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PARACHUTE BATTALION
ASSOCIATION



151/156 Parachute Battalion Association

Newsletter 4 | December 2022



151/156 PARACHUTE BATTALION 81ST ANNUAL REUNION & THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FORMATION OF THE PARACHUTE REGIMENT

Friday/Saturday 7th/8th October 2022

Saltby Airfield (Buckminster Gliding Club)

The events taking place on Friday, 7th October began at Saltby Airfield and commenced with the service taken by Padre Brian McAvoy at the Memorial stones. The wreaths were laid by Major Chris McGinley Royal Signals 216 Parachute Signal Squadron on behalf of the Parachute Regiment and by Air Marshall Philip Sturley on behalf of the Royal Air Force. Lunch followed in the Clubhouse with wartime music provided by Nigel Maddison. During this time, talks were given by the Air Marshall on the relationship between the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Air Force; Brian Fare from the Melton History Group spoke about Saltby Airfield, which was the main departure point for most of the British paratroopers en route to Arnhem in September 1944; and Falkland War veterans Andy McColgan and Dave Raes gave their gripping account of the part they played in that campaign whilst serving with the Parachute Regiment. The last one was particularly appropriate given that 2022 was the 40th anniversary of that conflict.



Menu

Starters

*Cream of mushroom soup, warm penny loaf
Prawn, apple & celery salad, Marie Rose dressing
Brie Brûlée - baked with red onion chutney, crusty bread*

Main Courses

*Roast Leg of Lamb - redcurrant & mint stuffing,
rich gravy with redcurrant & port
Beef Wellington - fillet of beef, chicken liver pate &
mushrooms, encased in puff pastry, with a red wine sauce
Homemade Smoked Haddock, cheddar & chive Fishcakes,
horseradish mayonnaise
Courgette, Pine Nut & Ricotta Tart (v)*

Puddings

*Baked Cherry Bakewell Cheesecake
Lemon Posset - light zesty lemon cream, homemade
shortbread
Apple & Sultana Strudel & custard
Followed by freshly brewed filter coffee or
English breakfast tea & mint chocolates*

FAREWELL TO JOHN JEFFRIES



Flowers laid for Royal Signaller John Jeffries in Oosterbeek War Cemetery.

John Jeffries, a Royal Signaller attached to the 4th Brigade at Arnhem, was wounded when he parachuted onto the DZ with the 156 Parachute Battalion. We all have fond memories of John, one of our most popular veterans. Many will remember his renditions of wartime songs accompanied by his daughter, Lynn, at Saltby Airfield. He was the last Arnhem veteran to parachute onto the Ginkelseheide in September 2019, an amazing achievement.

It was a memorable moment in Arnhem this year when John's final wish was carried out and his ashes interred at the Oosterbeek War Cemetery on Friday, 16th September with all the ceremony he deserved.

81st Anniversary

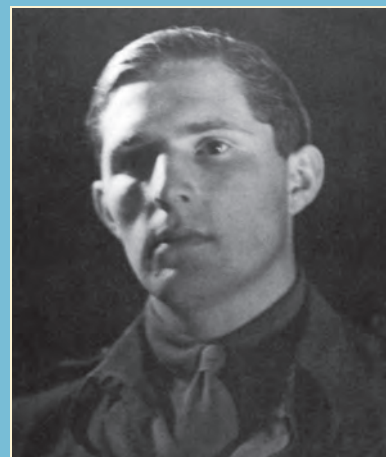


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PARACHUTE BATTALION

Annual Reunion Dinner

*Sysonby Knoll Hotel, Melton Mowbray,
Friday 7th October 2022*



Captain Michael Lees

Michael Lees joined 151 Parachute Battalion in India in March 1942 as a lieutenant. During February of the following year, the battalion was based in Palestine, and leave in Cairo was a welcome change from routine soldiering. Lees was always one to seize an opportunity and made for a bar at the Shepherd's Hotel, a favourite of British officers.

Whilst sitting at a table at the hotel, Lees was joined by a British officer celebrating his promotion and accompanied by a glamorous blonde. The inebriated officer was boasting to Lees about the recent exploits which had led to his promotion in a secret organisation. He crucially mentioned that the Special Operations Executive (SOE) HQ was situated nearby. Lees, who was disappointed at not yet having seen action, became entranced by the stories that flowed. He saw an opportunity for adventure.

The blonde, feeling ignored, had become bored and disappeared. Lees eventually put his new-found 'friend' to bed who, by this time, had been convinced that he had been at school with Lees. The germ of a seed had taken root and Lees began to hatch a plan to join the SOE, or the 'Tweed Cap Boys' as they were known.

