

The Wells War Memorial



The Wells War Memorial Project traces the 39 men and women of Wells who died during the Second World War and are named on the memorial.

A collaboration between
Wells & Mendip Museum and Wells City Archives

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Gunner Walter James ALLEN

Service number 1600335

Royal Artillery

165 Battery, 56th (Cornwall) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment

Died on 22 March 1941, aged 28

Born in Wells, Walter joined the Royal Artillery in July 1940. By March 1941 his regiment was stationed at Plymouth to protect the city and its naval dockyards from German air raids. On 20 March he returned from leave in Wells and was caught in an air raid while at Plymouth station. It was the first night of what became known as the Plymouth Blitz. Two days later Walter died of his injuries, aged 28. The Blitz continued on the nights of March 21 and April 21, 22, 23, 28 and 29, and destroyed the centres of Plymouth, Devonport and East Stonehouse.



Walter in uniform on the platform at Tucker Street Station

Photography courtesy of Mrs Carol Porch, Walter's niece

Walter was born on 17 October 1912 to Arthur and Florence Allen, and was baptised at St Thomas' Church on 20 October 1912. He had a brother and sister, Doris and Leonard, and his father was a painter. They lived at 3, Lorne Place, Wells.

He married Marjorie Smith on 19 September 1938 at St Thomas' Church. The service was conducted by Bishop Wynne Wilson, the former Bishop of Bath & Wells, for whom Marjorie had worked. Their reception was held at the Bekynton Café and they went to Weymouth for their honeymoon.

In September 1939, they were living at 4, Keward, and Walter was working as a shop assistant.

On 28 March 1941 the *Wells Journal* reported:

The death of Gunner Walter James Allen, of Sunnysdene, Allen's Lane, Bath-road, Wells, by enemy action in a South-West town on Thursday last has caused very sincere regret in his home town. Gunner Allen was a son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Allen, of Bath-road, and was 28 years of age...

Prior to his joining the Royal Artillery in July last Mr. Allen was employed at the World's Stores [12, High St], and was much liked by customers and was popular among his fellow workers. He was home on short leave last week and attended a dance in the City on the

Wednesday evening [19th]. The following day [20th] while returning to his station he met his death during an air raid.

The funeral took place at Wells on Wednesday afternoon with full military honours. The first part of the service was held at St. Thomas' Church, and the interment followed at Wells Cemetery... An army lorry was used as a hearse and an escort was provided by a bearer and firing party from a local military station. The coffin was covered with the Union Jack. Two Gunners were present representing his Battery ... After the committal service three volleys were fired over the grave and a bugler sounded the Last Post and Reveille.

Walter is buried in Wells Cemetery, in Section H. Row J. Grave 2. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Marjorie returned to Barrow-in-Furness to be with her parents. She later moved to Coventry and in 1942 she remarried.



Walter and Marjorie's wedding photo
Photography courtesy of Mrs Carol Porch, Walter's niece



Walter and Marjorie's in Weymouth, perhaps on their honeymoon
Photography courtesy of Mrs Carol Porch, Walter's niece

We would like to thank Mrs Carol Porch, Walter's niece, and Jeffrey Allen for their help with this article.

Private William Ronald BROWN

Service number 7360859
Royal Army Medical Corps
176 (Highland) Field Ambulance
Died on 20 May 1941, aged 22

Born in Wells, William worked at the Wiltshire United Dairies and was in the Wells St John Ambulance. He joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted to the 176 (Highland) Field Ambulance. On 20 May 1941, aged 22, he died of meningitis in a hospital in the north of England.



Members of the Wells St John Ambulance
Photograph by Phillips City Studio, © Wells & Mendip Museum

William was born in Wells on 15 February 1919 to William Henry Brown and Anne née Gardner. His father was a carpenter and undertaker. He had two sisters, Winifred and Kathleen, and one brother, Lionel. In September 1939, William was living with his family at 37, Southover. He was working as a 'packet cheese worker' at the Wiltshire United Dairies and was in the Wells St John Ambulance.

William enlisted into the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted to the 176 (Highland) Field Ambulance. The 176 was part of the 28th Brigade, 9th (Highland) Infantry Division, which was created in 1939 as a Territorial Army duplicate of the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division. The 51st went to France and the 9th Division remained in Scotland protecting naval bases and never went to France.

To all intents and purposes the 51st Division was lost in France, and so in August 1940, the 9th Division was renamed the 51st. The 176 Field Ambulance was then brigaded with the 1st and 7th Black Watch, and the 7th Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders. For the next two years the division spent its time in training and home defence.

We do not know when William joined the 176 Field Ambulance, but it seems that he spent his time on training and coastal defence either on the south coast of England or on the northeast coast of Scotland. On 20 May 1941 he died of meningitis in a hospital in the north of England.

His funeral took place at Wells Cemetery on 24 May 1941 and he is buried in Section H. Row K. Grave 3. Following the committal, three volleys were fired over the grave and a bugler played the Last Post. William is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Trooper Douglas Ernest Vincent CHISHOLM

Service Number 323220
North Somerset Yeomanry
Died on 19 April 1940, aged 23

Douglas has the distinction of being the City's first soldier to die on active service in this war. He was born in Wells, where his family ran a cycle shop on High Street. He went to the Cathedral School, was a cathedral chorister, and was the children's organist at St Cuthbert's. In January 1940 he went with the North Somerset Yeomanry to Palestine where he died of meningitis.



The memorial to Douglas in St Cuthbert's Church
Photograph by Mark Newton © WMR-24689

Douglas was born in Wells in late 1916 to Ernest William Chisholm and Lily née Vincent. He had six sisters and lived above the shop at 70, High Street. His father ran a bicycle shop and was a member of the Wells Lodge of Druids. On 26 April 1940, the *Wells Journal* reported that:

Trooper Douglas Chisholm, of the North Somerset Yeomanry, has died in military hospital while serving overseas ...

Trooper Chisholm, who was an only son, was 23 years of age. It was known some weeks ago that he had been seriously ill, but it was hoped that he was, by this time, well on the road to recovery. The news of his death on Friday was received with sorrow by a host of friends in the City.

Douglas was an old Cathedral School boy and sang as a chorister in Wells Cathedral choir. On leaving school he was employed by Messrs. Harris and Harris, solicitors, of Wells, and later by Mr. D. Woodhams [Stock Broker, 5 Market Place]. After the death of his father [in 1938] he assisted his mother in the High-street business.

He was a member of the Mendip Players and also of Toc H. and assisted at the Public Library. Of a happy disposition he enjoyed the esteem and respect of a wide circle of friends.

A few other facts about Douglas' life in Wells can be added. He was at the Cathedral School from September 1929 until July 1932, and before that he attended Oakleigh School on Chamberlain Street. At various times he was a member of the St Cuthbert's Sunday School, the 5th Wells Rovers (Scouts), the Operatic Society's chorus and the Swimming Club. Douglas acted as the organist for the children's services at St Cuthbert's Church and was generally involved in church life.

It seems likely that Douglas had enlisted into the yeomanry before the war started, perhaps in April 1939 when it was announced that by joining the territorial forces the recruit would not be liable for conscription later on. Douglas would then have been called up for six months' training.

In January 1940, the North Somerset Yeomanry, both men and horses, sailed from Southampton to Cherbourg in France, and from there went by train to Marseilles. From Marseilles they went by boat to Haifa, in what was then Palestine, and arrived there at the end of January. In Palestine the regiment served as a garrison force to relieve Regular units. On 20 February, Douglas was reported to be 'dangerously ill' with meningitis in a Military Hospital in Haifa, and two months later he died.

Douglas is buried in Israel, at the Ramleh War Cemetery in grave D.21. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Cathedral School, Wells Town Hall, Wells Cemetery, and on a tablet in St Cuthbert's Church on the north wall near the organ.

We would like to thank George Bunting (Chairman, The Wellensian Association) for his help with this article.

Private Jesse Stanley Jack COLLETT

Service number 5676458

Somerset Light Infantry

4th Battalion

Killed in action on 29 June 1944, aged 27

Jack was raised in Wells, and before the war worked as a bus conductor for Bristol Tramways. He served with the 4th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, which landed in Normandy two weeks after D-Day. On 29 June 1944, the battalion fought its first action and Jesse was killed near Baron-sur-Odon, aged 27.



Detail of the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company's war memorial
Taken from a photograph by Geoff Sheppard, licensed by Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>)

Jesse, known as Jack, was born in Axbridge on 13 December 1916 to Charles William Collett and Jessie Catherine née Brown. His father was a carpenter and his mother came from Wells. He had two brothers, Clifford and Francis, and a sister, Gertrude, and they lived in Moor Lane, Axbridge.

Jack's mother died in 1922, and the family moved to Wells, perhaps to be closer to his mother's family. He went to St Cuthbert's Sunday School, and in 1934 was a butcher's apprentice. Jack's father died in the first half of 1939, and in September 1939, Jack and his sister were living with their mother's sister, Matilda Brown, at 6, South Street. Jack was then working as a bus conductor for the Bristol Tramways Company.

Jack enlisted into the army early in the war, and in 1944, he was serving with the 4th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry. The 4th was part of the 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division, and spent from 1939 until June 1944 training for the invasion of Europe, particularly in Kent.

Prior to D-Day the Battalion was at Dymchurch on Romney Marsh. On 15 June, they moved to the marshalling area at Firle Park in Sussex, and on the 18th, at 11.30, they embarked at Newhaven. The battalion arrived off the Normandy beaches on the evening of 19 June, two weeks after D-Day, and started to land on the beach at Arromance.

On 25 June, the battalion moved to the front line, and on the 29th took part in its first operation of the war. This was a brigade-sized advance to sweep the woods and orchards around Tourville-sur-Odon,

before crossing the river Odon north of Baron-sur-Odon and clearing the south bank.¹ It was during this first operation that Jack died.

He is buried in France in the St. Manvieu War Cemetery, Cheux, in grave X. G. 3. Jack is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall, Wells Cemetery and on the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company's war memorial, which is on the outside of Enterprise House, Easton Road, Bristol.

¹ See History of the 4th Bn. The Somerset Light Infantry (Prince Albert's) in the Campaign in North-West Europe June, 1944 - May, 1945 (Uckfield, 2009).

Trooper Leslie Sidney Donald DOWELL

Service number 14368896

13th/18th Royal Hussars

Killed in action on 29 August 1944, aged 20

Born in Wells, Leslie was a day chorister at the Cathedral School who went on to become an apprentice stonemason at the Cathedral. He joined the army in 1941. On D-Day his regiment's tanks swam ashore, the first tanks to reach France. They then took part in the battles for Caen and the Falaise Gap. On 28 August, they crossed the Seine and Leslie was killed in fighting the next day.



D-Day, tanks of 13th/18th Royal Hussars in fighting as they enter Ouistreham

Photograph by Laws, G (Sgt), Army Film and Photographic Unit © IWM MH 2012

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205021847>

Leslie's birth was registered in the first quarter of 1923. His parents were William Harold Dowell and Elsie Emily née Hallett. In 1939, his father worked in a paper mill and his mother at a steam laundry.

Leslie attended the Wesleyan Church Sunday School and Wells Cathedral School. The story of his life was told in the Michaelmas 1944 edition of the *The Wellensian*:

Leslie Dowell, who joined the School as a Day Chorister in October, 1933, resided with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Dowell, at 90, Southover. His interests lay chiefly with the Choir and the Cathedral, and he was best known to his fellow choristers, with whom he was very popular. He followed the advice of the late Dean Armitage Robinson in eschewing a black coat, and was apprenticed to W. A. Wheeler (O.W.) in the mason's yard of the Cathedral. He left school in December, 1939, and had not much time for his chosen work before he was old enough to fight ... [He was] killed in a tank action near the River Seine, August 29th, 1944, aged 20 years.

The *Wells Journal* of 15 September 1944 reported that he was called up just before Christmas 1941.

On 3 June 1944, the 13th/18th Royal Hussars were loaded onto landing craft at Portsmouth. Two of the four squadrons were equipped with Sherman Duplex-Drive amphibious tanks. On 6 June, D-Day, these tanks were launched from their landing craft 5000 yards from Sword Beach and they swam ashore – the first tanks to land in France. The rest of the regiment were taken to the beach and waded ashore. They then supported the infantry in their advance off the beach.

In the following weeks the regiment took part in the fighting to capture Caen and in the battle of the Falaise Gap. On 28 August 1944, the regiment crossed the Seine. The next day, in the face of stiff opposition, they advanced eastwards. The whole regiment saw action that day and it was then that Leslie died.

Leslie was originally buried near Aveny, about 10 miles east of the Seine, but after the war he was moved to St. Desir War Cemetery, grave IV.A.2. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Cathedral School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. His brother Ronald also served in the forces.

The Roll of Honour published in the *Wells Journal* of 24 August 1945 records that Leslie was “ever remembered by his Mum, Dad and his Sweetheart Lizzie”.

We would like to thank George Bunting (Chairman, The Wellensian Association) for his help with this article.

Sergeant Arthur George Henry FORD

Service number 921623
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
158 Squadron, RAF
Killed in action on 22 June 1943, aged 30

Arthur was born in Wells. When the war started he was an assistant manager at an insurance office. He was married with a daughter, and they lived in Bristol. He joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and trained as a Flight Engineer. In June 1943 he was posted to 158 Squadron, RAF. On 22 June 1943, while on his first operational sortie, his Halifax bomber was damaged by flak over Krefeld. He bailed out and was killed aged 30.



A Halifax Mk II bomber

Photograph by a Royal Air Force official photographer © IWM CH 11324
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205450799>)

Arthur was born in Wells on 30 July 1911 to Tom Ford and Elizabeth Jane née Williams, and was baptised at St Cuthbert's Church on 10 September. His father was a boot maker and he had two brothers and three sisters.

On 8 December 1934, he married Kathleen Vowles, of Sadler Street, at St Cuthbert's Church. After a reception at 'The Four Tubs' they went to London for their honeymoon. Arthur then worked for Pearl Assurance and was a member of the St Cuthbert's Bible Class.

In 1937 their daughter Vera was born, and in December 1938 they were living at 4, Herbert Terrace. At the start of the war, they were living at 1, Cottrell Avenue, Bristol, where Arthur was an assistant manager in an insurance office.

Arthur enlisted into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve at Uxbridge before June 1940. After his initial training he went to Number 4 School of Technical Training at St Athan to train as a flight engineer. On graduation he went to 1658 Heavy Conversion Unit at RAF Riccall (near Selby in North Yorkshire). There he met up with the crew that he would fly with, and did his type conversion onto Halifax bombers and started to gain flying experience.

On 15 June 1943 Arthur and his crew were posted to 158 Squadron at RAF Lissett (west of Bridlington, East Riding of Yorkshire). The squadron was then flying Halifax Mk II heavy bombers.

The crew's first operation flight was on the night of 21/22 June 1943. They took off at 23.32 in Halifax Mk II JD116 NP-A to bomb Krefeld in Germany. The squadron's Operation Record Book¹ describes what happened over Krefeld:

Target not identified. Bombed red T.I. [target indicator] one burst. Many large fires, concentrated. Captain states: "At 0210 hrs. approx. 18,000ft. in heavy flak and caught in searchlights. Aircraft came down to 13,000ft. Inter-comm. u/s [unserviceable] after hearing Navigator say he had been hit." Captain managed to control aircraft and observed Engineer [Arthur] leaving aircraft. Found later that the Navigator, W/Op [wireless operator], Bomb Aimer and Engineer had all bailed out. R/Gnr [rear gunner] sustained a light facial injury.

The aircraft landed safely back in the UK. Of the four who bailed out, two became prisoners of war, and two died. Sgt Denys Floyd was found dead and was buried in Düsseldorf. Nothing is known of Arthur's fate but it was assumed that he too had died.

Arthur has no known grave but is remembered on Panel 149 of the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede. The memorial was unveiled by the Queen on 17 October 1953, and Arthur's wife and daughter were there. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

¹ Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference AIR 27/1048/35

Sergeant George John FOWLER

Service number 5669328
Somerset Light Infantry
Died on 1 August 1941, aged 29

Born in Wells, George was a professional soldier who had served in India before the war. In 1940, he returned to the UK from Gibraltar, and became an instructor at the Infantry Training Centre in Taunton. On 1 August 1941, he died when a mortar bomb fuse accidentally exploded. George was married and had a son. The War Memorial calls him 'J. G. Fowler' but on his gravestone in Wells Cemetery he is called George John.



Lance Corporal Fowler in about 1937
The stripes at the bottom of his sleeve indicate 6 years' service
Photograph courtesy of Mr John Fowler, George's son

George was born in Wells on 7 September 1911, to John George Fowler and Frances Elizabeth née Norton. His father was a grocer's carter and the family lived at 2, Charles Place, Southover. George was baptised at St Cuthbert's Church on 8 October.

He had three sisters and three brothers. Before joining the army, he worked for Wookey Hole Paper Mill. His wife was Joan Margaret née Chandler from Bristol, and their son was John.

There is some confusion over George's name. The War Memorial and the local rolls of honour call him 'J. G. Fowler' and the newspaper reports call him 'John George', but his family called him 'George John' and so that is what is used here.

The story of his life and death were told in the *Wells Journal* of 8 August 1941:

Full military honours were accorded to Sergt. John George Fowler, of the Somerset L.I. at the funeral at Wells Cemetery on Wednesday afternoon.

Sergt. Fowler was accidentally killed in the course of his duty at Taunton on Friday last. He was the youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. John George Fowler, of 5, Green's Place, Southover, and was married about three years ago, his wife residing at 1, Bell Close [off South Street]. There is a young child aged two ...

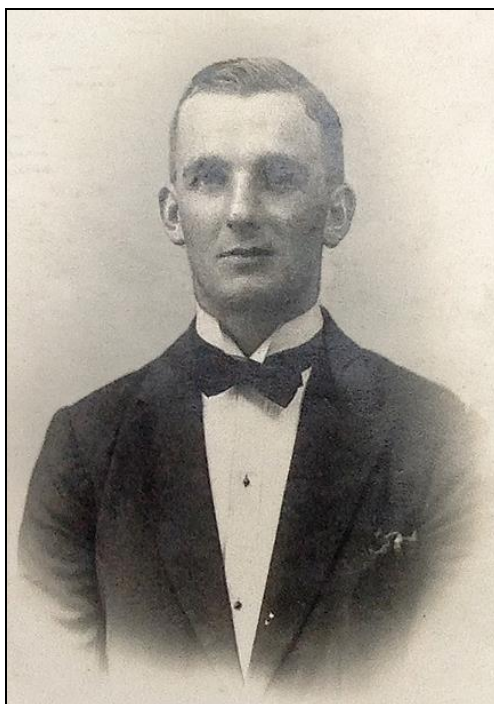
Sergt. Fowler, who was acting as Sergt. Instructor, joined the Army about 11 years ago and had served for seven years in India and had spent a year at Gibraltar. He returned to England about nine months ago and was home on leave a few weeks before his death. The body was brought to Wells and rested in St. Cuthbert's Church, where the first part of the service was held ...

