking at investing in this technology to enable the future face-

to-face meetings to be broadcast internationally. This will also allow us to engage more fully with our less mobile members who perhaps find it difficult to be present at the monthly get-together.

### 73rd EAST CHESHIRE REUNION (ECR)

Covid also meant that we could not hold the 73d ECR in its normal format. The occasion was observed with a Covid-secure Act of Remembrance at the ARC Stockport to maintain the continuity. Planning is underway for the 74th ECR at Stockport on 30th October 2021. Ticket information to follow.

### CHESHIRE REGIMENT MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTION

The Cheshire Regiment has no memorial at the NMA; this is now being rectified by a group co-ordinated by the Cheshire Regiment Association. Stockport Branch MRA was pleased to support this initiative by a donation of £2,000. Below is pictured Mike Pilkington (Branch Chair) presenting the cheque to Harold Riley (Branch Vice Chair – Cheshire Regiment). The photograph was taken between lockdowns in anticipation of the funding action (preparation and planning...etc!).

### **MERCIAN VOLUNTEERS REGIMENTAL ASSOCIATION**

Obviously, our activities have been limited due the lockdowns, but we have been able to hold meetings using 'Zoom'. Branches are keeping in touch with their members via, the Telephone and Facebook. We look forward to when we can meet again.

Kidderminster will be able to begin playing golf again and Stockport their long-distance walks. It is hoped that we will be able to hold our event at the National Memorial Arboretum in August, but only time will tell.

We were not able to celebrate the Anniversary of the formation of the 2nd Battalion Mercian Volunteers thirty years ago, except on Facebook.

### **CHESHIRE REGIMENTAL ASSOCIATION**

*Peter Gresty*

The 106th Anniversary of the Battle of Mons was remembered in the Regimental Garden in Chester Cathedral on the 13th of September with a small wreath laying ceremony. Mike Huntriss laid the wreath, Derek Sykes carried the standard and Paul Wilkinson blew Last Post. It was a small affair with few attendees, because of the pandemic, but a format that can be used going forward. Meanwhile in Belgium the Bourgmestre of Quievrain, Mme Veronique Damee accompanied by M Frederic Depont, laid wreaths at the war graves in Audregnies Cemetery and at the battlefield memorial to mark the anniversary.

As we are all aware remembrance services were severely interrupted last year but a few branches did manage pay their respects and whilst the main event in London was a fraction of its normal size our Southern Region arranged, with the Royal British Legion, for a wreath to be laid at the Cenotaph on our behalf, sadly the Field of Remembrance was also not accessible for Tony Twiss who was to have hosted on our behalf.

The 73rd East Cheshire Reunion was postponed, reduced and postponed again before going ahead as a very much smaller service of remembrance that was held in early December, the importance of maintaining the tradition of this reunion is to maintain its unbroken run with this year's being the 74th and hopefully on to a gala event celebrating 75 years in 2022.

Despite the pandemic a few people did manage to get over to Northern Ireland for the Droppin Well Memorial early in December where Ken Cooper oversaw a much smaller event for the 38th anniversary of that terrible event. Thanks go to Alan Grundy, Steve (Sam) Nulty and Sue Jones for making the journey under difficult circumstances.

CRA Branches have been very supportive of the Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Clubs which have sprung up and I know the following in Cheshire are very well supported with people travelling many miles to attend: Stockport, Runcorn, Ellesmere Port, Northwich, Knutsford, and Macclesfield. The Stockport club even got a mention in the House of Commons recently.

The walking group, aptly called Bimble 22, is still quite active, between lockdowns, and I know they are just waiting for this lockdown to end so they can don their rucksacks again and get out for what they call "Wild Camping. They recently held a competition to design a hat for its members as can be seen on the photograph below.

There is always a silver lining if we look hard enough and in our case, it wasn't too slow to come to light. Derek Sykes, recipient of Her Majesty's Lord Lieutenant's Certificate of Meritorious Service Award for Veterans, although he received his award through the mail because of the COVID pandemic.

Mental health has been a major concern for our members over the last year and sadly a couple of the names at the start of this meeting decided they could not continue so importantly branches have been extremely active making sure they have been keeping in touch with members through Telephone calls, WhatsApp Groups, Skype, Google and Zoom meetings, online quizzes, newsletters and walking groups to get people out of the house.

Some members are shopping for other members or taking people to hospital for appointments or just meeting up for a socially distanced coffee, in other words the association doing what it does best and that is supporting each other. The good news of course is the COVID-19 Vaccine which means many of our members have already had their 1st jab and even for a small number their 2nd as well.