It was not a straight-forward route, and it took three attempts, but eventually Lees talked his way in. Having impressed in training, in June 1943, Lees was parachuted into Serbia. His mission was to sabotage rail links, which was beset with problems, but he managed to successfully complete his task.

His next mission was in Northern Italy in January 1944, and he was parachuted into a mountainous region there. He established a mixed force of Italian Partisans, escaped Russians, deluded Germans and even ex Foreign Legionnaires. Local girls became his spies, their eyes and ears helping to locate suitable targets for sabotage. They hit the jackpot, locating an important German HQ. To bolster his existing force, Lees requested SAS assistance and a party of 30 joined him to attack and destroy this target. His achievement here against the German war machine was significant if somewhat controversial.

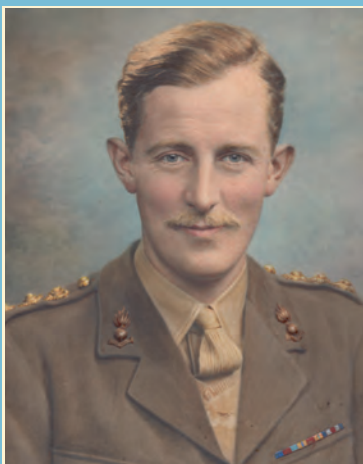
REMEMBERED



Lieutenant Michael Wenner

By the time Captain Lees' exploits in Italy had concluded, his former 151 colleague, Captain Wenner, was readying his unit to go into action in the same battle zone in Northern Italy.

Wenner had broken his leg twice previously and been told that he would not be able to parachute again. He, therefore, joined 1st Parachute Brigade as a staff officer but decided that a desk job was not for him. Determined to see action, in 1944 he transferred to the 9th Scottish Commandos where he was made Intelligence Officer. With his new unit, he would be in the vanguard of the action across Lake Commachio which would be, in effect, the first move by the Allied armies signalling the big push forward in their attempt to destroy the Germans in Northern Italy beginning on 2nd April 1945. By the end of the month, they had indeed surrendered and, following the cessation of hostilities Michael could return to his studies at Oxford.



Captain Raymond Stevens, RA (Royal Artillery)

Captain Michael Stevens' commemorative plaque in Oosterbeek.



On Saturday, 23rd September 1944, the Germans made a concerted effort to crush the survivors of the 156 Parachute Battalion and the rest of 1st Airborne Division fighting around the perimeter in Oosterbeek.

At this stage in the battle, the 156 consisted of around 50 men split into two platoons: one commanded by Lieutenant Piers St Aubyn and the other by Captain Raymond Stevens. The latter was, in fact, attached as the Battalion Forward Observation Officer (FOO) whose role should have been to radio for artillery fire support. Events during the battle, however, had required his role to be utterly changed and he was now commanding paratroopers. During the previous few days, Stevens had established himself leading numerous defensive actions. In doing so, he had quickly become accepted as 'one of the mob'. No longer a FOO but considered a para by those who fought with him.

Later, on that Saturday, the Germans attacked with tanks, supported by infantry, and the 156 resisted fiercely from their positions at the crossroads of Paul Krugerstraat and Mariaweg. The first tank broke through within a few yards of them but was put out of action. From his trench in the garden opposite the Crum's damaged bakery, William Hurst of C Company – armed with a Bren gun – despatched the crew as they bailed out. He was subsequently hit and seriously wounded by the fragment of a shell which had exploded on the corner of a building nearby. Hurst now found himself isolated, cut off on the north side of Paul Krugerstraat and out of touch with fellow 156 paratroopers. Somehow, he managed to drag himself across to the bakery where his call for help was answered and he was taken down to the cellar.

In addition to the Crum family in the cellar, fortunately for Hurst, were two Dutch nurses – De Waal and Kauffield – who, working quickly, stemmed the bleeding which saved his life.

As the Germans continued to drive home their attack, Company Commander Major Powell gave the order to pull back and re-establish a new defensive line in the gardens of Mariaweg. It was a critical point in the battle. There was no other defence between the 156 and the Divisional HQ, barely 200 yards away. Powell decided that the best form of defence was attack. He ordered Stevens to take some of his men and charge the oncoming Germans. With fixed bayonets, Stevens led from the front but, as he crossed Paul Krugerstraat, he was hit in the midriff by a burst from a Spandau. Mortally wounded, Stevens managed to crawl to 13 De la Reyweg where he was taken in and cared for by the Valkenburg family. Sadly, he passed away during the night.