The body was conveyed to the Cemetery on an army vehicle, the bearers being fellow Sergeants of his company. His C.O. also attended. The company also provided a firing party and bugler.

The following week (15 August 1941), the *Wells Journal* reported on the inquest into his death:

A verdict of "Death by Misadventure" was returned. Sergeant Fowler was attached to an infantry training centre and he was killed when a [mortar] bomb fuse exploded in the armoury at the training centre. The medical evidence showed that death was due to shock and hemorrhage from two punctured wounds in the chest.

George is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section H. Row L. Grave 3. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.



George Fowler

Photograph courtesy of Mr John Fowler, George's son

Based on the details given in the *Wells Journal*, it seems that George enlisted in about 1930, and then served in India with the 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry. The battalion was then stationed in Wellington in southern India. In 1934, it moved to Poona (now Pune) in the east, where it remained

until 1939. Communal rioting was then rife and on several occasions the battalion was called upon to “show the flag” in Poona, and Sholapur. Having served his seven years in India, it seems likely that George returned to Wells and was put on the reserve. Then when the war came he was recalled to the regiment and went to Gibraltar to join the 2nd Battalion, which had been there since January 1939 (and would remain there until it went to Italy in 1944). George came back to England in about November 1940 and joined the Infantry Training Centre in Taunton.

Outside of his army career, George was a sportsman. He was a life-guard at the swimming pools in Wells and Wookey Hole. He and Frank Pople, who also died in the war, were great friends and took part in bicycle races at Wells Athletic Ground, using bicycles with bamboo spokes.

George’s widow, Joan, remarried on 14 April 1943 and became Mrs Hawker.

We would like to thank Mr John Fowler, George’s son, for his help in writing this article. We would also like to thank Mrs Jan Stubbins for putting us in touch.

Able Seaman Dennis Vincent FREEGARD

Service number D/JX 420047

Royal Navy

HM LCF 22

Died on 23 May 1946, aged 21

Dennis was raised in Wells, and before the war worked for Mr. Pope the builder. Around Christmas 1943, Dennis joined the Royal Navy and served in a Landing Craft Flak based at Dartmouth. From there he took part in the D-Day invasion. On the evening before he was to be demobilised, Dennis slipped off a path along the side of the River Dart, struck his head on a rock, and drowned.



A Landing Craft Flak similar to the one that Dennis served on

Photograph by a Royal Navy official photographer © IWM FL 5979

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205120515>

Dennis was born in Chippenham on 30 October 1924, to Cyril Ralph Freegard and Margaret Lizzie née Cole. The family moved to Wells in about 1927. In September 1939, they were living at 61, Burcott Road. Both of Dennis' parents worked at the Wiltshire United Dairies and his father was a member of the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes and of the Civil Defence Corps.

At the time of his death Dennis was serving on HM Landing Craft Flak 22. This was a tank landing craft modified to carry a range of anti-aircraft guns, for example, eight QF 2 pounders (pom-pom guns) and four 20 mm Oerlikon guns. Such boats provided air defence during landings. The operation of these boats was the responsibility of RN crew and the guns were manned by Royal Marines.

The story of Dennis' life and the circumstances of his death were reported in the *Wells Journal* on 31 May 1946:

Able Seaman Freegard was a member of a Landing Craft moored on the River Dart south of Dittisham. On Thursday night with others he was returning from Dittisham to get aboard his craft and while walking along a path through some woods alongside the river he apparently

slipped and fell down some rocks sustaining severe head injuries. His body was later recovered from the water.

It is a pathetic coincidence that Freegard was due for demobilisation the following day.

Dennis, who was an only son, had been serving in the Royal Navy for the past 3½ years and had spent a considerable part of his service life at Dartmouth, from which port he sailed on Saturday, June 3rd, 1944 with the armada for the invasion of Normandy.

Before joining up he was employed at the Wilts United Dairies and later for Mr. J. A. Pope, builder of Wells.

Mr. and Mrs. Freegard's only daughter [Valda] recently sailed for America to join her husband [Staff Sergeant Hayden Ward, US Army] ...

The body was brought back to Wells and the funeral took place at Wells Cemetery on Wednesday afternoon, many sympathisers attending. The coffin was covered with the Union Jack, and the bearers were members of the crew of the ship on which he had served. His C.O., Sub-Lieut. J. C. Opperman, was also present.

Dennis is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section H. Row e/ee. Grave 2. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Corporal Percy Edgar GOOLD

Service number 5573387

Royal Norfolk Regiment

4th Battalion

Killed in action on 11 February 1942, aged 25

Percy's father was the Headmaster of Wells Boys' Central School. Percy went to the Blue School and was a chorister for 15 years at St Cuthbert's Church. He played football for Wells City Reserves and Sheldon's Sports Club, and cricket for St. Cuthbert's Paper Mill. Before the war he worked in the Bristol Tramways Office in Wells. Percy joined the army early in the war and was given special leave to get married in 1940. After Pearl Harbour his battalion was sent to Singapore and on 11 February 1942 he died fighting the Japanese.



Percy, taken from a Sheldon's Sports Club team photo, 1937-38

Photograph courtesy of Sue Macdonald and Michael Scammell

Percy was born in Wells on 5 April 1916 to Ernest William West Goold and Ada Mary née Hutchings. His father was the Headmaster of Wells Boys' Central School and they lived in the School House. He had one brother and two sisters.

In September 1939, he was living with his parents at Westward Ho, Portway Avenue. Percy joined the army early in the war, and was given special leave to marry Miss Enid Dorothy Parsons of Cinderford at St Cuthbert's Church on 10 May 1940. At that time the 4th Battalion was on coastal defence duties near Yarmouth.

The story of Percy's life was reported in the *Wells Journal* of 16 November 1945:

Cpl. Goold was an old boy of the Wells Blue School. He played football and cricket for the school team and was a member of the cup winning side. He sang in St. Cuthbert's Church Choir for 15 years, and for many years was cross-bearer. He taught in the Sunday school. Before joining the Army he was employed as clerk in the Bristol Tramways Office and was treasurer of the Social Club at the Wells Depot. He had played football for Wells City

Reserves and Sheldons Sports Club and cricket for St. Cuthbert's Paper Mill. Fond of athletics he had won many prizes at the Tramways Sports at Bristol. He was a member of Wells Amateur Operatic Society.

On 20 October 1941 the 4th Battalion, along with the rest of its division, sailed via Halifax and Cape Town for the Middle East. While they were at Cape Town, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and so they were sent via Bombay to Singapore where they arrived on 29 January 1942.

The Japanese started their invasion of Singapore Island on 8 February, and began advancing towards Bukit Timah. On 11 February, two British brigades, including the 4th Battalion, attempted a counter-attack, but this was repulsed. It was during this action that Percy was killed.

Percy is buried in Singapore at the Kranji War Cemetery in grave 17.A.20. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Blue School, Wells Town Hall, Wells Cemetery, and on the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Co.'s war memorial, which is now on the outside of Enterprise House, Easton Road, Bristol.

Leading Writer Ronald Charles GRIFFIN

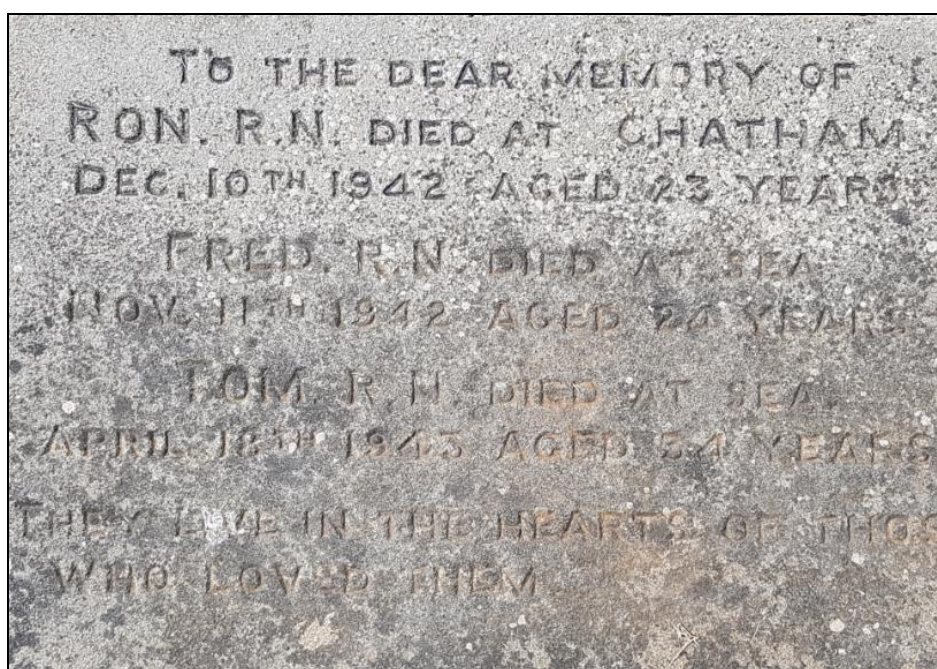
Service number P/MX 58761

Royal Navy

HMS Acute

Died on 10 December 1942, aged 23

Ronald was born in Wells. He went to the Blue School and then worked as a clerk for the Wiltshire United Dairies. He joined the Royal Navy at the start of 1939, and served as a writer on a number of ships. He died in the Royal Naval Hospital, Chatham, from thyrotoxicosis and lymphoid hyperplasia and a collapsed lung. He is buried in Wells Cemetery.



The memorial to Ron and his cousins Fred and Tom on Ronald's grave in Wells Cemetery

© Peter Trueman

Ronald was born in Wells on 8 October 1919, to Robert Charles Griffin and Fanny née James. He had three sisters: Betty, Mary and Pat. From 1919 until the early 1930s, his father was the publican at the New Inn at 60, St Thomas Street. After leaving the New Inn, the family lived at 31, St Thomas Street and were still there when the war started.

Ronald went to the Blue School and got his School Certificate in 1936. In 1937, he was working as a clerk for the Wiltshire United Dairies.

He joined the Royal Navy in January 1939, and that September he was back in Wells, on leave with his parents. Ronald was then a rating writer at the training establishment HMS Boscawen. On 1 March 1940, the *Wells Journal* published a letter from him thanking the 'kind ladies' who had sent him two parcels of socks and scarves.

The *Wells Journal* reported Ronald's death on 18 December 1942:

[Ronald died] at the Royal Naval Hospital, Chatham, on Thursday last at the early age of 23 years.

Ronald was an old Blue School boy. He was formerly employed at the Wilts United Dairies and he enlisted in the Royal Navy in January 1939 and at the time of his death was serving as a Petty Officer Writer.

He had seen much service at sea, having served on S.S. Manchester City and H.M.S. Algerine, a minesweeper, which was sunk in the recent North African campaign. At the time of his illness he was serving with H.M.S. Acute [an Algerine-Class Fleet Minesweeper].

He was a keen sportsman and had played rugby football and cricket for naval teams. He had also played cricket, soccer and table tennis for the Wilts United Dairies. He was a member of Toc H.

There was a large attendance at the funeral on Tuesday afternoon. The first part of the service was held in St. Thomas Church ... Six chums acted as bearers, two being pals in the Royal Navy and the others are serving in the Army Services.

It is most likely that Ronald left HMS Algerine before it was torpedoed on 15 November 1942.

In the Royal Navy, writers, or 'Scribes', performed all of the administrative and clerical duties on board a ship. When their ship went into action, they could also be utilised with damage control parties, for instance.

The cause of Ronald's death was thyrotoxicosis and lymphoid hyperplasia caused by an infection, which then resulted in a massive collapse of the lower lobe of his right lung.

Ronald is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section H. Row d/dd. Grave 3. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall, Wells Blue School and Wells Cemetery. Two of his cousins, Frederick Jacobs and Walter 'Tom' James, are also on the Wells War Memorial and are named on Ron's gravestone.

We would like to thank Mark Culliford, Wells Cemetery Manager, for his help in finding Ronald's grave.

Able Seaman Richard ‘Dick’ GRIST

Service number D/J 96929
Royal Navy
Died on 18 January 1945, aged 40

Dick was born in Wells in 1905, and his father worked on the Tudway Estate. After leaving school Dick worked as a labourer until, in 1920, when he was 15, he joined the Royal Navy as a boy seaman. From then he served in the navy until he was invalided out in 1943. During the war he served on HMS Diomedé, first at Scapa Flow and then in the West Indies. Dick died in hospital after a long illness.



Dick's grave in Wells Cemetery
© Peter Trueman

Dick was born in Wells on 8 January 1905, to Edward John and Florence Emma Grist, and was baptised on 9 April at St Cuthbert's Church. He was the third of their six children, and had four brothers and a sister. The family lived in Milton Hill Cottage where his father was a woodsman on the Tudway Estate, and a member of the old Wells Volunteer Company.

Dick went to the Wells Boys' Central School and in 1914 won a prize for good attendance. After leaving school he worked as a labourer until on 13 April 1920, aged 15, he joined the Royal Navy as a Boy 2nd Class and went to the training ship HMS Impregnable at Devonport. On his 18th birthday he enlisted in the Royal Navy for twelve years and became an Ordinary Seaman. At the end of that time he re-enlisted. He served as a gunnery rating.

His father died in 1924, and in 1939, his mother was living at 23, South Street with his brother George.

On 31 July 1939, Dick joined HMS Diomedé in Portsmouth. Launched in 1919, she had just been brought out of the reserve fleet and made ready to serve in her first war. When the war started she was at Scapa Flow as part of the Home Fleet on Northern Patrol duties. In February 1940, she sailed to the West Indies to join the 8th Cruiser Squadron on shipping protection and patrolling duty. In September 1942, she returned to the UK with a defective port turbine, and was still being refitted when Dick was invalided out of the Navy on 6 February 1943.

On 26 January 1945, the *Wells Journal* reported his death:

[He] served for seven years in H.M. Submarines [before the war]. He was invalided out on pension in 1943. He died at the County Sanatorium after a long illness which had been patiently borne.

The funeral took place at Wells Cemetery on Tuesday afternoon. A naval non-commissioned officer preceded the coffin, and six Naval Ratings acted as bearers, the coffin being covered with the Union Jack ... The interment took place in the Ex-Servicemen's Burial Ground.

The County Sanatorium was the Taunton and District Joint Isolation Hospital, Cheddar Road, Taunton, so he may have died of T.B. At the time of his death, Dick was engaged to Dorcas Stoodley.

He is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section H. Row e/ee. Grave 3. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. His brother Ernest also served in the Royal Navy during the war.

We would like to thank Pete Jaggard for his help with this article.

Sergeant Harold Stephen Sidney HOWELL

Service number 5185687
Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
3 Base Workshop
Died on 8 March 1945, aged 28

At the start of the war, Bristol-born Harold served with the 66th (Gloucesters) Searchlight Regiment, Royal Artillery, and most likely belonged to its 449 Battery which was headquartered in Wookey Hole. In December 1940, in Glasgow, he married Audrey Stroud from Wells. He then went to Malta to serve with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. In late 1944 Harold was sent to an Officer Cadet Training Unit in Egypt where he died in an accident.



Harold, based on a photo in the *Wells Journal*, 6 April 1945
© Edmund Trueman

Harold was born in Bristol to Joseph Clifford Howell and Winifred Ethel née Ford. His father was a pattern maker and they lived at 30, Belle Vue Road, Easton, Bristol. He was baptised on 13 May 1917 at St Thomas' Church in Eastville. He seems to have been known as Stephen.

On 27 December 1940, Stephen married Audrey Olive Stroud, aged 20, daughter of Mr and Mrs A. E. Stroud of 36, St Thomas Street, Wells, at the Cathcart Road Methodist Church in Glasgow. He was then a Lance-Bombardier in the Royal Artillery. Both of his witnesses were officers in the Royal Artillery and soldiers from his regiment formed a guard of honour. According to the marriage registration record, both of Stephen's parents were dead and his pre-war employment was that of an electrical appliance salesman, whilst Audrey was employed as a general store saleswoman.

The rest of Stephen's story is told in the *Wells Journal* of 30 March 1945:

On Thursday last Mrs. Audrey Howell, of 36 St. Thomas' Street, Wells received official confirmation of the tragic death of her husband Sgt. G.[sic] Stephen Howell on March 8th

near Cairo. Details concerning the actual cause of his death are not yet available but it is believed that he was involved in a fatal accident whilst upon an officer course.

Sgt Howell, formerly of Queens Drive, Hanham, Bristol was 27. He joined the Gloucester Regiment at the outbreak of war and was stationed in the Wells area for thirteen months. In December 1940 he married Audrey ... shortly after which he was sent to Malta, where he served with the R.E.M.E. until October of last year, when he was selected for pre O.C.T.U. [Officer Cadet Training Unit] course and went to Egypt.

The news came as a great shock as Sgt. Howell was expected to arrive home within a few weeks.

The fatal accident took place at Trayia in Egypt.

It seems likely that Stephen was part of the 66th (Gloucesters) Searchlight Regiment, Royal Artillery, which until August 1939 had been the 4th (City of Bristol) Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment (66th Searchlight Regiment). This regiment was part of the anti-aircraft defences for Bristol. In 1940, its 449 Battery had its headquarters in Wookey Hole. Apparently they kept their equipment in the Caves Car Park, commandeered the Chapel's School Rooms and shared the use of the Wookey Hole Club.

At the time of his marriage Stephen was living in Glasgow at 56, Prospecthill Road, Cathcart. This was the site of the Glasgow Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, which must have been requisitioned during the war to billet troops. The 66th Regiment did not serve in Glasgow and so Stephen had presumably been posted to another Royal Artillery unit in Glasgow, possibly the 57th (Glasgow) Searchlight Regiment.

Harold is buried in Egypt at the Fayid War Cemetery in grave 5.D.5. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

On 1 December 1945, at St Thomas' Church, Audrey married Robert Barnard from Kelty, Fife.

We would like to thank David Hudsmith for his help with this article.

Guardsman Frederick Leonard ‘Len’ HOWLETT

Service number 2627715

Grenadier Guards

1st Battalion

Killed in action on 30 April 1948, aged 20

Although listed amongst those who died in the Second World War, Len died in Palestine fighting in another conflict. Born in Wells, he joined the Grenadier Guards near the end of the war. After a time in Germany, including taking part in the British Victory Parade in Berlin, he went to Palestine just before the British mandate ended.



Len

Photograph courtesy of Mrs R. Trebble, Len's sister

Len was born in Wells in 1927 to William Leonard John Howlett and Eva L. née Haney. He had a brother and two sisters. His younger sister describes him as “quiet and bookish”.

The family lived off St Thomas Street, but by September 1939 they were at 27, Barley Close, Wells. His father joined the Wells City Fire Brigade in 1928 and during the war was a full-time member of the National Fire Service and fought blitz fires in many parts of the country. Len's sister remembers their father coming home with his clothes still smelling of smoke after the Liverpool Blitz. Len began an apprenticeship as a mechanic at a garage in Coxley.