Stevens' attack, no doubt, convinced the Germans that there was plenty of fight left in this group of paratroopers. The result was that the Germans did not advance any further that day.

It is hard to calculate the number of lives that might have been lost had Stevens not helped to stem the German advance. He had a brilliant mind and, before the war, had studied at Oxford. Had Stevens survived, one can only speculate as to the life he might have led.

This year, on 16th September, a commemorative plaque for Captain Stevens was unveiled in the garden of No. 13 De la Reyweg, Oosterbeek.



Private William Hurst (prior to joining 156 Parachute Battalion from RA)



Private Lew Kemp saw a great deal of action with the 156 Parachute Battalion at Arnhem. Still only 19 years old, on 20th September 1944, he had fought through the German armour and infantry units in the Bilderberg Woods. Later the same day, with fixed bayonet he charged with what remained of the Battalion into Hackett's Hollow routing the Germans within. Practically surrounded, the remnants of the battalion and 4th Brigade HQ fought valiantly for four hours. By this time the 150 men that had entered the Hollow had suffered close to 50% casualties, Lew being one of them. It was time to go and those that were able broke out and made a dash for Oosterbeek.

Left behind in the Hollow, as the Germans approached, Lew recalled the following: "An SS officer made for me and I thought my time was up and he was going to shoot me but, instead, he offered me a bar of chocolate and I said thank you."

For many years, Lew returned to Arnhem with his family. Here they are pictured in the football stadium as guests of the Arnhem Vitesse football team. Each year in September, Vitesse change their strip to the colours of the Parachute Regiment insignia, light blue and claret in honour of the valiant sacrifice made.

Lew Kemp at the Arnhem Vitesse football stadium with (left to right) daughter Linda, grandson Sam, Lew, and grandson Thomas. Lew Kemp's wife, Freda, is now the last surviving wartime widow of a 156 veteran.

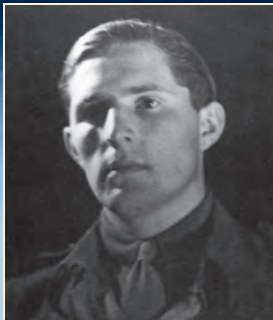




Annual Dinner at The Sysonby Knoll

Friday evening's dinner commenced with drinks in the bar at 6pm, followed by dinner at 7pm. After dinner speeches were given by Raymond Simonds on the action of his uncle, Captain Raymond Stevens, at Arnhem, the Forward Observation Officer who was killed in action in Oosterbeek whilst fighting alongside the 151/156 Parachute Battalion. This was followed by the first part of Christine Bueno's talk on her father, Captain Michael Lees of the Special Operations Executive. One of Lindsay's originals, after serving a year with the 151 Parachute Battalion, Lees then transferred to SOE. He was sent into Serbia, where he was dropped behind enemy lines to carry out sabotage operations. Finally, Raven Wenner entertained us with many anecdotes relating to her husband, Captain Michael Wenner, another of the Battalion's original officers. Raven included some amusing stories regarding Michael's diplomatic career interspersed with some beautiful poetry. Michael was the last officer to attend our annual reunions.

151/156 PARACHUTE BATTALION



Captain Michael Lees of 151 Parachute Battalion and Special Operations Executive



John Jeffries, a Royal Signaller attached to the 4th Brigade at Arnhem, was wounded when he parachuted onto the DZ with the 156 Parachute Battalion. We all have fond memories of John, one of our most popular veterans. He was the last Arnhem veteran to parachute onto the Ginkelseheide in September 2019, an amazing achievement. It was a memorable moment in Arnhem this year when John's final wish was carried out and his ashes interred at the Oosterbeek War Cemetery on Friday, 16th September with all the ceremony he deserved.

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80th ANNIVERSARY Formation of the Parachute Regiment 1942-2022



Captain Raymond Stevens (KIA Arnhem)

REMEMBRANCE SERVICE

Conducted by Padre Brian McAvoy

St. Mary's Church, Melton Mowbray
Saturday, 8th October 2022 at 11.00 a.m.
Music from The Melton Band at 10.40 a.m.

151/156 PARACHUTE BATTALION REUNION

THE MUSIC

The Director of Music James Gutteridge

James Gutteridge has been the Organist and Choirmaster at St Mary's Parish Church in Melton Mowbray for 17 years now. It is a post once held by Sir Malcolm Sargent from 1914 to 1924. In 2013, James reformed the Melton Mowbray Choral Society, and this has been very successful. James also works with Melton Mowbray Amateur Operatics Society (started by Sargent in 1919) as a Musical Director and, additionally, is a teacher of piano, organ, singing, and theory.