At the end of the war, Len was serving with the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, but he was killed in action in Palestine in 1948. His death was reported in the *Wells Journal* on 7 May 1948:

The first intimation the parents received was on Sunday when they were informed that their son was missing, and this was followed by another communication that he was officially reported dead. The following day a communication was received from the Commanding Officer officially informing Mr. and Mrs. Howlett of their son's tragic death and stating that the cause of death was a fractured skull and gunshot wound in the chest ...

Leonard Howlett was an old Central School boy, and on leaving school was employed at Keward Garage. He joined the Forces just before the end of the war and for about 18 months saw service with the Grenadiers in Germany. He was transferred with his Regiment to Palestine about six weeks ago. He was home on leave at Christmas and on embarkation leave at the end of February. He was 20 years of age.

Mr. and Mrs. Howlett's other son is serving with the Royal Navy ... A memorial service will be held at St. Cuthbert's Church, this Sunday, May 9th, at 3.30 p.m.

When the war ended, the 1st Battalion was at Stade near Hamburg. In late June it moved to Brunswick, and then on 4 July, after passing through Russian occupied Germany, it entered Berlin. On the 21st, the battalion took part in the British Victory Parade in front of Churchill, Atlee and Montgomery. In August it moved to Bonn, and in late 1946 returned to the UK, first to London and then in September 1947 to Windsor.

After the Second World War, Palestine was still under British control. In late 1945, in response to full-scale riots in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, a state of emergency was declared and more troops were sent to Palestine. In 1947, the British government referred the Palestine question to the newly created United Nations, but violence continued, leading to the introduction of martial law and stricter curfews. The UN resolved to partition Palestine and on 29 November 1947, the British government announced that its mandate would end on 15 May 1948.



Len's funeral in Haifa
A set of four photos sent to his parents
Photographs courtesy of Mrs R. Trebble, Len's sister

In January 1948, the 1st Battalion was sent to Palestine to replace the 3rd Battalion, Grenadier Guards, who were based at Nathanya near Haifa. The handover was done a company at a time over a three-month period and was completed by 4 April 1948. The battalion then moved to Haifa to protect the route to the docks, so that the army would be able to withdraw safely out of Haifa. What it was like for Len is described by Oliver Lindsay in Once a Grenadier, 1945-1995 (Barnsley, 1996):

The situation was approaching conventional warfare. British Comet tanks smashed Jewish and Arab road blocks; houses of both sides were blown up, batteries of Royal Artillery opened fire if necessary, while rifle companies tried to impose a curfew in Haifa. L/Sgt PR Clarke and Gdsm F Howlett were killed in action.

Len's sister tells how, on the day of his death, he had carried out his duty in the morning, escorting Jewish settlers to work. One of the soldiers detailed to escort them back in the afternoon fell ill, and so Len took his place: Poignantly, this is when he was killed.

Len is buried near Haifa in Israel in the Khayat Beach War Cemetery in Plot F Row A Grave 13. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.



“There is happiness in remembrance”

Len's grave in Haifa

Photograph courtesy of Mrs R. Trebble, Len's sister

After leaving the navy, Len's brother David served with the Admiralty Constabulary at H.M. Dockyard, Portsmouth, and in 1967 was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Brave Conduct for “services when a mentally unstable man, armed with a knife and a hand grenade, attempted to evade arrest”.¹

We would like to thank Mrs R. Trebble, Len's sister, and Mrs P. D'Amore, Len's niece, for their help in writing this article. We would also like to thank Mrs Jan Stubbins for putting us in touch.

¹ *Supplement to The London Gazette*, 3rd October 1967.

Leading Stoker Gilbert Edward HUTTON

Service number D/K 60339

Royal Navy

HMS Galatea

Killed in action on 15 December 1941, aged 46

Born in Bristol, Gilbert served in the Royal Navy in the Great War, and then again from 1922 until his death. He married Mary Jenkins from Haybridge and they lived in Wells with their two children. From February 1940, Gilbert served on the light cruiser HMS Galatea, which took part in the Norwegian Campaign and in the hunt for the Bismarck. Gilbert died when the Galatea was sunk by a German submarine off the coast of Alexandria.



Gilbert, from his Merchant Navy registration card

© The National Archives, ref. BT350

Gilbert was born in Bristol on 20 March 1898 to William and Mary Jane Hutton. In 1901 they were living at 10, Lower Station Road, Bristol, and in 1911 at 10, Lower Fishponds, Bristol. His father was a general labourer. In 1911, Gilbert had five brothers and three sisters.

Before the Great War he was working as a collier. In the war he joined the Royal Navy and served as a stoker from 26 October 1916 until 12 July 1919. After leaving the navy he served for a while in the Merchant Navy, but then on 16 December 1922, he rejoined the Royal Navy and again served as a stoker. He served for a while on HMS Hood, which was then the pride of the Navy, and in 1935 became a Leading Stoker.

In 1923 in Wells, Gilbert married Mary Jane Jenkins of Haybridge. They had two children, Ronald whose birth was registered in the first quarter of 1926, and Audrey whose birth was registered in the second quarter of 1929. In September 1939, Mary and the children were living at 7, Burcott Road.

Gilbert's first sea-going posting in the Second World War was to light cruiser HMS Galatea on 24 February 1940. He had an active time on her. First she was used to intercept enemy merchant ships attempting to leave Vigo in Spain. Then she took part in the Norwegian campaign, and in the

evacuation of allied troops from western France. On 8 September 1940 she struck a mine and spent three months in dry dock. She was also involved in the hunt for the Bismarck.

HMS Galatea joined the Mediterranean Fleet in July 1941, and by November was based at Malta. Just before midnight on 15 December 1941, the Galatea was off the coast of Alexandria, Egypt, when she was sunk by U-557 with heavy loss of life. Gilbert was one of those who died.

Gilbert's only grave is the wreck of HMS Galatea, but he is remembered on the Plymouth Naval Museum, on Panel 52, Column 2. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Joiner 4th Class Frederick (Freddie) William Charles JACOBS

Service number D/MX 70501

Royal Navy

HMS Hecla

Killed in action on 12 November 1942, aged 24

Born in Wells, Freddie was a carpenter by trade and played in the Wells City Band. He joined the Royal Navy in 1940 and served as a carpenter. He joined HMS Hecla and went to Iceland. Returning to the UK, he got married in March 1942. He sailed again in the Hecla, this time down to the tip of South Africa, where it hit a mine. When it was repaired it went to support the ships taking part in the Invasion of North Africa but was torpedoed by a German U-boat about 200 miles west of Gibraltar. Freddie died when the ship sank.



“HMS Hecla Sinking off the West Coast of Morocco: 11th November 1942”

Painting by Herbert Hastings McWilliams, image © IWM Art.IWM ART LD 2611

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/18827>

Freddie was born in Wells on 29 July 1918 to Ferdinand E. Jacobs and Bessie née James. He was their only son and had an elder sister, Kathleen. His father was a carter and the family lived on Tor Street.

After leaving school he served his apprenticeship as a carpenter with Mr J. Pope, and afterwards worked for Messrs W. & H. Paul. In his spare time he was a member of the Wells City Band and he is still remembered by them on Remembrance Sunday.

In September 1939, he was living at 10, Tor Street, Wells with his parents and three lodgers. Frederick was working as a carpenter and his father was a museum attendant, presumably at the Wells & Mendip Museum.

Freddie joined the Navy in August 1940, and continued in his trade of carpenter. On 1 November 1940, the *Wells Journal* printed a letter that he had sent from HMS Rayleigh, the RN Training Establishment at Torpoint in Cornwall, to say that the old Crimean War cannon in Wells Market Place should be scrapped for “shells for our Navy”.

HMS Hecla¹ was built on the Clyde as a destroyer depot ship and after being commissioned on 6 January 1941, was based at Havelfjord in Iceland as the mother ship for the destroyers escorting the Atlantic convoys. It seems likely that Freddie was with the Hecla right from her commissioning, as the *Wells Journal* of 11 December 1942 states that he had served for a number of months in Iceland.

In the autumn of 1941 HMS Hecla returned to the Clyde for a refit. On 25 March 1942, at St Thomas' Church, Frederick married Lilian May Talbot from Haybridge. Lilian was in the ATS, and a sergeant and six of Lilian's comrades formed a guard of honour for the newlyweds as they left the church. The reception was held at the Fountain Inn.

On 15 April 1942, HMS Hecla headed south to join the fleet being assembled to protect Singapore against the Japanese. On 15 May she struck a mine off the South African coast and limped into Simonstown where she spent several months under repair. On 20 October, Hecla left Cape Town and arrived at Freetown on 2 November. There she joined another destroyer depot ship, HMS Vindictive, and together they left on 4 November in a convoy bound for Liverpool.

Four days later, near the Canaries, the two destroyer depot ships, were joined by the destroyers HMS Venomous and HMS Marne, and together they were detached for Gibraltar to support the ships taking part in Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa. On the night of 11-12 November, about 200 miles west of Gibraltar, HMS Hecla was hit by five torpedoes fired from a German U-boat, and sank at about 02:00.

HMS Marne rescued 64 of Hecla's crew before a torpedo blew off her stern and 493 were saved by HMS Venomous despite her having to break off the rescue to attack the U-boat. According to the Admiralty, nine of Hecla's crew died and another 273 were "missing presumed killed". Freddie was one of the missing.

On 6 August 1943, the *Wells Journal* reported that:

Mrs. F. Jacobs, of the Bungalow, Haybridge [his wife] ... has received a message from the King, stating "The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy in your great loss. We pray that your country's gratitude for a life so nobly given in its service may bring you some measure of consolation. George R.I."

It continued:

This is the third bereavement suffered by Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs of Tor Street [his parents], during the past eight months. A nephew, Leading Writer Griffin died in the Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham last December, and another nephew, William Rowland (Tom) James, who after his mother's death lived with Mrs. Jacobs, his aunt, is presumed to have lost his life while serving in a submarine.

Freddie has no known grave other than the wreck of HMS Hecla, but is remembered on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 71, Column 1. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. Both of Freddie's cousins are on the Wells War Memorial.

Freddie's wife, Lilian, married Thomas Lansdown in 1958.

The picture used above to illustrate Freddie's story was painted by Herbert Hastings McWilliams, who was a Lieutenant serving on the Hecla when it was sunk. It is based on sketches that he made after he had been rescued by HMS Venomous. The notes in the corner say, "The explosion in the stem of the destroyer and the burning ammunition lit up the sinking 'Hecla' vividly, and showed the enormous hole in her port side made by the third torpedo".

¹ The story of HMS Hecla is taken from Bill Foster's webpage A Hard Fought Ship: The story of HMS Venomous (http://www.holywellhousepublishing.co.uk/HMS_Hecla.html).

Petty Officer Walter Roland Frederick (Tom) JAMES

Service number D/JX 128319
Royal Navy
HM Submarine P615
Killed in action on 18 April 1943, aged 33

Born in Wells in 1910, Tom joined the Royal Navy as a boy seaman in 1926. In 1933 he joined the submarine service. He married in 1938 and they had one daughter. When the war started he was serving on HM Submarine Regent in Hong Kong, which in 1940 moved to the Mediterranean. Tom was 'Mentioned in Despatches' for his service there. He next served on the P614 and P615, both of which provided escort to Arctic convoys including the ill-fated PQ 17. When he died he was serving on the P615, which was sunk by a German U-boat 100 miles southwest of Freetown.



HM Submarine P615

Photograph by a Royal Navy official photographer © IWM FL 20358
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205121577>)

Tom was born in Wells on 3 September 1910 to Emily Harriet James. On 21 September he was baptised in St Thomas' Church. Tom and his mother were then living with her married sister, Bessie Jacobs, at 46, St Thomas Street.

Towards the end of 1919, Emily married Charles Ball, a coal merchant and a widower with two children. Emily and Charles had two children of their own and they lived at 35, St Thomas Street.

After leaving school Tom worked as a grocer's errand boy. Then on 5 October 1926, aged 16, he joined the Royal Navy as a Boy 2nd Class, and went to the training ship HMS Impregnable at Devonport.

On 24 February 1927, his mother died of pleurisy after influenza. Sadly Tom was not able to attend the funeral. When he was on leave in Wells he would stay with his Aunt Bessie at 10, Tor Street. Bessie's son Freddie also died in the Royal Navy during the war, as did Tom's other cousin, Ronald Griffin.

On his 18th birthday, while serving on the minelaying cruiser HMS Adventure, Tom enlisted for 12 years and became an Ordinary Seaman. In 1933 he joined the submarine service and served in a number of different boats, some in UK waters and some in the Mediterranean. On 9 October 1937, he became a Leading Torpedo Operator.

In 1938, Tom married a Dorset girl, Kathleen Palmer Wilson, in Wells. They had one child, Jennifer Kathleen, who was born in 1939. In September 1939, Kathleen and Jennifer were living in lodgings at 12, Ventnor Road, Portland.

At the start of the war Tom was serving on HM Submarine Regent in Hong Kong as part of the 4th Submarine Flotilla which comprised three other Rainbow-class submarines and the depot ship HMS Medway. On 2 April 1940, the 4th Flotilla left Hong Kong, arriving in Alexandria on 3 May.

On its first patrol the Regent laid mines off the North African coast. It then went on patrols in the Eastern Mediterranean until the end of 1940 and sank two Italian merchant ships. The *Supplement to the London Gazette* of 5 May 1942 announced that Tom had been 'Mentioned in Despatches' for "Daring, enterprise and devotion to duty in successful patrols in H.M. Submarines" for his service at this time.

We know that on 27 March 1941 Tom was serving in HM Submarine P614 and that when he died on 18 April 1943 he was serving in her sister submarine the P615, but we do not know when he transferred to the P615. Both submarines were built in Barrow-in-Furness and both were launched in late 1940. In early 1942, they left Barrow within a month of each other to be commissioned into the Royal Navy. Up until Tom's last voyage, both submarines acted as escorts for the Arctic convoys to Russia, usually together. So no matter which boat he was on, he would have been on these patrols.

On 18 May 1942, P614 sailed from Lerwick on her first war patrol. She patrolled in the Norwegian Sea to provide cover for convoy PQ 16 bound for Northern Russia and for the returning convoy QP 12. On 31 May 1942 she arrived back at Lerwick.

The P615's first war patrol, and the P614's second, was as part of the escort to the ill-fated Arctic convoy PQ 17. The convoy left Reykjavik, Iceland, on 27 June 1942, destined for the port of Archangel in Russia. Because of the perceived threat from German surface ships, including the battleship Tirpitz, on 4 July the order was given to withdraw the escort and to scatter the convoy. The 37 merchant ships then fell prey to German aircraft and U-boats. Only 11 reached Russia. P614 and P615 arrived at Polyarnoe, in northern Russia, close to the Finnish border, on 8 July. After 13 days in Russia they left and arrived in Lerwick on 29 July.

On their next patrol they both departed from Seidisfjord, Iceland, on 8 Sep 1942, and rendezvoused with the Russian-bound convoy PQ 18 at sea. The two submarines did not go all the way to Russia; instead they transferred to the homecoming QP 14 convoy, and arrived at Lerwick on 25 September 1942.

In addition to their war patrols and a lot of training, the P614 and P615 also took part in the making of the 1943 film *We Dive at Dawn* starring John Mills. Both were stand-ins for John Mills' submarine HMS Sea Tiger.

On 11 December 1942, the P615 left Scotland bound for Freetown, Sierra Leone, and we know that by now Tom had to be aboard as this was its last voyage. The P615 arrived at Falmouth on 13 December to refuel and set off again on the 19th. She arrived at Freetown on 6 January 1943, and on the 17th departed for Simonstown, South Africa, escorted by a British minesweeper. This description of Tom's death is taken from the website *uboat.net* (<https://uboat.net/>):

U-123 spotted both vessels at 03.44 hours and missed them with two spreads of two torpedoes at 05.34 and 06.47 hours, one of the torpedo tracks was sighted by the escort, but was put down to a porpoise. At 11.01 hours, a merchant vessel was sighted and at 11.53 hours the U-boat fired one torpedo at the minesweeper on station about 300 yards off the submarine's starboard quarter, but missed. At 11.54 hours, a spread of two torpedoes was fired at the submarine, which was hit by one of them on the starboard side, exploded and sank immediately about 100 miles southwest of Freetown. The commander, six officers and 37 ratings were lost.

Tom has no known grave other than the wreck of the P615 but is commemorated on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 78, Column 2. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Tom's wife Kathleen never remarried and died in Dorset in 2003.

Gunner Albert Edward KENISTON

Service number 5575290
Royal Artillery
6 Battery, 3rd Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment
Killed in action on 14 May 1941, aged 27

Albert was born in Wells and his parents ran a fish and chip shop in South Street. When the war started he was a builder's labourer and was married with one daughter. He joined the Wiltshire Regiment early in the war and transferred to the Royal Artillery where he manned the guns on merchant ships, the so-called DEMS. He died as a result of enemy action on board the MV (Motor Vessel) Rabaut, or perhaps on the MV Rabaul which was sunk by the German raider Atlantis.



Albert

Photograph courtesy of Elaine Watson, Albert's granddaughter

Albert was born in Wells on 23 October 1913, to George Henry Keniston and Bessie née Fowler, and was baptised on 12 April 1914, at St Cuthbert's Church. He was their second son, and he would eventually have six sisters and four brothers. They lived at 22, South Street, and his father was a labourer.

His father died on 2 November 1926. At that time Albert's parents were running a 'Fish and Potato' business from 1, South Street; today we would call it a Fish and Chip shop. Two years later it was taken over by his uncle, also called Albert Keniston. Our Albert's mother, Bessie, died on 9 September 1934.

On Boxing Day 1936 a double wedding took place at St Thomas' Church. Albert married Elsie Amy Ford of Bath Road, and her sister Lilian married Kenneth Tolson, from Wareham in Dorset. Albert and Elsie had one child, a daughter called Pauline, who was born on 22 May 1938.

In September 1939, they were living with Elsie's widowed mother at 10, Bath Road. Albert was then working as a labourer for Mr Harry Kingston, builder, of 1, Market Street.

Early in the war Albert joined the Wiltshire Regiment. The *Wells Journal* of 18 October 1940 reported that the Clareville Social Club had sent cigarettes to a number of Wells men serving in the forces including "Pte. A. E. Keniston".

In June 1939, the government started the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) programme, which would provide British merchant ships with some defence against enemy aircraft and surfaced submarines. These guns were manned by Royal Navy and Royal Artillery personnel. In 1940, there were not enough gunners to man all of the ships and in March a request for volunteers was sent to various infantry regiments. 940 men responded,¹ and this may be when Alfred became Gunner Keniston.



Albert in uniform, and Albert and Elsie on their wedding day
Photographs courtesy of Elaine Watson, Albert's granddaughter

By May 1941, over 9,000 soldiers were serving aboard DEMS and it was decided to create the Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Artillery, from the existing serving soldiers. Later it became the Maritime Royal Artillery. Alfred belonged to 6 Battery, 3rd Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment. The regiment then had its headquarters in Cardiff and 6 Battery was responsible for South Devon, South Wales and the Severn Estuary.

All of the DEMS gunners signed on as members of the ship's crew, i.e. as merchant seamen, and were therefore under the authority of the ship's master. As a merchant seaman, Alfred could have visited neutral countries without being interned.

Albert's casualty card says that he died on 14 May 1941 as a result of enemy action while serving on the MV (Motor Vessel) Rabout, and the *Wells Journal* of 18 July 1941 says that he died in the Indian Ocean while serving in the Merchant Navy. We have not been to find out anything at all about the MV Rabout.

A ship with a similar name did sink on 14 May 1941. The MV Rabaul was sunk by the German raider Atlantis off the west coast of South Africa. Six crew and three passengers died, and the rest were

¹ "Unsung heroes – the Maritime Royal Artillery and armed merchant ships", *The Times of Malta*, 17 September 2011.

taken prisoner. One of the Royal Artillery men serving on the Rabaul, Pte W. A. Fisher, had (like Albert) started out in the Wiltshire Regiment. The MV Rabaul had left Newport on 4 April and was headed for Cape Town. However, apart from the similarity in the ships' names and the date, and perhaps the fact that it sailed from Newport which was in 6 Battery's area, there is nothing to say that Alfred died on the Rabaul. It remains a mystery.

A memorial service was held for Albert in St Cuthbert's Church on 6 July 1941. He has no known grave other than the wreck of the MV Rabaul but is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial, panel 50.3. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. Two of his brothers served in the Army during the war, Jim in Italy and Harold in India.

His widow Elsie re-married twice: to John Boyd on 23 December 1946 (who died in 1966), and then to Leslie E Hellier in 1971.

We would like to thank Richard Witcombe for his help in writing this article.



The British Legion Roll of Honour lodged at Wells Town Hall
Photograph © Kevin Westwood

Updated 16 November 2020

Private Ronald Albert Frank LANSDOWNE

Service number 5682998
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry
2nd (Airborne) Battalion
Divisional Defence Platoon, 1st British Airborne Division
Killed in action on 25/26 September 1944, aged 21

Born in Wells in 1923, Ronald went to Wells Central School and then joined the Post Office, first as a messenger and then as a postman. When he turned 18, he joined the Somerset Light Infantry, and then transferred to the 'The Ox and Bucks', which were glider infantry in the 1st Airborne Division. Ronald landed on the first day of the battle for Arnhem, and died on the last day of the battle when he drowned during the night-time withdrawal over the Rhine.



The grave of a British airborne soldier killed during the battle of Arnhem

Photograph by Sgt. C. H. Hewitt, No. 5 Army Film and Photo Section, Army Film and Photographic Unit © IWM BU 3646
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205203296>)

Ronald was born in Wells on 3 February 1923, to Ernest Frank Lansdowne and Alice Florence née Berry. His father was a paper mill worker. He had a younger brother, Harold (whom the family called Jack), who was born in 1925. Soon after Harold's birth they moved to 36, Southover. Ronald's father died of tuberculosis in late 1927.

Ronald went to Wells Central Boys' School, and on leaving school was employed by the Wells Postal Service, first as a messenger and then as a postman. Ronald belonged to the congregation of the Wells Methodist Church. In September 1939, he was living with his mother and brother at 25, Southover.

In 1941, probably as soon as he was 18, Ronald joined the 4th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry. On 10 October 1942, he transferred to the 2nd (Airborne) Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, which were glider infantry. Originally the 2nd Battalion was part of the 1st Airborne Division and provided the Divisional Defence Platoon, whose job was to protect the Divisional Headquarters.¹ This they continued to do after the 2nd Battalion was transferred to the 6th Airborne

¹ Information about the Defence Platoon is from 'The Tale of a Few Bridges' by Steve Berridge (<http://www.lightbobs.com/the-tale-of-a-few-bridges---2-oxf--bucks-li-1944-45.html>).

Division in 1943. By September 1944, the Divisional Defence Platoon was still mainly made up of men from the 2nd Battalion.

Ronald was a member of the Defence Platoon, and this is why, on 17 September 1944, the first day of the battle for Arnhem, Ronald landed in a Horsa glider at Landing Zone 'Z' about one mile south-west of Wolfheze, even though his regiment was not present.

The objectives of the 1st Airborne Division were to capture and hold the bridges over the river Rhine at Arnhem. However, in the end, only a force slightly over battalion strength managed to reach and hold the northern approaches to the road bridge. On 20 September, after it had been cut to pieces trying to get to Arnhem, the 1st Airborne Division withdrew to the Oosterbeek perimeter. On the 21st, all resistance at the road bridge ceased. During the defence of the Oosterbeek perimeter, the Defence Platoon was engaged in the defence of the Hartenstein Hotel, which had become the Divisional Headquarters.

On the night of 25/26 September, after fighting for nine days, what was left of the 1st Airborne Division were withdrawn across the Rhine. Just under 2,000 men were safely withdrawn out of a division that originally numbered about 9,000.

News of what happened to Ronald on that night was given in the *Wells Journal* of 5 October 1945:

It was stated that a member of the Unit last saw Pte. Lansdowne near a river immediately prior to the evacuation of Arnhem. The operation involved the crossing of the river at night, during which many casualties were sustained and unhappily no further information concerning Pte. Lansdowne has been received from the survivors.

Ronald died in the river and his body floated down the Rhine for about 38 miles to Hagenstein, where it was found by German soldiers on 27 November 1944. The Germans buried Ronald by a brick-work's chimney stack about 100 yards from the south bank of the river, which in Hagenstein is called the Lek.

On 27 November 1946, Ronald was reburied at the Amersfoort (Oud Leusden) General Cemetery in Plot 13. Row B. Grave 1. He has a memorial plaque in the Wells Methodist Church, and is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

In birth records, army record and the *Wells Journal*, Ronald's surname is always spelt with an 'e' at the end, but on his memorial plaque, his surname is spelt 'Lansdown'.

Marine Alfred Henry MALLOWS

Service number PO/X 101610

Royal Marines

Mobile Naval Base Defence Organization 1

Died of wounds on 30 May 1941, aged 21

Born in Wells, Alfred was an apprentice for Sheldon's Engineering, and was a keen footballer and bird fancier. He joined the Royal Marines, and was posted to Mobile Naval Base Defence Organization 1. His unit deployed to Crete on 9 May 1941, eleven days before Germany launched its invasion. On 30 May 1941, aged 21, he died in No. 8 British General Hospital, Alexandria, of wounds received during the Battle of Crete.



Alfred with one of his birds

Photograph courtesy of Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Alfred's niece

Alfred was born in Wells on 27 January 1920 to William Ethelbert Malloys and Lillie Blanche née White. His father was a shoemaker, who worked for Mendip Hospital for 32 years, and a sometime bandmaster for the Wells City and Boys Brigade Bands. At the end of 1932 the family moved to 62, Burcott Road.

The Boys' Central School had an annual prize of a watch for the boy voted to be the 'most honourable in the school'. In 1933, the prize was presented to Alfred by ex-Mayor Wheeler. In the same year, Alfred was also the joint holder of the 'Wheeler Cup for Sport'.

Alfred was a keen sportsman. He played in the Sheldon's Works football team and in 1939 started playing for Wells City. He also played for the Wells Minors alongside Philip Stiles and Maurice Whiting, who died in the war too. His other passion was birds. He bred canaries and in 1938 he won first prize for a goldfinch at the Ninth Wells and District Fanciers' and Chrysanthemum Society annual show at the Town Hall.

At the start of the war Alfred was living with his parents and his sister Annie at 62, Burcott Road. He was an apprentice fitter and turner working for Messrs. Sheldon's Engineering Works. As he was an apprentice he was exempt from military service until his apprenticeship was finished, but as his two brothers had joined up, so did he.

Alfred enlisted into the Royal Marines, and after basic training at Portsmouth joined Mobile Naval Base Defence Organization 1 (MNBDO 1). The function of the MNBDO was to provide the Fleet with a coastal base in any part of the world within a week, and then to defend it.

MNBDO 1 sailed for the Middle East on 4 February 1941 on three ships. After five days in Durban in South Africa, the ships went through the Suez Canal and arrived at Port Said in April. On 23 April the MNBDO 1 arrived at Tahal Camp in Egypt. It was decided that MNBDO 1 should provide a naval base in Souda Bay in Crete, and so the advanced group, including Alfred, arrived on Crete on 9 May.

The German invasion of Crete began on 20 May with airborne troops landing in the area of Souda Bay. The MNBDO fought as infantry during the German airborne landings and subsequent fighting. Later in the month Alfred was evacuated back to Alexandria suffering from multiple injuries due to bomb blast. On 29 May he was admitted to No. 8 British General Hospital, where he died the next day. His parents were told in July 1941 that Alfred was missing but his death was not confirmed until April 1945.

Alfred is buried in Egypt at the Alexandria (Chatby) Military and War Memorial Cemetery, in grave P. 128. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.



The photo of his grave that was sent to his parents
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Alfred's niece

His two brothers also served in the war: Sergeant Ethelbert (Bert) Mallows was with the Somerset Light Infantry in Italy and ENSA, and Private Frederick Mallows was with the Gloucester Hussars, and then with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

We would like to thank Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Alfred's niece, for her help with this article.

Sapper Alec William MATTHEWS

Service number 14334670

Royal Engineers

91 Field Company

Killed in action on 20 November 1944, aged 20

Alec and his twin brother Christopher were born in Wells in 1924. Before the war he worked for Mr Sage the builder. During the war he joined the Royal Engineers. Alec landed on Sword Beach on D-Day, helped build the bridges needed for the battle for Caen, and died near Nijmegen.



The France and Germany Star

Awarded for service in NW Europe between 6 June 1944 and 8 May 1945

Image created by Col André Kritzinger now in Public domain

Alec and his twin Christopher were born in Wells on 8 June 1924, to Theodore Silvester Matthews and Beatrice Lilian née Lester. They had a younger sister called Mildred.

In September 1939, the family were living at 29, Everetts Close, Hawkers Lane. Alec's father was a plasterer and tiler, and Alec worked for Mr Sage the builder of 14, Tor Street.

Alec joined the Royal Engineers and was posted to 91 Field Company. Originally this was a chemical warfare company but in 1943 it was converted into a Field Company, which was the standard unit of the Royal Engineers and provided the sappers required for a designated task. It was part of the 18th (1st London) General Headquarters Troops Royal Engineers (GHQTRE), sometimes known by its old name – the Tower Hamlets Engineers.

On 21 March 1944, Alec's mother died of pulmonary tuberculosis.

On D-Day, 18th GHQTRE provided the engineer component of Nos. 5 and 6 Beach Groups that supported the British 3rd Division's assault on Sword Beach. The GHQTRE's field companies, including 91, landed in the first wave of troops and made it easier for the fighting units to land and then get off the beach quickly.

The next task for the 18th GHQTRE was to strengthen existing bridges (such as Pegasus Bridge) and build new ones over the River Orne and Caen Canal in preparation for Operation Goodwood which was part of the battle for Caen in Normandy. This work, which had to be carried out in secrecy on the night of 17/18 July, required much preparation in road building and mine clearing, as well as bringing up and concealing the bridging material.

After the withdrawal of the 1st Airborne Division from Arnhem, Nijmegen became a front line town and remained so until February 1945. The area around it was known as the Nijmegen salient and included a bridgehead over the Waal. Nijmegen was continually under bombardment and there were many German attempts to destroy its rail and road bridges over the Waal.

Alec died near to Nijmegen. We do not know how he died, but we do know that another three sappers from his company died on the same day and another a day later. They were all buried next to No. 3 Casualty Clearing station, in a cemetery in a wooded area called Jonkers Bosch, which was about 2 miles south west of Nijmegen.

On 2 April 1947, Alec was reburied in the Jonkerbos War Cemetery at Nijmegen in grave 19.E.4. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

His twin brother, Christopher, served in the army in Italy.

Lieutenant Arthur Richard Burton McGILLYCUDDY

Service number 74898
Somerset Light Infantry
2nd Battalion

Killed in action on 17 September 1944, aged 27

Descended from a 2nd century king of Munster, Arthur's grandfather was 'The McGillicuddy of The Reeks'. Arthur's mother was a District Nurse in Wells until she married Major Richard McGillicuddy MC in 1916. After he died, she returned to Wells, and in 1921 married Dr A. C. Hincks, a Wells GP. Arthur was brought up in Wells. He served in North Africa from the Battle of El Alamein until the capture of Tunis when the Axis forces in North Africa surrendered. Arthur then took part in the Salerno Landings in Italy, and in the final battle for Monte Cassino. He died when the 8th Army broke through the German Gothic Line at Coriano.



Infantry of B Company 1/5th Queen's Royal Regiment practise using collapsible boats before the assault on the River Volturno.

Photograph by Sgt. Mott, Army Film and Photographic Unit © IWM NA 7613
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194442>)

Arthur was born on 4 February 1917, to Major Richard Hugh McGillicuddy MC and Ethel Florence née Lukey at 40, Compton Road, Wimbledon. His father was a major in the Royal Army Medical Corps who later died from pneumonia on 21 October 1918 while on active service.

Arthur's grandfather was 'The McGillicuddy of The Reeks'. 'The McGillicuddy' is the hereditary Chief of the name of McGillicuddy, a family originating in County Kerry in Ireland. The McGillicuddy is a direct descendant of Mogh Nuaghad, King of Munster, who ruled around 125 AD.

Arthur's mother, who was from Dover, had been a District Nurse in Wells for two years when she married Arthur's father in St Cuthbert's Church on 3 February 1916. She resigned her post and left Wells at the end of May 1916.

After Arthur's father died, his mother moved back to Wells and lived at 2, Chamberlain Street, and Arthur's sister, Patricia, was born in Wells on 6 June 1919. On 25 January 1921, Arthur's mother married Arthur Hincks at Christ Church in New Malden, Surrey, where her sister Marian Spiers lived.

Dr Arthur Cecil Hincks, MC, MB ChB, had been in general practice in Wells since 1909, and would go on to become Medical Officer of Health for Wells, Police Surgeon, and Medical Officer for the Cottage Hospital. They lived first at 'Melbourne House' on Chamberlain Street, and then at 'Sunnymead', St Thomas Street. Arthur and Ethel had two boys of their own, Peter and Michael.

A summary of Arthur's life up to the start of the war was given in the *Wells Journal* of 6 October 1944:

He was educated at St. Dunstan's Preparatory School, Burnham-on-Sea, Fettes College, Edinburgh, and at Bristol University, where he studied medicine.

He joined the Territorial Army of the Somerset Light Infantry [Wells Platoon] in 1938, and at the outbreak of war he left Bristol University for active service.

While at Bristol University he joined the Officer Training Corps. On 2 April 1938 he was made a 2nd lieutenant in the 4th Battalion Somerset Light Infantry. On 2 October 1939 he became a lieutenant and on 1 July 1941 he became a temporary captain.

On 28 March 1942, in St John's Church Great Clacton, Arthur married Nesta Barbara 'Jimmy' Roper of Layer-de-la-Haye, Essex. Nesta was in the WAAF.

The *Wells Journal* of 6 October 1944 continues his story:

In July, 1942, he was drafted overseas, joining the Eighth Army, and served with the Queen's Royal Regiment throughout the Tunisian campaign. In April this year he joined a Battalion of his own Regiment and served in Italy.

The 131st (Queen's) Infantry Brigade was made up of the 1/5th, 1/6th, and 1/7th Battalions of the Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey) and was part of the 44th Infantry Division. In mid-1942 the division was sent to join the British 8th Army in Egypt. We do not know in which battalion Arthur served, but they have a common and distinguished history.

The 44th Division sailed from Gourock on the mouth of the Clyde on 25 May 1942. The 1/6th and 1/7th were on the SS Strathalan and the 1/5th was on the SS Cristobal. They sailed to Egypt via Sierra Leone, South Africa and Aden, and disembarked at Suez on 21 July 1942, joining the 8th Army on 14 August.

The 131st Brigade's desert war started with an attack on Deir El Munassib on 29 September. This was followed by the Battle of El Alamein in October/November. At El Alamein, the 131st Brigade was assigned to the 7th Armoured Division ("The Desert Rats") and would remain with them for the rest of the war.

The brigade took part in the pursuit to Tobruk, which was entered unopposed on 13 November, and then in the advance on Tripoli, which was captured on 23 January 1943. It next advanced to the Mareth Line, fought in the Battle of Medenine on 6 March 1943, and in May took part in the capture of Tunis, where the Germans and Italians fighting in North Africa finally surrendered.

After rest and training it moved to another theatre of war and landed at Salerno in Italy on 19 September and fought in the Battle for the Salerno beachhead. On 28 September it took part in the forcing of the River Sarno, and in October in the crossing of the River Volturno. In January 1944 the 131st Brigade, along with the rest of the 7th Armoured Division, left Italy for England and began training for the invasion of Europe.

In April 1944, Arthur joined the 2nd Battalion Somerset Light Infantry, which was part of the 28th Infantry Brigade, and had arrived in Italy in March 1944. The brigade served in the Italian Campaign as part of the 8th Army, and fought with distinction at the fourth and final Battle of Monte Cassino in May 1944.

In the autumn of 1944, the Coriano Ridge, which was part of the German Gothic Line, was the last important ridge blocking the Allied advance in the Adriatic sector. Its capture was the key to Rimini and eventually to the River Po. German forces, aided by bad weather, resisted all attacks on their positions between 4 and 12 September 1944. On the night of 12 September, the 8th Army reopened its attack on the Ridge. This attack was successful in taking the Ridge, but marked the beginning of a week of the heaviest fighting experienced by the 8th Army since Cassino in May.

Starting from the town of Coriano on 14 September, the 28th Brigade advanced to the River Marano at Cerasolo, which was finally taken on the 17th. The 2nd Battalion was not involved in the final attack but heavy German shelling continued during the day and Arthur was killed by a mortar splinter.

Arthur is buried in Italy in the Coriano Ridge War Cemetery in grave XX, A, 8. He is also remembered on the Fettes College War Memorial and on the Bristol University Roll of Honour at the Wills Memorial Building, and in Wells on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Arthur's wife, Nesta, got remarried in Chelsea on 26 April 1947, to Leslie Harmer.

Private Kenneth William MILLINGTON

Service number 5675986

Somerset Light Infantry

7th Battalion

Killed in action on 27 August 1944, aged 24

Kenneth was from Launcherley, but by the start of the war he was living in Wells and working for Sheldon's and was in the St John Ambulance Brigade. He joined the army in 1940 and by D-Day was serving in the Somerset Light Infantry. Kenneth landed in France on 22 June and took part in the fighting around Caen. He died in the fighting to establish a bridgehead over the Seine at Vernon.