The Melton Choral Society Choir

Melton Mowbray Choral Society has been rehearsing and performing concerts together since being re-formed in April 2013. We are now over 50 strong and perform major concerts organised with professional soloists, as well as a traditional Christmas Carol Concert each year. We are very fortunate in performing most of our concerts in the wonderful setting of St Mary's Parish Church in Melton Mowbray, as well as many other beautiful venues.

The Melton Band Conducted by Tony Rifugiato

The Melton Band can trace its history back to 1814 when a Town Band played for the Prince Regent and the Duke of Rutland who, it was reported, were in Melton Mowbray together. It is assumed that the majority of the instruments were of the reed variety with little or no brass. By 1833, to celebrate the coronation of Queen Victoria, a procession marched through Melton Mowbray with many bands participating including the Melton Town Band. By that time brass instruments were known to be available, and it is acknowledged as the earliest evidence of a brass band in Melton Mowbray. Fast forward to 2022 and the Melton Band continues to thrive as a concert and contesting brass band in Melton Mowbray.

Soloist Trumpeter John Barker

John is one of Britain's finest Trumpeters. He began playing the trumpet at the age of 5 and the piano at the age of 9 and makes most of his backing tracks on Piano and Keyboard, whilst playing the trumpet 'live' to the tracks when performing. Having perfected his breathing technique, John plays with consummate ease and has an instantly recognisable sound. He began a professional career at the age of 22, performing at The Hippodrome London, with more recent engagements at Kensington Palace London and The ICC Birmingham. In 1996 he played on the film soundtrack 'The Full Monty' with Stocksbridge Brass Band (Sheffield), having also worked in the past with artists such as Dina Carroll, Jimmy James and the Vagabonds, and the New Bert Kaempfert Orchestra. He recently toured with the Sweet Inspirations, who were Elvis Presley's female backing singers during the Vegas years (1969-1977). Each November, John is proud to play the Last Post and Reveille for 617 Squadron ('the Dambusters') at their memorial in Woodhall Spa, Lincolnshire, on behalf of the Woodhall Spa Parish Council.

REMEMBERED

Major Michael Page

Captain Terry Rogers

Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux

Lieutenant Bille Wood

Of the 33 officers who fought with the 151/156 Parachute Battalion at Arnhem, 11 were killed in action:

Lieutenant David Delacour

True to the tradition of the Parachute Regiment, many of these officers lost their lives leading from the front, a testament to their bravery.

St. Mary's Church, Melton Mowbray

At 1040 hours on Saturday, 8th October, The Melton Band welcomed everyone to St. Mary's with sounds from the Forties.

Padre Brian McAvoy conducted the service, which included music from The Melton Choral Society led by James Gutteridge on the organ. A particular highlight was In Paradisum from Fauré's Requiem. One of the country's finest trumpeters, John Barker, played his own interpretations of the Ashokan Farewell, Band of Brothers and High on A Hill. John also played an outstanding rendition of the Last Post, which was followed by the laying of the wreath at the Battalion Monument by Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux's granddaughter, Catherine Vaughan, helped by her two-year-old son, Luke.

The first talk was given by the Mayor of Melton Mowbray, Alan Hewson, on the role his family farm played in the training of the 151/156 Parachute Battalion in 1944. Christine Bueno spoke further on her father's epic experiences following his drop behind enemy lines in northern Italy where he commanded what was, in effect, his own multi-national private army. Major Sean 'Pinky' Phillips of 4 Parachute Battalion spoke about one of the Battalion's most controversial officers, Major Dickie Lonsdale (MC, DSO, and bar). Pinky's talk culminated with the story of the important part played by Tom Wainwright and John O'Reilly from the 156 in the success of Operation Pegasus I, when the largest number of escapees in World War Two were led through the German lines after the Battle of Arnhem. The band followed this with music from the film The Great Escape because this really had been the greatest escape!

The day was completed when we crossed the road to the Harboro Hotel for lunch, followed later by farewells to all.







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Seasonal greetings and a happy and healthy 2023 to the families and friends of the 151/156 Parachute Battalion Association, together with Friends of the Tenth, and to all with connections to The Regiment.

Lincoln Cathedral Christmas 2022



With best wishes
from John, Michelle
and Rosie

www.156para.co.uk