Kenneth, taken from a Sheldon's Sports Club team photo, 1937-38

Photograph courtesy of Sue Macdonald and Michael Scammell

Kenneth was born on 5 October 1919 to John Millington and Lilian Maud née Haden. He had two sisters, Olive and Muriel, and two brothers, John and Douglas. In the early 1930s, the family were living in Launcherley. Kenneth and some friends took part in the 1938 Wells Carnival as "Ye Olde Village Keep Fit Class".

In September 1939, Kenneth was living with his parents at 3, Town Hall Buildings. He was a cake food operator at Sheldon's, and a member of the St John Ambulance Brigade. Kenneth joined the army at the start of 1940, and by D-Day was in the 7th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, which was part of the 214th Infantry Brigade of the 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division.

For the seven weeks before D-Day, the 7th battalion was camped near Battle in Sussex as part of the subterfuge to persuade the Germans that the invasion would be at Calais. On 16 June they moved to Newhaven and boarded the SS Biarritz, and after a certain amount of hanging around, at 0700 on 22 June, they were on the beach at Courseulles-sur-Mer.

The battalion's first actions were at Hill 112 near Caen and then at Mount Pincon. Once the breakout phase of the invasion was complete, the British drove flat out for the River Seine, with the 43rd (Wessex) Division sent ahead to make an assault crossing at the French town of Vernon. The 7th battalion arrived at Vernon on 25 August and started to cross the Seine at 7pm on the 26th using the remains of a broken road bridge. By nightfall they were established on the other side of the Seine. On

the 27th their task was to enlarge the bridgehead along with the rest of 214th Brigade, and it was during the resultant fighting that Kenneth was killed.

Kenneth is buried in France at the St Desir War Cemetery, in grave VI.C.11. His is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. One of his brothers was in the forces too.

Leading Aircraftwoman Sybil Antoinette MULLINS

Service number 2127023
Women's Auxiliary Air Force
282 Squadron, RAF
Died on 31 July 1944, aged 19

A descendant of Henry VII who was born in Wells, Sybil joined the WAAF in early 1943 and trained as an Aircraft Mechanic. She was posted to 282 Squadron at Davidstow Moor, near Camelford in North Cornwall. On 31 July 1944, she went on a test flight of a Warwick ASR1 aircraft which crashed on take-off, killing Sybil and all of the crew.



A Warwick ASR1 from Sybil's squadron
Part of the R.S. Punnett Collection © IWM MH 5337
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205126839>)

Sybil was born on 18 November 1924 to George Edward Mullins and Kathleen Maude née Nash, of 2, New Street, Wells. She had three sisters and one brother. Her father was a GP, who went on to become the Medical Officer of Wells Cottage Hospital, Divisional Surgeon to the St John Ambulance Brigade, and who held many other posts. He and his wife were pillars of the Wells community.

Sybil went to Wells High School for Girls at 9, New Street. In 1941, she was a Patrol Leader in the 5th Wells (The High School) Guide Company, and in 1942 she left the school, having passed her Oxford School Certificate.

In early 1943, Sybil joined the WAAF. Most likely (given the date) she did her two weeks' basic training at RAF Innsworth, near Gloucester, followed by training as an Aircraft Mechanic for 18 weeks at the No. 1 School of Technical Training at RAF Halton, near Wendover, Buckinghamshire.

After her training Sybil was posted to RAF Davidstow Moor, near Camelford in North Cornwall, as an Aircraft Mechanic. There she serviced the Vickers Warwick ASR1 aircraft of 282 Squadron which provided air-sea rescue cover for the Western Approaches, i.e. out into the Atlantic Ocean.

The following details of Sybil's death are taken from the *Remember Them* website (<https://scarletboy44.tumblr.com/>):

On the 31st July 1944 [Sybil] was aboard a [Vickers] Warwick [ASR1] aircraft which was undergoing an air test. During the flight an engine caught fire which quickly spread to the wing. In an attempt to land the aircraft the pilot chose a field off the end of the runway, which proved too small and the aircraft bounced and broke its back on a hedge at Trenuth Farm, Camelford. The tail fell back into the first field whilst the forward half of the fuselage

containing the aircrew, the burning engine and fuel tanks crashed into the next field and erupted into a ball of fire. All aboard were killed.

Sybil's funeral service was held in St. Thomas' Church on 11 August 1944, and she was buried in Wells Cemetery in Section A. Row F. Grave 15. Sybil is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

According to Paul Theroff's *Royal Genealogy Site* (<http://www.angelfire.com/realm/>), Sybil was a descendant of Henry VII.

At the start of the war her father, Dr Mullins, lent his collection of boarding pikes from HMS Victory to the Wells Home Guard.

Harry PATIS

ARP Rescue Party
Died on 6 April 1944, aged 63

Harry was the only person to be killed by enemy action in Wells during the war. He was born in London, and was an accomplished musician, and played double bass in many London Orchestras. Harry moved to Wells in 1922 and played for the Wells musical societies, which was how he met his future wife. During the Second World War he joined the Wells ARP and died from wounds caused by a German bomb exploding near to the wooden chalet where he lived.



Wells ARP Rescue Party
The date is unknown so perhaps Harry is on the photo
© Wells City Council Archives

Harry was born in London on 13 July 1880. The story of his pre-war life was given in the *Wells Journal* of 14 April 1944:

A native of London, he was a brilliant musician, and for several years played in many London orchestras. During the last war he was with a military band, playing the clarinet. Soon after the last war [1922] he came to this district to live with his nephew, Mr. J. H. Boothaway, and assisted him in his business at the Bekynton Cafe. An excellent double bass player he soon became associated with the various musical societies of the district and his services were in great demand for the various operatic and musical societies in this part of the county.

In 1934, Harry married Emily Sophia Wilkins BA, the elder daughter of Mr W. F. Wilkins, of 'Elim', 5, Elm Close. Sofia, as she preferred to be called, played the viola and appeared in a lot of the local music events, and played alongside Harry both before and after they married. Sophia had moved to Wells from Kent to work as a teacher before the Great War. In 1932, she was teaching at Oakleigh School.

Harry and Sophia lived in a wooden chalet off Tynning Lane. Now called Tynings Lane, it runs between Lower and Upper Milton, and the chalet was on the north side of the road a couple of fields before the lane meets the Old Bristol Road. Pat Robinson remembers:

Harry lived in Tynings Lane, in a wooden chalet hidden by trees, on an unmade lane up between Upper and Lower Milton so familiar to me. But as children we never met them. The Patis Chalet fell into disrepair but their garden plants remained for a long time.

During the war, Harry joined the ARP and became a member of the First Aid Team which was later merged into the ARP Rescue Service. His sister, Alice Kate Patis, came to Wells to escape the bombing in London and stayed on afterwards, dying here in 1956.

The following details of Harry's death are taken from Paul Fry's book A Short History of the Order of St John and in particular the City of Wells Division (Wells, 1996):

What was termed a "Baby Blitz" on Weston-super-Mare and Bristol took place during March [1944]. Wells was on the flight path of the enemy aircraft, and it was during the night of 27/28th March [that] an enemy aircraft, fleeing from defending Beaufighter night-fighters jettisoned its load of high explosive bombs over the Mendips. Several fell in the area of Tynning Lane, Upper Milton, causing injury to a man living in a converted caravan tucked away in a wood under the Mendips.

At 0030 hrs a call out of the Wells Ambulance was made from the Rescue Post to respond to the incident. The St. John ambulance was dispatched at 0035 hrs and was away until 0220 hrs.

The Report of the A.R.P. District Officer [G.E. Mitchell] noted:

"Divisional Superintendent Fry took charge of the ambulance and quickly arrived at the scene, he was accompanied by Mrs Collins, who was driving, and Messrs Vowles, Grist and Baker.

One casualty (Mr H. Patis aged 63, himself a member of the A.R.P. first aid party,) was found lying on the floor of the living room with a compound fracture and severe lacerated wounds of the left leg. He received admirable first aid and was quickly removed to hospital. ..."

The unfortunate Mr Patis, died of blood poisoning some days later [on 6 April] in the Wells Cottage Hospital ... His home under the Mendips was regarded as one of the safest places in the area.

Jeff Allen's father always said that Harry was lying on a bed when rocks thrown up by the explosion of a bomb came through the roof of the chalet and hit his leg. The 'Jack Blandiver' column in the *Wells Journal* of 24 February 1956 stated that Harry was preparing to report to the ARP post when he was injured.

Harry's funeral took place on 10 April 1944 and was well attended by friends and colleagues, and by many local government and civil defence dignitaries. It was reported in the *Wells Journal* of 14 April 1944 that:

The first part of the funeral service was held at St. Cuthbert's Church. ... Members of the Wells First Aid and Rescue Party, acted as bearers, and his cap, belt and pouch rested on the coffin. Members of the First Aid, Rescue and Decontamination Parties, Ambulance Drivers, Wardens Service, N.F.S., Special Constabulary, Red Cross Nurses, and St. John Ambulance Brigade men and women were present. ... The interment took place at Wells Cemetery and after the committal, the members of the various services filed past the grave and saluted.

Harry is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section H, Row N, Grave 6; sadly it is unmarked. Harry is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. He is also listed in the seven volumes of "The Civilian War Dead in the United Kingdom" which are kept just outside the entrance to St George's Chapel in Westminster Abbey.

Harry's wife remarried at the registry office in Wells on 18 February 1947 to Rev. Percy W. Jones.

We would like to thank Pat Robinson, Pauline Pickford and Jeffery Allen for their help in writing this article.

Lance Sergeant Francis (Frank) William POPLE

Service number 2654924

Coldstream Guards

5th Battalion

Died on 14 March 1942, aged 33

Born in St Georges near Banwell, Frank joined the Coldstream Guards in 1930, and married a Wells girl a year later. In 1939, Frank was an army reservist living in Wells with his wife and daughter. When war was declared he was recalled to the Coldstream Guards. Frank served with the 1st Battalion in France, and on 1 June 1940, on one of the Dunkirk beaches, he was wounded in action. Back in England, he was transferred to the 5th Battalion, and on the night of 12 March 1942, he was hit by a car in the black-out and died two days later.



Frank in his Coldstream Guards uniform
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Jan Stubbins, Frank's daughter

Frank was born in St Georges, near Banwell, on 28 May 1908 to Frank Pople and Georgina née Hembury, and was baptised on 11 February 1909 in Banwell. Frank was the first of their six children, and his father was a shepherd.

Frank's early life is told by his daughter, Mrs Jan Stubbins:

He left school at 13 and became a farm labourer. He met his future wife in 1929 on a Saturday evening in the Recreation Ground in Wells. Edith Maud Kate Hatcher and Francis became engaged in 1930. He joined the Coldstream Guards in 1930 to "better himself" as farm labourers' wages and their accommodation were very poor. They married on 17 October 1931. Edith stayed in Wells with her parents at 6, Muriel Terrace. I was born in May 1934 with a twin brother (Frank Harold). Sadly my brother died at 6 days old. My mother then moved to be with him in Aldershot. (When my father met my mother he was living at Brewery Farm, Oakhill.)

After joining the Guards, within 3 months he went from a farm labourer to being on guard at Buckingham Palace. He was on guard of honour at the celebration of George V's Silver Jubilee, at the funeral procession of George V and at the coronation of George VI.

There was a show on the London Stage called "All the Kings Men". They wanted 10 of the smartest guardsmen (Coldstream of course). Sergeant Major Ronald Britten chose my father and nine others. My father trained at Perbriht. In the Guards he was known as Pop and became a master cook preparing meals for the officers' mess.

On 1 October 1936, Lance Corporal Pople arrived in Palestine with the 3rd Battalion on board the SS Laurentic. It was there to help maintain the peace, but after three uneventful months it returned to Aldershot on New Year's Eve. While in Palestine he narrowly avoided being killed when the lorry he should have been in was blown up by terrorists on the way to Haifa.



Edith and Frank on their wedding day
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Jan Stubbins, Frank's daughter

On 2 November 1937, Frank's term of enlistment ended and he was transferred to the reserves. He, Edith and Janet returned to Wells, and he started to look for a job. Frank saw an advert for a watchman's job in Bristol which said that they wanted an ex-guardsman. So he cycled over to Bristol, but when Frank got there it turned out that they only wanted an ex-**Grenadier** guard! So instead he worked as a plasterer's mate in Wells.

In 1939, the family were living at 35, Everett Close, Wells. On 1 September, the reservists were called up and Frank rejoined the Coldstream Guards and went with the 1st Battalion to France, arriving on 30 September.

The 1st Battalion spent the winter constructing defences, and then, on 5 May 1940, advanced into Belgium to meet the invading Germans. On 1 June 1940 at 03.00, the 1st Battalion was on the beach at La Panne, Dunkirk, and was evacuated back to England that day. While on the beach, or on the tug boat that took him off, Frank was wounded by shrapnel.

Mrs Stubbins continues the story:

They landed at Ramsgate where the Salvation Army waited with blankets, hot drinks and a stamped postcard to send to their next of kin. Then he went to Shenley Military Hospital [in Hertfordshire] to treat his spinal injuries. After leave he was passed A1 to join his regiment!

In October 1941, the 5th Battalion was raised and Frank was transferred to it. He was then a lance sergeant.

On 20 March 1942, the *Wells Journal* reported his death:

[He] met with a fatal accident on Thursday last. He was knocked down by a car in the black-out, and was conveyed to Shenley (Herts) Military Hospital where he died on Saturday.

Jan writes that he had gone out “to post a letter to my mother Edith”. On 27 March 1942, the *Journal* added:

The funeral of the late Lance/Sergt. Frank Pople ... took place at Wells Cemetery on Saturday. The body was brought to Wells by train and rested overnight in the Methodist Church, where a service was held on Saturday ... The coffin was covered with the Union Jack and a detachment of the Coldstream Guards acted as bearers and escort.

Frank is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section H. Row L. Grave 5. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. When his wife died, she was buried with him.

We would like to thank Mrs Jan Stubbins, Frank’s daughter, for her invaluable contribution to this article.

Bandsman Julian Donald ROCHEFORT

Service number 5436716
Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry
2nd Battalion
Killed in action on 30 May 1940, aged 20

Julian was born in Derbyshire into a musical family. The family moved to Wells from Cornwall in the late 1920s or early 1930s. After leaving school, Julian joined the army and became a bandsman. At the start of the war his battalion was guarding Buckingham Place but it soon went to France with the British Expeditionary Force. As a bandsman, Julian would normally have been used as a stretcher bearer. Julian died in the fighting to hold the Dunkirk Perimeter.



The cap badge of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

Photograph by Dormskirk, licensed by <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

Julian's birth was registered in the last quarter of 1919 in Alferton, Derbyshire. His parents were Christopher Rochefort and Margaret Helen née Ball. It was an musical family as his father was a professional singer and his mother was a professional dancer, and two of their three children would be musical.

Julian's elder sister, Joyce, was born in Derbyshire but his younger sister, Zona, was born in St Austell in 1924. When she grew up Zona become a leading light of the Wells Operatic Society.

The earliest record of the family being in Wells is a mention of Joyce in the *Wells Journal* of 4 December 1935.

On leaving school, Julian joined the 2nd Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, and became a bandsman (*Wells Journal*, 21 June 1940). From 1935 until the start of the war the 2nd Battalion was in England.

In September 1939, his mother and sisters were living at 14, Broad Street, along with Joyce's daughter.

Prior to the start of the war, the 2nd Battalion was providing the guard at Buckingham Palace and was based at Chelsea Barracks and the Tower of London. When the war started, the battalion handed these duties back to the Guards and returned to its depot at Bodmin in Cornwall.

The 2nd Battalion was part of the 10th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division, and it arrived in France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on 1 October 1939. It then spent the next seven months of the so called 'phoney war' on the Franco-Belgian border around Lille digging

trenches and building weapons pits and pill boxes. As a bandsman, Julian's normal role in a battle would have been as a stretcher bearer.

The German Army launched its invasion of Belgium and Holland on 10 May 1940, and the 4th Division advanced to the River Dyle, east of Brussels, to counter it. On 16 May, the 4th Division was ordered to retreat, and from the 19th to the 22nd it fought to hold the Germans at the River Scheldt.

Meanwhile, starting on 13 May, the Germans attacked through the Ardennes, advanced to the River Somme and then swung north towards the English Channel, and on 26 March captured the channel ports of Boulogne and Calais. This move separated the BEF from its support elements and led to the BEF's retreat to Dunkirk.

On 27 May, the 10th Brigade was transferred to the 5th Division to help hold the Ypres-Comines canal. Holding this canal allowed a substantial part of the BEF to reach Dunkirk. On 28 May, the brigade rejoined the 4th Division, which was holding the eastern, Nieuport, end of the Dunkirk perimeter along the banks of the Nieuport-Veurne-Dunkirk Canal.

Julian died on the 30th, most likely in the fighting along the Nieuport-Veurne-Dunkirk Canal. On 31 May, the 10th Brigade, which had suffered heavy losses since the start of the fighting, was evacuated from the Dunkirk beaches.

Julian is buried about two miles west of Nieuport at the Oostduinkerke Communal Cemetery in Row D, Grave 88. In Wells he is remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Sergeant John Charles SAMUEL

Service number 1853730
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
153 Squadron
Killed in action on 29 November 1944, aged 21

Born in Wales, John moved to Wells in 1934 when his father took over the Rose and Crown pub in St John Street. Early in the war he joined the Wells Fire Service and then when he was 18 he joined the RAF and trained to be a flight engineer. He died on his first operation flight when his Lancaster was hit by flak while attacking Dortmund in a daylight raid.



Avro Lancaster B.I heavy bomber

Photograph by Flt Lt Bertrand J. H. Daventry, RAF official photographer © IWM CH 6071
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205018420>)

John's birth was registered in Pontypridd in the third quarter of 1923. His parents were John Samuel and Winifred Rose née Osmond, who was John's second wife. John senior's first wife, Florence Louise née Mead, died in 1918, and John had two stepsisters, Mary and Mildred, and a stepbrother, William, who is also on the Wells War Memorial. In 1911, the Samuels lived at 26, Bailey Street, Mountain Ash, and John's father was then a coal miner. They may have still been at that address when John was born.

John's mother, Winifred, was born in Bridgwater and raised in Wells, where, from about 1917, her father, Charles Osmond, was the landlord of the Rose and Crown public house on St John Street. In 1934, Charles Osmond, died, and so the Samuel family moved to Wells, where John senior became the new landlord of the Rose and Crown.

John attended the Blue School, and in September 1939 was living with his parents and his sister Mary at the Rose and Crown. During the early years of the war he was in the Wells Fire Service, probably as a messenger, and his father was an ARP Warden.

The *Wells Journal* of 11 July 1941 reported that John was best man at Mary's wedding to Gilbert Warman. Gilbert was then serving in the Royal Artillery and would take over the running of the pub when John senior retired in 1955.

John enlisted into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve at Oxford at some point after November 1942. When he had completed his initial training, he went to Number 4 School of Technical Training at St Athan to train as a flight engineer. On graduation he went to one of the Heavy Conversion Units belonging to 1 Group: 1656, 1662 or 1667 Squadron. There he met up with the crew that he would fly

with, did his type conversion onto Lancaster bombers and started to gain flying experience, as this was the first time that his training had involved flying.

On 16 November 1944, John and his crew joined 'B' Flight of 153 Squadron at RAF Scampton, about 5 miles north of Lincoln. The squadron had been reformed as a bomber squadron the previous month and flew a combination of Lancaster B.I and B.III heavy bombers

The crew's first operational flight was on 29 November 1944. They took off at 12:15 in Lancaster P4-X (a type BI, serial number PD380) with a maximum bomb load of 14,000 lbs. At this stage of the war it was possible to fly daylight raids into Germany with a heavy escort. The mission is described in the squadron's Operations Record Book:¹

The Squadron was ordered to take part in an attack on Dortmund and 20 aircraft were detailed. This was a daylight attack and the Base Column² tactics were used, with an escort of 17 Squadrons of fighters. Take-off was at noon in good conditions of visibility and clear skies. One aircraft failed to take-off owing to engine trouble. The remainder formed up in Base Column and flew over 4-6/10ths cloud on the route. The target was covered by 4-6/10ths' cloud, base 2,000 feet, tops 6-7 thousand feet. No [target] markers were seen on the run-up with a result that bombing was rather scattered, mainly to the North East of the Aiming Point. The route home was made in similar conditions and all aircraft landed safely at Base with the exception of 'X' flown by F/Lt. Pow of whom nothing was heard after take-off. Flak was very active and 5 of our aircraft were damaged, but no fighters were encountered.

The aircraft that did not return was John's aircraft. It is now known that it disintegrated after being hit by anti-aircraft fire over Horde, about three miles south of Dortmund.³ In all, 294 Lancasters and 17 Mosquitos from squadrons in 1 and 8 Groups took part in the raid and six Lancasters were lost.

The crew of Lancaster P4-X were buried by the German authorities in the Dortmund Main Cemetery. On 11 December 1946, they were moved to the Reichwald Forest War Cemetery near Kleve in Germany, and John was buried in Section 4, Row B, Grave 13, next to his crew. John is also remembered on the rolls of honour at the Blue School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Strangely, given his father's position, the only mention of John's service and death was one memorial printed in the *Wells Journal* on the day after the first anniversary of his death:

Proud and treasured memories of our son, John Charles, Flt. Sgt., R.A.F. killed in operations over Germany, Nov. 29th, 1944, aged 21. Always remembered by his Mum and Dad, Sisters.

Updated 3 October 2020

¹ Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference AIR-27-1029-21.

² All of the bombers from Scampton flew in a loose 'gaggle' of aircraft flying behind a leading 'vic' (a leading aircraft with one on either side slightly behind it); the aim being to keep the planes together and achieve a greater concentration of bombs on the target.

³ See <http://www.rafc commands.com/database/wardead/details.php?qnum=39884>.

Gunner William John SAMUEL

Service number 3906690

Royal Artillery

6 Battery, 3rd Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment

Killed in action on 20 December 1942, aged 35

Born in Wales, his father became the landlord of the Rose and Crown public house in Wells. William had a wife and twin boys, and lived in Poole. At the start of the war he was in the Green Howards but transferred to the Royal Artillery, where he manned the guns on merchant ships, the so-called DEMS. He died when the tanker Otina was torpedoed by a German U boat in the middle of the Atlantic.



The Otina before the war

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(<http://billedarkiv.mfs.dk/fotoweb/archives/5001-Museet-for-søfarts-billedarkiv/archive/Arkiv-94/000027866.jpg.info>)

William was born in Mountain Ash in Glamorgan in 1908. His parents were John Samuel and Florence Louise née Mead, who had married in Bridgwater, where Florence was from. In 1911, the Samuels lived at 26, Bailey Street, Mountain Ash, and William's father was a coal miner.

William was their first child and they went on to have three daughters, Winifred, Mary and Mildred. 1918 was a bad year for the family: first his sister Winifred died and then his mother died. In 1923, his father married his second wife, Winifred Rose Osmond, in Pontypridd. John and Winifred would have one child of their own, John Charles, who is also on the Wells War Memorial.

In 1934 the family moved to Wells and William's father became the landlord of the Rose and Crown public house on St John Street for 21 years. We know that Mary and John came to Wells, but it is likely that William did not, as he was then 26 years old.

In 1935, William married Edith May Aldridge in Bournemouth. A year later, their twins, John and William, were born in Poole. In September 1939, May (as she preferred to be called) and the boys were living in a bungalow called 'Mount Pleasant' at 87, Connaught Crescent, Parkstone, Poole, and they were still there in 1962 when William's probate was finally completed.

On 1 September 1939, William was serving with the Green Howards, but we do not know when he enlisted or if he was a professional soldier. He also served with the South Wales Borderers. The UK-

based battalion of these two regiments fought in either France or Norway in 1949, so he may have seen action before joining the Royal Artillery.

In June 1939, the government started the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) programme, which would provide British merchant ships with some defence against enemy aircraft and surfaced submarines. These guns were manned by Royal Navy and Royal Artillery personnel. In 1940, there were not enough gunners to man all of the ships and in March a request for volunteers was sent to various infantry regiments. 940¹ men responded, and this may be when William joined the Royal Artillery.

By May 1941, over 9,000 soldiers were serving aboard DEMS and it was decided to create the Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Artillery from the existing serving soldiers. William belonged to 6 Battery, 3rd Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment which was responsible for South Wales and the Severn Estuary. 6 Battery originally had its headquarters in Cardiff, but in 1941 it moved to Thornbury, and on 1 November 1942, it became the 6th Maritime Royal Artillery Regiment.

All of the DEMS gunners signed on as members of the ship's crew, i.e. as merchant seamen, and were therefore under the authority of the ship's master. As a merchant seaman, William could have visited neutral countries without being interned.

William's last voyage was on the Otina, a 6,217 ton tanker, built in 1938 and belonging to the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co Ltd. The Otina sailed from Belfast on 12 December 1942 and joined convoy ON 153 destined for New York. She was sailing 'in ballast', i.e. with her tanks full of sea water, as she was going to the USA to collect a cargo of 'white oil' (refined mineral oil). There were seven DEMS gunners on board the ship: William, five from the Royal Navy, and Thomas Thompson who was also from 6 Battery.

This description of the sinking of the Otina is taken from the website *uboat.net*:²

At 20.21 hours on 20 December 1942, the Otina (Master Robert Ranson), a straggler from convoy ON-153, was hit by two torpedoes from U-621 and sank at 21.06 hours [about 1,000 miles] west of Ireland. The master, 52 crew members and seven gunners were lost.

Chillingly, the Otina's 'Merchant Shipping Movement Card'³ ends:

Torpedoed 47°40'N 33°06W ...
Going slowly, heavy seas. Taken to boats.
Sunk

William may have died when the Otina was torpedoed or he may have died some days later in the lifeboats; perhaps the former would have been preferable.

William has no known grave other than the Atlantic Ocean but is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial, panel 67.2, and on the 6th Maritime Regiment Memorial at the Thornbury & District Museum. In Wells, he is remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

His wife, May, died in 1962, without remarrying.

¹ "Unsung heroes – the Maritime Royal Artillery and armed merchant ships", The Times of Malta, 17 September 2011.

² <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/2526.html>.

³ Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference BT 389/23/11.

Lance Corporal William ‘Billy’ Robert Peter SHADWICK

Service number 1875632
Royal Engineers
1 Supply Base Depot
Killed in action on 17 June 1940, aged 20

Billy was born in London but raised in Wells. He died in what is still Britain's worst-ever maritime disaster, when the troopship HMT Lancastria was sunk by German bombs when evacuating troops from St Nazaire in western France. This disaster was hushed up at the time and is still not widely known about today.



Billy in uniform

Photograph courtesy of Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Billy's niece

William was born in London on 7 January 1921, to Jonathon Strong Shadwick, a ham factor and bacon curer, and Ellen Elizabeth née King. William's mother, Ellen, was from Wells. Her first husband was Ernest Welsford who died in the Great War and is commemorated on the Wells War Memorial. After the Great War, Ellen and their daughter, Gwendoline, moved to London, where she worked as a housekeeper for Mr Jonathon Strong Shadwick, who was 65 when they married in 1920.

They moved to Wells in the late 1920s and lived in Silver Street. In 1927 they bought a cottage and moved to West Bradley (about 1 mile south east of West Pennard). Billy's father died in 1932, and they moved back to Wells and lived with Ellen's first husband's sister and her husband, Eleanor and Joseph Vincent, at 10, Union Street.

Ellen then got a housekeeping job with Mr Thomas Martin in Poole, who in late 1938 decided that it would be more proper if they were to be married. In September 1939 they were living at 37, Lincoln Road, Poole, along with Ellen's mother Caroline. Billy went to the Catholic school in Poole and later worked in either Boots or Timothy Whites in Bournemouth.

Billy enlisted in Bournemouth and lied about his age as he was a year too young to join up. He joined the Royal Engineers and after training was posted to 1 Supply Base Depot, Royal Engineers, which was in France with the British Expeditionary Force.

As the Germans advanced into France in 1940, a quarter of a million troops were cut off to the south of the German advance. These were mainly logistic and support troops and included Billy's unit. After the evacuation from Dunkirk, Operation Ariel evacuated these Allied troops and civilians from ports in western France from 15 to 25 June 1940.

The HMT Lancastria was a pre-war ocean liner that had been requisitioned as a troop ship at the start of the war. In the early hours of 17 June, the Lancastria, along with some thirty other merchant vessels, anchored in the Loire Estuary outside the French port of St Nazaire. In the morning she started to take on troops and civilians, including Billy's unit.

In the middle of the afternoon there was a German air raid, and the Lancastria was hit by four bombs and sank 20 minutes later. According to Brian Crabb ('The Forgotten Tragedy: The Story of the Sinking of HMT Lancastria'):

Crammed with approximately 6,000 troops, RAF personnel, civilians and crew, a third of whom did not survive, this incident remains Britain's worst-ever maritime disaster but, like many other shipping disasters of the Second World War, it remains little known today.

Following the successful evacuation of Dunkirk only weeks before, Winston Churchill initially forbade media disclosure of the event. Over a month passed before the story eventually reached the national newspapers, via American journalists.

Billy died when the Lancastria sank.

He has no known grave, other than the Lancastria, but is commemorated on Column 23, Dunkirk Memorial, Nord, France. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

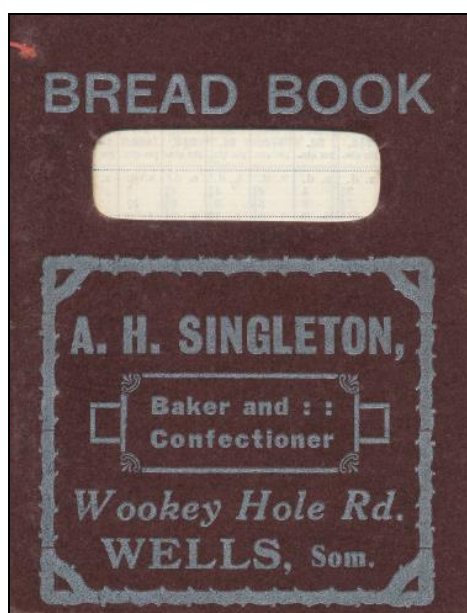
In 1939, his step-sister, Gwendoline, married Bert Mallows in Wells. Her brother in-law, Alfred Mallows, is also commemorated on the war memorial.

We would like to thank Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Billy's niece, for her help with this article.

Corporal Esma Beatrice SINGLETON

Service number 2065034
Women's Auxiliary Air Force
Died on 3 March 1943, aged 23

Esma was born in Australia but was raised from an early age in Wells, where her parents ran the bakery and grocer's shop on Wookey Hole Road. She was educated at Oakleigh School and, like her parents, was an active member of the United Church, where amongst other things she was a Sunday School teacher. She joined the WAAF and at the time of her death from an illness was a corporal in the motor transport section at an RAF base in Hampshire.



A Bread Book from Singleton's Bakery and Shop
© Wells City Council Archives

Esma was Australian by birth. She was born in Maclean, New South Wales, on 22 August 1919, to Alfred Henry Singleton and Beatrice Mary née Smith. She had one brother, Donovan Frederick, who was born in 1915 in Grafton, New South Wales.

When her parents met, her father, who was from Lancashire, was working as a harness maker for Mr Noble in Sadler Street, Wells, and he was lodging with Beatrice's family who ran a bakery at what was then 8 and 10, Wookey Hole Road. In 1912, Alfred and Beatrice got married in Wells, and on 2 August 1912, boarded the SS Orsova in London bound for Sydney, New South Wales. There Alfred ran his own business as a harness maker.

On 4 October 1921, the family returned to England on board the SS Omar and landed at Plymouth. They came back to Wells and in a couple of year Alfred took over his father-in-law's bakery on Wookey Hole Road.

The premises comprised an old farmhouse and a separate bakery. As well as selling bread they sold cakes and general groceries. Behind the house were orchards and a tennis court which was used by the United Church's Tennis Club. It was also used for many other church events over the years, and during the war it was the site of Sunday School outings. Where their house and bakery was is now Singleton Court, near where Ash Lane joins Wookey Hole Road.

Esma attended Oakleigh School, which in 1926 was at its new location on Cathedral Green. She was a member of the school's Junior Red Cross section. In 1932, the section went to Montacute House to take part in an inspection and march past of the Somerset detachments of the Red Cross in front of Princess Mary, and Esma co-lead the Oakleigh section in its march past. In August 1933, she was

awarded the school's Founder's Cup, which was awarded each term to the pupil who had most successfully striven to fulfil the founder's ideal of "Nothing but the best". In 1934, she passed her higher division Associated Board Examination of the Royal Academy of Music. Outside of school, she went to the United Church Sunday School.

Sadly, her brother Donovan was fatally injured on 16 March 1931, while on his way to school at the Boys' Blue School, which was then in the building now called the Little Theatre on Portway. An unattended milk van ran down Kennion Road for 400 yards, mounted the pavement on Wookey Hole Road, hit the embankment and tipped over onto Donovan. He was taken to Wells Cottage Hospital and died the next day.

The *Wells Journal* of 12 March 1943 gives some idea of Esma after she left school:

Like her parents, Miss Singleton took a keen interest in the activities of the United Church ... She was a member of the Church, of the choir and a Sunday School Teacher. She also belonged to the Church Tennis Club and was ever ready to help in the many church activities.

In September 1939 she was still living with her parents at the General Stores at 8, Wookey Hole Road. Her father was a bread baker and in the ARP, and Esma ran the family shop. Alfred had been a Civil Defence Warden since 1938 and was Post Warden of the 'B.B. Post' (his premises) throughout the war.

Esma volunteered for the WAAF in July 1940 and enlisted after May 1941. At the time of her death she was based at an RAF base in Hampshire. Her death was reported in the *Wells Journal* of 12 March 1943:

In a letter to her parents the Flight Officer in charge of her station writes: I would like you to know what a high opinion I had of her character and capability. She took her duties as a corporal in the motor transport section very seriously and in every way proved reliable and trustworthy. Although she had not been well for the past few months she has not complained at any time and whenever I visited her in sick quarters she was always cheerful ...

The funeral took place on Saturday [6 March] afternoon the first part of the service being held at the United Church, and attended by many friends. The many church organisations were represented and also the A.R.P. Warden Service, Mr. Singleton being Post Warden. Three members of the W.A.A.F. representing her Section also attended ... Four Deacons of the United Church acted as bearers.

Among the principal mourners was Frank Rowland, who must have been a special friend.

Esma is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section C, Row H, Grave 34 along with her brother and her parents. She is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

We would like to thank Mrs Jan Stubbins for her contribution to this article.

Stoker 1st Class Raymond Douglas STEVENS

Service number D/KX 137794

Royal Navy

HMS Hardy

Killed in action 30 January 1944, aged 21

Born in Wells, Raymond joined the Royal Navy and served on HMS Hardy. In January 1944, HMS Hardy was part of the escort for Arctic convoy JW 56B to Russia. Raymond died when his ship was torpedoed by a German U-boat in the Barents Sea, 185 miles north of Norway.



HMS Hardy

Photograph by Royal Navy official photographer, © IWM FL 9572

(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205120774>)

Raymond was born in Wells on 8 September 1922 to William Stevens and Frances Augusta Sophia née Rayfield. He had an elder sister Dorothy who had been born two years earlier.

We know nothing about Raymond's early life. There is no mention of him in the *Wells Journal*.

In September 1939 the family lived at 2, Greens Place, Southover. Raymond's father was working as a nurse in a mental hospital, probably Mendip Hospital, and his sister was working as a laundry packer. Two years later, Dorothy married Herbert Gibson in Wells. After the war Raymond's parents moved to Chandler's Ford, Hampshire.

Raymond was a few days off being 17 when the war started, and so it is likely that he joined the Navy in later 1940 or early 1941, but other than the name of the ship that he died on, we know nothing about his service. Given that HMS Hardy was only a few months old when she was sunk, it seems likely that Raymond had been with her since she was commissioned in August 1943, and perhaps since she was launched in March.

HMS Hardy¹ (R 08) was a V-Class Fleet Destroyer, fitted for use as Flotilla Leader in Arctic waters. After completing her acceptance trials she was commissioned into the Royal Navy on 14 August

¹ The information about HMS Hardy is taken from www.naval-history.net, www.uboot.net, and <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

1943. In September she joined the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow as part of the 26th Destroyer Flotilla. Her first operational patrol was on 14 October when she and four other destroyers escorted the battleship HMS Anson to Spitsbergen with a relief garrison.

Convoy JW 54B departed Loch Ewe on 22 November 1943, and three days later, it was joined by an escort of eight Home Fleet destroyers, led by HMS Hardy. On 3 December, after an uneventful passage over the Norwegian and Barents Seas, the destroyers left the convoy and returned to Scapa Flow. Convoy JW 54B arrived safely at Archangel in Russia later the same day.

HMS Hardy's third and final patrol was as part of the escort for the arctic convoys JW 56A and 56B.

JW 56A departed Loch Ewe on 12 January 1944, but had to shelter from storms at Akureyri in Iceland. On 21 January the convoy sailed and was joined by a group of nine fleet destroyers led by HMS Hardy. The convoy was attacked by German U-boats on 25 January. In the course of that day and the following night, one destroyer was damaged, three merchant ships were sunk and a fourth was damaged.

On 27 January, JW 56A was met by Soviet destroyers from Murmansk, and HMS Hardy and the remaining seven destroyers returned to reinforce convoy JW 56B, which it met on 29 January south of Bear Island. Waiting for the convoy were the ten U-boats that had attacked JW 56A plus five newcomers.

The attack began early on 30 January, when, at 04:00, HMS Hardy was hit by an acoustic torpedo which had homed in on the destroyer's propeller noise and caused severe damage aft. The crew were taken off by HMS Venus which then sank the Hardy, as in those circumstances it was not safe to take her in tow. Six of the U-boats made a total of thirteen attacks during that day but they were unable to reach the merchant ships

Mr George Anthony White was a young sailor on HMS Hardy and he recalled its end:²

The back of the Ship was torpedoed right off. I had finished my watch and was asleep. It was 4am. It was my friend Bean who was on watch, I saw him laid out, he didn't make it. The Germans knew when the watch changed and timed their attacks.

We were sinking. I saw part of the ship go under and the green of the sea, I thought that was it. A Lieutenant ordered us to go up to the focsle where it was safer.

AB McCarthy dived straight overboard off the sinking ship. His face appeared and I pulled him back on board. The water was freezing. He asked me what we should do. I said, "I am going to go down with the ship."

I had resigned myself to it. I never thought we would be rescued. We then looked for survivors and friends. You don't think about your own safety in that kind of situation. The commander came, we tried to get the lifeboats off but they were frozen stuck. We managed to get one off. I held its rope as the others went and picked the men out of the freezing water.

The commander got the DSO. The others got the British Empire Medal. I got nothing as I was holding the rope!

Another ship came alongside. HMS Venus. The Captain said over the tannoy, "If you can jump, jump but I am sorry I can't stop." We all managed to jump off as the boat was sinking.

HMS Hardy sank in the Barents Sea, 185 miles north of Norway. Of the 225 crew, 33 were missing presumed killed and two died of wounds.

² This was contributed by Leeds Libraries to WW2 People's War which is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/>.

Being a stoker, Raymond would have been in the engine rooms during the fighting and was probably killed by the explosion of the torpedoes. He has no known grave other than the wreck of HMS Hardy but is remembered on Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 90, Column 1. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Marine Philip Gordon STILES

Service number PLY/X 104166

Royal Marines

Died on 8 August 1942, aged 20

In May 1941, Philip joined the Royal Marines in Plymouth. He finished his training on 25 July 1942, and came back to Wells to spend his embarkation leave with his family. While at home, he contracted peritonitis caused by a ruptured appendix and was taken to the Military Hospital at Combe Down, Bath. He died there on 8 August 1942, three days before his 21st birthday.



Philip in uniform

Photograph courtesy of Sue Macdonald and Michael Scammell, Philip's niece and nephew

Philip was born on 11 August 1921, to Edwin Russell Stiles and Elizabeth Emma née Hale. Edwin was a grocer and draper, and they then lived at 10, Town Hall Buildings, Wells.

In 1939 Philip was living with his widowed mother and his sister Betty at 18, Chamberlain Street.

On 14 August 1942, the *Wells Journal* reported his death:

The death occurred on Saturday, after a week's illness, at the Military Hospital, Bath, of Philip Gordon Stiles, aged 20, the younger son of Mrs. E. Stiles and the late Mr. Russell Stiles of Wells.

Philip was educated at the Wells Blue School where he proved himself a gifted scholar and a keen member of the Scout Troop. He gained his School Certificate and Matriculation and upon leaving school took up employment with Messrs Chalmers, Wade & Co., Chartered Accountants of Wells. He volunteered for the Royal Marines 15 months ago and had just successfully completed his training, being home on leave when suddenly taken ill. ... The funeral took place on Wednesday afternoon at Wells Cemetery after a service at the United Church, Wells.

Philip is buried in Wells Cemetery, in Section B. Row T. Grave 20, with his father. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at the Blue School and Wells Cemetery.

In addition to the details given by the paper, we know that he was a member of the United Church Sunday School, and of the swimming club. In 1938 he was Honorary Secretary of the newly created Minor Football Club and played for them alongside Maurice Whiting and Alfred Mallows, who also died in the war.



Philip in 1939

Photograph courtesy of Sue Macdonald and Michael Scammell, Philip's niece and nephew

His name was originally left off the Wells War Memorial and was not added to it until 2001, after the family had campaigned. Sadly, even then he was added to the Great War names by mistake.

His brother, Russell Stiles, was Mayor of Wells in 1971. Russell was a widower, and so his sister Betty was the Mayoress. Russell later remarried, and his wife, Christine, was Mayor of Wells in 1977.

We would like to thank Sue Macdonald and Michael Scammell, Philip's niece and nephew, for their help with this article. Gordon Scammell, Philip's brother-in-law, first told us Philip's story.

Flying Officer Ronald TOOMER

Service number 152236
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
35 (Madras Presidency) Squadron
Killed in action on 12 September 1944, aged 27

Ronald was born in Aberdeen during the Great War. His father was from Wells and so when his father went to fight in France, the family moved to Wells. Ronald went to the Blue School, was an active member of St Cuthbert's Church and was working for Sheldons' Engineering when the war started. He joined the RAF in 1942 and trained in Canada as a bomb aimer. He died when his Lancaster was shot down over Germany on his 40th mission.



Ronald, based on a photo in the *Wells Journal*, 20 April 1945
© Edmund Trueman

Ronald was born in Aberdeen on 30 April 1917, to Joseph Charles John Toomer and Jeannie Hepburn née Sangster, who lived on Crown Street, Aberdeen.

Joseph was from Wells but was working in Aberdeen as a grocer's manager. On 27 June 1914, he married Jeannie Sangster at St Andrew's Cathedral in Aberdeen. At the time of Ronald's birth he was a corporal in the Cameron Highlanders and later in 1916 went to serve in France. On 17 September 1917, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers, and in February 1918, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. By then Ronald, his younger brother Ian, and their mother were living in Wells on High Street.

Joseph came back to Wells in January 1919, but continued to serve in the Lancashire Fusiliers, being made a Lieutenant on 1 March 1919. In February 1921, he was transferred to the Reserves, and two months later, he went to Ireland and joined the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary.¹

¹ The information about the Auxiliaries, and Joseph's service with them, is taken from www.theauxiliaries.com.

The Auxiliaries were an independent paramilitary unit made up of ex-officers from the British Army whose job was to conduct counter-insurgency operations against the IRA. They were separate from the 'Black and Tans'. On 1 October 1921, Joseph was hospitalised suffering from a severe chill and lumbago, and was discharged from the Auxiliaries on 17 February 1922, while still in hospital in Ireland.

He returned to Wells, and in January 1923, was employed as the City Council's rent collector and as the manager of the Wells Labour Exchange, a post he held until his retirement in 1956. He was a City Councillor from 1935 to 1941 and secretary of the Wells Branch of the British Legion for many years.

In 1928, Ronald attended the Blue School and St Cuthbert's Sunday School, and was a cub in the 4th Wells Scout Troop.

Ronald was a good singer. In 1933, he was in the Blue School Choral Society and sang in that year's School Concert. In February 1935, he sang in the chorus of the Wells Musical Comedy Society's production of 'The Arcadians', which played for eight shows at the Palace Theatre.

On the sporting side, in 1936, Ronald played football for Wookey Hole Football Club, and in 1937 he played cricket for Sheldons' and for Chewton Mendip.

He was an active member of St Cuthbert's Church. He was a committee member of the Bible Class, sang in the Church Choir, and from 1937 was a sidesman. Ronald was also a member of the Church of England Missionary Society.

In September 1939, Ronald was living with his family at 'Maryville', 16, Mary Road, along with a lodger, Edith Clark, who was a civil servant. Ronald was a draughtsman/engineer at Messrs. Sheldons' Engineering Works, and his brother Ian was serving in the Royal Artillery. During the war his father was an ARP Warden and the reception officer for evacuees arriving in Wells.

The *Wells Journal* of 20 April 1945 tells us of Ronald's early wartime service:

He was employed at Messrs. Sheldon's Engineering Works, and later as chief draughtsman for a Government firm near Salisbury. Although in a deferred occupation he gave up his job to join the R.A.F. in February, 1942 and went to Canada for part of his training [as a bomb aimer]. Whilst there he won the Skyways Silver Trophy, open to Dominion Trainees for a year's work ... He also volunteered for the Path Finder Force, when the Corps was formed and was the holder of the Path Finder Force Badge, an award much prized in the R.A.F.

On graduating as a bomb aimer in May 1943, Ronald was promoted from Leading Aircraftsman to Pilot Officer, and in November 1943 he was promoted to Flying Officer.

On returning from Canada, Ronald went to an Operation Training Unit where he met up with his crew and together they trained on twin-engine bombers, probably Wellingtons. After five or six weeks they moved on to 1665 Heavy Conversion Unit, at RAF Tilstock in Shropshire, to train on four-engine Halifax bombers.

On 8 March 1944, Ronald's crew joined 76 Squadron at RAF Holme-on-Spalding Moor in the East Riding of Yorkshire. 76 Squadron was a bomber squadron flying Halifax III bombers. From 9 April until 1 May they flew on nine raids including a 596 bomber raid on Dusseldorf and a 637 bomber raid on Karlsruhe.

On 3 May 1944, Ronald's crew were posted to 35 (Madras Presidency) Squadron, based at RAF Graveley, in Cambridgeshire, and joined 'B' Flight. 35 Squadron was part of the Pathfinder Force whose job was to accurately mark targets with Target Indicators (TIs) and incendiaries, so that the main bomber force could find the right target. As 35 Squadron flew Avro Lancaster B.III aircraft, the crew's first priority must have been to get used to flying a Lancaster, as so far they had only flown Halifaxes.

Their first raid was on 27 May 1944 when they bombed Rennes. In all, Ronald flew on 31 raids, mostly to targets in France in support of the D-Day landings. His last sortie was a day-light raid on the synthetic oil plant at Wanne-Eickel, about 10 miles west of Dortmund. It was part of a 412 aircraft attack on three oil plants at Dortmund, Scholven-Buer and Wanne-Eickel.

They took off at 12.13 on 12 September 1944 in Lancaster TL-O (serial number PB 308). Their designated role was that of a 'Supporter', which means that they had to fly with the main bomber force ready to remark or reinforce the original TIs as required by dropping incendiaries onto them.

The mission is described in the squadron's Operations Record Book:²

Seven aircraft set out shortly after noon to bomb WANNE EICKEL. Heavy 'flak' was encountered and a smoke screen hampered the attackers, and one aircraft went on to bomb BOCHUM, the alternative target. Two aircraft, captained by F/L P.C. GRANGER and F/O D. CAMPBELL, failed to return.

Ronald's aircraft, piloted by Donald Campbell, crashed at Gelsenkirchen-Bismarck, about four miles west of the target. Ronald and the rest of his crew were originally buried in the cemetery at Gelsenkirchen-Huellen, about 16 miles west of Dortmund.

On 9 May 1947, Ronald was reburied in the Reichswald Forest War cemetery in collective grave 19.E.15-17, along with Joseph Robinson and Francis Davidson, who were the two airgunners from his crew. In Wells he is remembered on the rolls of honour at the Blue School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

His brother Ian went on to serve abroad with REME (the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers).

² Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference AIR- 27-381-17.

Sergeant William John (Bill) VICK

Service number 610957

Royal Air Force

Died on 30 October 1942, aged 24

Bill was born in South Wales and moved to Wells with his family in 1929. He worked for Willmott's Transport and St Cuthbert's Paper Mill. In 1938, he joined the RAF and served with 501 Squadron at RAF Filton and RAF Tangmere. He took part in the Battle of France in 1940 as an anti-aircraft gunner. After returning to the UK, he transferred to an RAF Maintenance Unit. He was sent home to Wells on sick leave and on his 24th birthday was taken to Bath Military Hospital where he subsequently died.



Airmen crowd the deck of a steam packet during the evacuation of British forces from Brest

Photograph by Mr S.A. Devon, RAF official photographer, © IWM C 1742

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205211894>

Bill's birth was registered in Bedwellty, an old urban district of Monmouthshire, in the third quarter of 1918. He was the son of George Henry Vick and Jane née Morgan, and was born in September or October 1918.

The family's life before coming to Wells was told in the *Wells Journal* of 5 May 1961, on the occasion of his parent's golden wedding anniversary:

[Bill's parents] were married at Gelligaer Parish Church, Glamorgan, on May 3rd, 1911. Before they were married Mr. and Mrs. Vick lived next door to each other in the mining town of Bargoed, in the Rhymney Valley. They were married from there and lived there [in the valley] until they moved to Wells in 1929. Mr. Vick told our reporter that he started work at the age of 12 in a colliery in the Forest of Dean. When he was 14 his family moved to Bargoed and he took up employment at the pit there. Mr. Vick recalled that when he started work he was paid 3/- a day for an 8-hour day. He had to walk four miles there and back. Owing to illness, Mr. Vick had to leave the pit and in 1929 moved to Wells where he worked for Mr. George Willmott [a haulage contractor and motor engineer on Princes Road] until his retirement in 1955.

Prior to coming to Wells, the family lived at 61, Pencoed Avenue, Pengam,¹ which, like Gelligaer and Bargoed, is about 8 miles south east of Merthyr Tydfil. After leaving Wales, they first lived in

¹ A Garden Suburb development carried out in co-operation with the local mining union.

Haydon, which is just outside of Wells, past the Horringtons, on the old Bath Road. In 1931 the family were living at 25, St Thomas Street, but they moved to 14, Burcott Road in late 1938, and were still there in 1961 when George and Jane celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

When they came to Wells in 1929, William had two elder brothers, George and Albert, and four sisters, Violet, Myra, Hilda and Lilian. In 1931, his sister Sylvia was born, and in 1936, Violet, aged 14, died after being ill for some time.

The story of William's early life was given in the *Wells Journal* of 6 November 1942:

On leaving school Mr. Vick entered the employ of Mr. G. Willmott [where his father worked] and was later employed at the St. Cuthbert's Paper Works. He left the Mill in 1938 to join the R.A.F. After completing his early training in this part of the country he was one of eight picked from several hundred men to form the 501st Bomber Squadron. As a gunner he served in France with the R.A.F. and he remained in that country until just before the capitulation, when he escaped from Brest. He was then transferred to the motor transport section of the R.A.F. and rose to the rank of Sergeant.

501 (County of Gloucester) Squadron was founded in 1929 as part of RAF Bomber Command, and was based at RAF Filton in Bristol. When Bill was posted to it in 1938, it was flying two-seater Hawker Hind bi-planes. In December 1938, the squadron became a fighter squadron, and received its first Hawker Hurricane on 8 March 1939.

Soon after the outbreak of the war, 501 Squadron moved to RAF Tangmere in West Sussex, just north of Bognor Regis. On 11 May 1940, the day after the start of the German invasion of France and the Low Countries, the squadron flew to Betheniville in France; the pilots in their Hurricanes and ground staff in civil and military transport aircraft. Bill's role in France was as an anti-aircraft gunner protecting the airfields. During the next month they moved westward, providing air cover during the retreat of the allied forces to Brittany, and ended up in Dinard on 16 June.

From Dinard, half of the squadron sailed back from St Malo on the 18th, arriving in Southampton the next day, and the rest, including the aircraft, returned via Jersey. So why Bill came back via Brest is a mystery, but it was one of the major evacuation ports especially for RAF ground personnel so perhaps he had become separated from his squadron.

Bill married Vera Smith at Christmas 1941, in Warrington, Lancashire. In September 1939, Vera had been living with her parents at 33, Howard Street, Warrington, and was working as a box mender. After they married, Vera moved to Wells and worked for the Wells and District Co-operative Society.

Bill's death was reported in the *Wells Journal* on 6 November 1942:

He was taken ill about eight weeks ago and was sent home on sick leave. He did not recover and on his 24th birthday he was removed to Bath Military Hospital where he passed away on Friday last [30 October] ... The first part of the funeral service was held in St. Cuthbert's Church ... The coffin, which was covered with the Union Jack, was conveyed to Wells on an R.A.F. lorry and was carried into church by six sergeants. A Flt.-Lieut. of the R.A.F. and the Q.M.S. of the Bath Military Hospital also attended, with Aircraftman Walker, his pal from the Station where he was serving ... [Wreaths were sent] from Officers and Men of the 16th Maintenance Unit, R.A.F. Station, from the Sergeants Mess of the same station, and from His Comrades and Pals of R.T. Section.

It seems likely that Bill was serving with the 16th Maintenance Unit based at RAF Stafford. However, the following week the *Wells Journal* said that the wreath was from the 6th Maintenance Unit, which was based at RAF Brize Norton; one or the other must be a misprint.

Bill is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section 3, Row P, Grave 30, along with his parents and his sister, Sylvia. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

After Bill's death, Vera went back to Warrington, and on 25 November 1943 she married Denis Healy there.

Bill's brother Albert served in Burma with 136 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery.

Lance Corporal James WARDROPPER

Service number 820000
Royal Corps of Signals
17 Line of Communication Signals
Killed in action on 23 February 1945, aged 32

James was born in Middlesbrough. Before the war he was in the Royal Artillery for six years. He married in Birmingham in March 1939 and the newlyweds moved to Wells. James was in the reserves and was called up when the war started. He was transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals. In the autumn of 1944, he went to Europe, and was in Antwerp in Belgium when he was killed by a V-1 or V-2 missile.



Port of Antwerp: Unloading ships of the first convoy to arrive

Photograph by Hampton, J A (Lt) © IWM A 26598

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205158169>

James' birth was registered in Middlesbrough, Yorkshire, during the second quarter of 1912. His parents were James Wardropper and Sarah née Deffew. A year earlier, in April 1911, James' father was a hall porter who still lived with his parents at 23, Holly Street, Felling, County Durham; later that year he married Sarah Deffew. In 1915, James' sister Vera was born.

James' father died in 1930. In 1932, James enlisted in the Royal Artillery in Middlesbrough. Six years later, on 14 May 1938, his enlistment ended and he became a civilian again, but remained in the Army Reserve.

On 4 March 1939, James married Linda Crucefix, at St John's Church, Sparkhill, in Birmingham. The reception was held at Linda's mother's home at 55, Clarence Road, Sparkhill. Afterwards the couple "left for their new home at Wells" (*Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser*, 11 March 1939).

It is possible that James was already living and working in Wells but we do not know. Presumably, he had a job to come to.

They did not spend long in their new home in Wells. With war looming, James was called up, and Linda went back to be with her mother in Sparkhill. In September 1939, Linda and her mother were living with her married sister and her husband at 55, Clarence Road. Linda was then working in a sweet shop. Their daughter Diana was born in Birmingham in early 1940.

James was transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals on 11 April 1941, and later joined 17 Line of Communication Signals (17 L of C Signals).

An army's 'Lines of Communication' stretch from the front line right back to the ports and bases which supply and maintain the fighting units. It is the role of the L of C Signals regiments to maintain text and voice communication over that area. There were five such regiments supporting the British 21st Army Group in North West Europe. Three of these regiments landed in Normandy and two others, 13 and 17 L of C, joined them in Autumn 1944 as the army advanced eastwards into Belgium. By the start of 1945:

The Headquarters of 17 L of C Signals was situated at Ghent together with its Nos. 1 and 3 Companies, while No. 2 was at Antwerp. This Company had moved there from Malines on January 2 and had since that date, like the rest of the town's inhabitants, been subjected to continual attacks from flying bombs, nearly all V2s.

Signals installations and billets had been extremely unlucky and damage was suffered by them on seven different occasions during the following weeks. Twice casualties were heavy. On February 1, when the main telephone exchange was destroyed, 15 men were killed and seven wounded. Then on the 23rd ... there was a direct hit on the Construction Section billet killing one officer and 13 other ranks, while another 14 were wounded, some seriously.¹

James was one of those killed on the 23rd.

The port of Antwerp was vital to the Allied advance into Germany. The only other major port in allied hands was Cherbourg, which was 300 miles to the west, which meant that until Antwerp's port was operational, all supplies had to be moved by road for 300-400 miles. Antwerp was captured in September 1944 and became operational again at the end of November. In an attempt to stop the Allies from using the port the German used their V-weapons:

Antwerp was the recipient of even more V-2s than London, resulting in more than 30,000 killed or injured. For the whole of the V-bomb campaign, Antwerp received on average three V-2s per day in the city and its suburbs. The number of V-1s was on average four per day in December and January, climbing to 12 daily in February.²

James is buried in Antwerp, Belgium, in the Schoonselhof Cemetery in grave IV.A.12. He is buried alongside the ten other soldiers from his regiment who died on the same day. In Wells, James is remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

At some point during the war, perhaps to get away from the bombing in Birmingham, or soon after, James' wife Linda came back to Wells with her daughter and her mother. Her mother died in Wells in the second quarter of 1946. On 24 April 1948, Linda got married to John Holcombe at St Cuthbert's Church.

¹ Taken from The Cheshire (Earl of Chester's) Yeomanry, 1898-1967: The Last Regiment to Fight on Horses, by Sir Richard Verdin (Chester 1971).

² Quoted from <http://www.v2rocket.com/start/chapters/antwerp.html>.

Lance Corporal Donald WHITCOMBE

Service number 5673655

Somerset Light Infantry

1st Battalion

Killed in action on 8 February 1944, aged 23

Donald was born in Wells and was an avid member of the 5th Wells Scout Troop. He joined the army at the start of the war and was posted to the 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, in India. He died in Burma (now Myanmar) during the 2nd Arakan Campaign, which was the start of the turn of the tide in Burma. Ten days earlier he had written a poignant letter to the scout leader (quoted in the full version of his story).



Donald, in the middle, on a Scout camp in 1938(?)

Photography courtesy of 5th/7th City of Wells Scouts

Donald was born in Wells on 16 September 1920 to Herbert Ballington Whitcombe and Alice Adanée Davis. He had an elder brother called John.

Donald went to the Oakleigh School on Chamberlain Street, the Boys' Blue School, and finally to Wells Cathedral School from September 1933 until December 1934. He was a keen and active member of the 5th Wells (City of Wells) Scout Troop right up to the start of the war, and was 'Seconder' in the Fox troop.

In September 1939, he was living with his mother at Pear Tree House, St Andrew Street (next to The Fountain's car park). It appears that his father had by then moved to Swindon and remarried.

Donald joined the army in September 1939, and in April 1942 was in the 6th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, which spent the war in training and in protecting the coast from invasion. In May 1940, it was on Romney Marsh and then on the Essex Coast. In March 1943 it went to Northern Ireland for training and returned to England in December 1943.

At some point Donald was posted to the 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, which had been in India since the start of the war. On 29 January 1944, when serving with 'C' Company, he wrote to 'Skipper' Coates, the leader of the Wells Scout troop:

Dear Skip & Mrs Coates,

I think it is long past time I sent you a line. I myself have just got over malaria here in hospital, but still I'm O.K. and still going strong. I may just as well let you know that I am now in action with the Japs, well we are just playing hide & seek in the jungle with them, it is just the one who sees the other one first wins, I cannot say where we are, or what we have done. To be at camp at Bath these days in a tent would be like a palace to us. There is one thing I would like to ask you to do for me and that is if I do get my lights put out, I do not want anyone to wear black, and see that Mum has a good time on my money at home.

Going away from the gloom of life, how is the troop going on these days? I trust you will be able to get some good camps in at Bath this year, I shall have to come up and see the new camp site some time or the other, I trust that you still spend your weekends up there like you used to do.

Please thank your mother for all the big kisses mum has sent from her. I trust all the old boys are still going strong, dotted all over the place.

Well I must come to a close for now as news is very short these days.

With love to you both,

Donald.

P.S. I know a scout never says die till dead, but it was just a wish I liked to get off my chest.

The battalion was part of the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade in the 7th Indian Infantry Division. The battalion left the Calcutta area and moved to Chittagong by rail and boat in June 1943 in preparation for the 2nd Arakan Campaign. The initial aim of the campaign was to take the Maungdow-Buthidaung road which was heavily defended by the Japanese.

Starting in December 1943, the 7th Division advanced south down the Kalapanzin River valley but was halted by the Japanese defences in front of Buthidaung. When Donald wrote his letter at the end of January 1944, the 1st Battalion was dug-in on the Pyinsh Ridge and had been attacking Japanese positions for a number of days.

In February 1944, Japanese troops infiltrated through the 7th Division's front line and overran the divisional HQ. Field-Marshal Viscount Slim describes what happened:

The brigades of 7th Division ... in accordance with the orders given for such a situation, dug in for all-round defence on their position, and beat off attacks, frontally from Doi Force and in [the] rear from Tanahashi's troops ... The 7th Division was surrounded. ... The Japanese knew they *had* to destroy the 7th Division ... The fighting was everywhere hand to hand and desperate.¹

They fought the Japanese to a standstill, their supplies ran out and at the end of February they had to retreat. The Somerset Light Infantry had won another battle honour – Buthidaung – but Donald had died in the fighting on 8 February.

Donald has no known grave but is remembered on Face 7 of the Rangoon Memorial which is in the Taukkayan War Cemetery, Myanmar. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

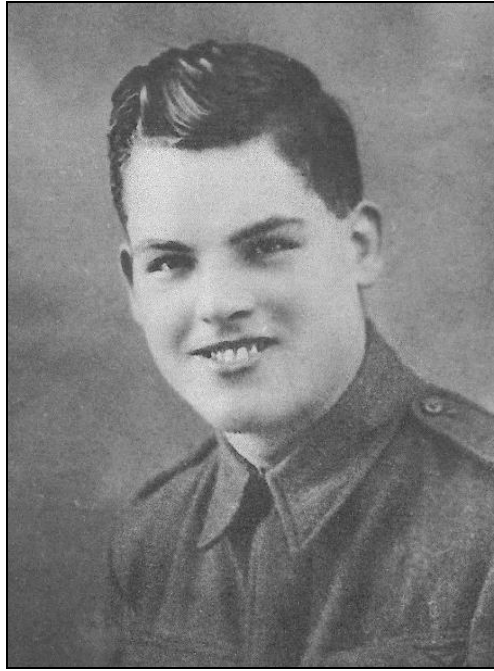
We would like to thank Derek Faulkes for his help in writing this article.

¹ Defeat into Victory. Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945 by Field-Marshal Viscount Slim (New York, 1972).

Oliver Frank WHITE

Service number PO/X110353
Royal Marines
Died on 24 July 1945, aged 21

Born in Wells, Oliver went to the Central School for Boys and before joining up he drove the delivery van for Sealey's Bakery. Oliver joined the Royal Marines when he was 17½ and in December 1944 went to Leyte in the Philippines. In July 1945, he flew to Australia for a week's leave, but on the flight back the plane crashed into the sea. There were no survivors.



Oliver

Photograph courtesy of Mrs Betty Holland, Oliver's sister

Oliver was born in Wells on 3 December 1923, to William Joseph White and Alice née Payne. He had an elder sister and brother, Georgina and William, and a younger sister, Betty. Although called Oliver, he was usually known by his middle name of Frank or Frankie.

He went to the Central School for Boys, and attended the United Church Sunday School. Oliver was very fond of sports, and in 1937, he took part in the Coronation Day sports and came first in the over-11s three-legged race and joint first in another. He had a dog to which he was very attached.

In September 1939, Oliver was living with his family at 19, Mary Road. His father was a roadstone quarrier at Underwood Quarry. Before joining the Royal Marines, Oliver was a member of the Home Guard, and he drove the delivery van for Sealey's Bakery of 3, St Thomas Street.

His sister, Mrs Betty Holland, recalls:

Oliver voluntarily joined the Royal Marines aged 17½ years, served on Hell Fire Corner, Dover, later transferred to Australia, and from there [in December 1944] to the Philippines at a U.S.A. Base. Oliver was sent on a short break to Australia and on his return to the Philippines the plane crashed into the sea just before it landed, on the 24th July 1945, just two weeks before the war ended in the Far East.

The following letter was sent to Oliver's mother by Captain Barry Moore (British Naval Liaison Officer, Philippines):

This note brings you our sympathy and tells you what details I can about your boy. He worked as a M.T. [motor transport] driver with our small unit up here where we got to know each other fairly well & we miss him a lot.

I had sent him on a week's leave to Australia & it was on his way back that the accident happened just out to sea from the airstrip. A court composed of experts has been trying to find out the cause of the accident. I do not think that they will find anything definite owing to lack of evidence. The aircraft plunged into the sea suddenly just before it was going to land. People who saw it say that it seemed to break up when it hit the water. I believe this to be true since 5 days' sweeping & diving operations have failed to locate the wreck. I feel certain that all the occupants were killed or stunned on hitting the water. A crash boat was over the spot within ten minutes but several hours' search produced only some small bits of wreckage. Your boy's body was recovered from the sea a day or so later and buried in the U.S. Armed Forces Cemetery – Leyte – Philippines.

We held a joint funeral service on 8th August for all the victims. Our small British Party all attended of course & full ceremonial was provided by the U.S. Navy. The cemetery is very well situated & when finished with the grass growing it will be beautiful – it is very well looked after by the Americans.

I attach some photos – you will note the absence of wreaths. This is in accordance with the customs of the U.S.A.F. Cemeteries ... Please accept the sympathy of all of us here who knew him.



Oliver's funeral on Leyte
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Betty Holland, Oliver's sister

Then in the margin it says:

The pilot was very experienced & this type of aircraft perhaps the most reliable flying today. The weather was bad but not impossible. The actual time was 5.30 p.m. on 24th July.

The plane was a Douglas C-47 Dakota IV transport aircraft belonging to 243 Squadron RAF. Its loss was reported in the Squadron's Operations Record Book on 25 July 1945:¹

¹ Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference AIR-27-1475-19.

Signal received to the effect that Flying Officer STEEL in aircraft KN 530 (C.47) had crashed into the sea, south of TACLOBAN. The aircraft exploded on impact and there were no survivors. The crew consisted of Flying Officer STEEL [pilot], Flying Officer TURTON [Wireless Operator], Flight Sergeant SCHOLLES [co-pilot] and Flight Sergeant EVANS [Navigator], all R.A.F. The passengers were Commander CLARKE, R.N., Flight Lieutenant SLY, R.A.A.F., Signalman SHANK, R.A.A.F., Royal Naval Reserve Marine WHITE and Royal Marine FOWLER.

One passenger, Royal Marine Reeves, was missed off the list, and 'Signalman SHANK, R.A.A.F' was actually Royal Navy Signalman Shanks. Commander Clarke's body was not found but the other nine were buried in adjacent graves.

Although Oliver was originally buried on Leyte in the USAF Cemetery Number 1, at Dulag, he was reburied on 28 October 1947 in the Sai Wan War Cemetery, grave II.E.4. Sai Wan War Cemetery is in the north-east of the island of Hong Kong, about 7 miles from the centre of Victoria. In Wells, Oliver is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

We would like to thank Mrs B. Holland, Oliver's sister, for her help in writing this article.



Marine Oliver White
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Betty Holland, Oliver's sister

Flight Sergeant Maurice Aubrey WHITING

Service number 1585651
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
17 Squadron, RAF
Died on 19 July 1945, aged 22

Most people in Wells know 'Whiting and Son', the hardware shop on High Street, and Maurice is the 'Son'. He joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve in 1943, trained as a pilot, and was posted to 17 Squadron, RAF, in 1945. Maurice died in India on 19 July 1945, aged 22, about a month before V-J Day, when his Spitfire XIV crashed while training for the invasion of Malaya.



Maurice in uniform after getting his 'wings'
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Michelle Machin, Maurice's niece

Maurice was born in Wells on 12 April 1923, to John Aubrey Whiting and Marie Suzanne née Gemey. He had one sister, Audrey, and spent the first part of his life at 13, Mary Road, Wells. In 1936, Maurice's father bought the shop at 68, High Street, and the family lived above it. Maurice was educated at Wells Blue School, and afterwards assisted his father in the business. In 1938, Maurice was Vice-Captain of the newly created Minor Football Club and played for them alongside Philip Stiles and Alfred Mallows, who also died in the war.

We know from the *Wells Journal* (27 July 1945) that:

At the outbreak of war he joined the National Fire Service as a messenger and was very popular with all the members of the N.F.S. at the Wells Station. He later became a member of the Home Guard and was called up for the R.A.F. in January, 1942. He received his training in South Africa and soon gained promotion.



Maurice in the garden of 68, High Street
(now the site of Whiting's garden department)
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Michelle Machin, Maurice's niece

In February 1945, Maurice joined 17 Squadron RAF at Ywaddon in Burma (now Myanmar), and flew his first sortie on the 24th in a Spitfire VIII. The squadron was commanded by Squadron Leader 'Ginger' Lacey, a famous Battle of Britain pilot. The squadron flew patrols, performed ground attack, and escorted VIP flights. On 22 March, Maurice flew as fighter escort for an aircraft carrying Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command.

17 Squadron was withdrawn from Burma to Madura (now Madurai) in southern India to re-equip with the new Spitfire XIV in preparation for the invasion of Malaya, when the squadron was to take off from an aircraft carrier in support of an assault on the Malayan coast. They arrived at Madura on 18 June, and their new aircraft started to arrive on the 27th.

On 19 July 1945, Maurice and Flight Sergeant Jack Edwards were taking part in a dive-bombing demonstration for Air Marshal Keith Park, Allied Air Commander of South-East Asia Command, when both aircraft broke up in the air while they were pulling out of dummy dive bombing attacks. The aircraft fell in the camp area, one of them narrowly missing the Station Sick Quarters.

These aircraft were among the first Spitfire XIVs delivered to India, and it has been suggested that the wing attachment had been incorrectly carried out: oversized pins that should have been refrigerated to enable them to be fitted had instead been reduced in diameter by the use of emery paper.

Maurice and Jack were buried the following day in Madura cemetery alongside another pilot from 17 Squadron. In 1952, the Madras War Cemetery, in Chennai, was created and Maurice was moved there. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at the Blue School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

One of the Spitfire VIIIs that Maurice flew, YB-J, serial number MT719, has been restored to flying condition.

We would like to thank Mrs Michelle Machin, Maurice's niece, for her help in writing this article.

Signalman Leslie Stephen WITT

Service number 2372338
Royal Corps of Signals
6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group Signals
Killed in action on 6 April 1943, aged 33

Born in Devon, Leslie came to Wells in 1917 when his father became cashier at Lloyds Bank. Leslie went to Wells Cathedral School and in his final year was Captain of Rugby and Head Boy. He then worked for Lloyds Bank, first in Taunton and then in Shepton Mallet, where he met his future wife. He joined the Royal Corps of Signals in 1942 and served with the 6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group Signals in Burma. He died during the first Arakan Campaign.



Leslie and Winifred on their wedding day
Photograph courtesy of Mr Ian Hobley, Winifred's great nephew

Leslie was born in Branksome in Dorset on 6 February 1910 to William Stephen and Edith Witt, and was baptised in nearby Parkstone on 14 April 1910. In 1911, the family lived at Devonia, Craven Road, Poole, and his father was a bank cashier. He had one brother.

The family moved to Wells in 1917, where his father worked as a cashier for Lloyds Bank. Initially they lived in Wick House, Coxley, and then in 1920 they moved to Dunedin, Portway, Wells.

Leslie went to Wells Cathedral School from September 1919 to December 1927. He was very successful there. He won a number of prizes and was successful in the sports days. In 1927 he was Captain of Rugby and Head Boy, and gained his School Certificate.

After leaving school, Leslie, like his father, worked for Lloyds Bank as a cashier. In 1928, he was appointed to their Taunton branch, but by the mid-1930s he was working for Lloyds in their Shepton Mallet High Street branch.



Leslie in a school photograph taken in 1923
© Wells Cathedral School

Outside of work Leslie sang in choruses of the Wells and the Shepton Mallet Operatic Societies. On the sporting side, he played for Wells City Hockey Club and was an active member and office holder of the Shepton Mallet Bowls, Croquet and Tennis Club.

On 29 April 1939, Leslie married Winifred Maud Hobley (always known as Winnie) in the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul, Shepton Mallet. Her father was Ernest Hobley, a farmer's son from Banbury, who started the hardware store 'E. Hobley and Son' in Shepton in about 1900. Leslie and Winifred lived in Sunnymount, Ham Lane, Bowlish, Shepton Mallet. Winifred was a member of the local detachment of the Red Cross Society.

Leslie joined the Royal Corps of Signals in the second half of 1942. At the time of his death in Burma he belonged to the 6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group Signals.¹

The 6th Infantry Brigade was part of the 2nd Division. After Japan invaded Burma the 2nd Division was sent from the UK to India. The 6th Brigade left in April 1942 and arrived in June. In October 1942, the 6th Infantry Brigade was detached from 2nd Division and reorganised as an 'independent brigade group', with its own supporting units, in order to take part in the Arakan Campaign in Burma.

The campaign started on 17 December 1942. Its aim was to clear the Japanese from the Mayu Peninsula and take Akyab Island. The campaign started well but was stopped by the Japanese defences at the end of the peninsula. On 18 March, the 6th Brigade were used for one last attempt to break through the defences but failed. The allied forces were then forced to retreat when the Japanese received reinforcements and counter-attacked.

On the night of 5 April the Japanese struck the rear of the 6th Brigade and overran its headquarters, killing most of the staff. "Everywhere the units of 6 Brigade found Japanese in between them, behind

¹ The CWGC say the 6th Indian Infantry Brigade but that unit was destroyed fighting the Japanese in Malaysia before Singapore fell. The 6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group fought in Burma which is where Leslie died.

them, and round them.”² The brigade rallied and fell back, and Leslie was killed in the fighting on the 6th.

Leslie has no known grave but is remembered in Myanmar (what was then Burma) on the Rangoon Memorial, Face 4, which is in the Taukkyan War Cemetery. He is also remembered on the Shepton Mallet War Memorial, and on the rolls of honour at Wells Cathedral School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. His brother Arthur served as a Sergeant in the 8th Army in Italy, and Winifred’s brother, Frank, served in the Royal Navy. In 1946 Winifred bought Sunnymount and lived there alone until her death in 1975.

In 1947, Leslie’s mother gave the Cathedral School a cup for a competition in his memory.

We would like to thank Ian Hobley (Winifred’s great nephew), Darshill and Bowlsh Conservation Society, and George Bunting (Chairman, The Wellensian Association) for their help with this article.

² Defeat into Victory. Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945 by Field-Marshal Viscount Slim (New York, 1972).