

# **ADDENDUM No. 2 TO OLD MORGANIANS**

**NEWSLETTER No. 17, October 2017**

**Harold Palmer Honoured.**

## **Legion d'Honneur Award to Old Morganian Harold Palmer.**

In November 2016 Harold Palmer, who was at Dr Morgan's School from 1936 to 1941, received a letter from the French Ambassador in London informing him that he had been 'appointed to the rank of Chevalier in the Ordre National de la Legion d'Honneur,' - a high honour which was 'in recognition of his acknowledged military engagement and his steadfast involvement in the Liberation of France during the Second World War'.

### **History of these Awards .**

The Légion d'Honneur was established in 1802 by Napoléon Bonaparte. It is France's highest distinction and is awarded in recognition of both military and civilian merit.

The intention to make such awards regarding World War Two was formally declared in June 2014, on the 70th anniversary of D-Day. The French President announced that the distinction would be awarded to some British veterans who fought for the liberation of France. To qualify veterans must have:

- Taken part in military operations in France between 1944 and 1945;
- Submitted details of their military service to the UK Ministry of Defence;
- Been approved by the MoD and agreed as warranted by the French Authorities.

### **The long wait.**

Harold was only 19 years old (now 92!) in 1944 when he took part in the Normandy landings. He was a wireless operator in a Royal Air Force Mobile Communications Unit whose role was to provide communications whilst based at advance landing strips, some of which were literally fields established so that allied aircraft could land in France!

After extensive training his unit was based initially in a copse just outside of Portsmouth with a plan that they would depart on D-Day (6th of June 1944), go to a selected airfield and be operational on D-Day +1, but the plans changed due to the delays while the Allies took control of Caen, which had been expected to be taken quickly, so they were moved to an airfield further inland in England and placed on immediate standby.

### **Perilous crossing.**

Later in June the order came to leave and Harold's Unit, together with the motor vans that held their equipment, boarded a landing craft that formed part of a naval convoy established to minimise chances of attack by German E-Boats (light torpedo boats) and headed for Normandy. Unfortunately, Harold's Landing Craft broke down on the first evening and they were told that the rest of the convoy couldn't stop as they would be 'sitting ducks' for the E-Boats. Fortunately, the crew of the Landing Craft were able to carry out the necessary repairs and they were eventually able to land on Juno Beach.

They proceeded in their vans a few kilometres inland to an air strip near a village called Plumetot. When they arrived they were told that their priorities were to:

- get operational as soon as possible; then
- quickly dig holes for cover as they were being shelled, quite heavily.

### **Waiting for the 'Break-out'.**

After a few weeks they moved in their own vans to a larger air strip in Beny-Sur-Mer (in the Calvados Department of Northwestern France, 13 kilometres from Caen) and remained there until the 'Break-out from Normandy' that would follow the Battle of the 'Falaise Pocket' which trapped most of the German forces remaining in the area, thereby opening the way to the Seine, Paris and beyond.

The Battle of the Falaise Pocket (12–21 August 1944) was the decisive engagement of the Battle of Normandy in the Second World War.

Beny-Sur-Mer is now the site of a Canadian War Cemetery. The majority of Canadian soldiers buried there are those who were lost on the front, on D-Day, when the Allies landed on Juno Beach.

### **Showers and Doodle-bugs in Belgium.**

After short stops at landing strips in Northern France and Belgium, where they supplied support services to Allies, Harold's Unit's next major stop was at a much larger Airfield at Dearne near Antwerp. Here they could live in brick buildings, rather than tents. They really were very pleased, after very many weeks, to be able to take a shower! The downside was that whilst they were there the Germans started using jet propelled V1 'flying bombs' into their area.

Because of the distinctive noise of their pulse jet engines, which cut out after a predetermined mileage based on a timing device, these bombs became known as 'Buzz Bombs' or 'Doodle-bugs'. When the noise stopped it meant they would fall nearby! They were fired from the French and Dutch coasts, mostly being aimed at London. These un-manned gyro guided planes delivered a tonne of high explosive each time one hurtled into the ground. The distinctive noise of their pulse jet engine terrorised London's population.

Harold said that few defensive measures were available but brave Fighter Pilots learned new tricks to destroy V1's such as flying alongside the weapon and tipping over one of its wings, thus knocking it off course!

### **Onto the Netherlands.**

Harold's unit was next moved from Belgium to an airstrip near Breda just over the border in the Netherlands. A person they knew went on a visit back to their previous base and found that the buildings they had occupied there had been flattened by 'Doodle-bugs'. They later moved onto several other locations in the Netherlands.

Whilst in Breda they repeatedly found power cables had been cut between their vans. They were never able to establish whether this was due to German Paratroopers or locally based

German sympathisers. This necessitated night time patrols that were carried out in deep snow and bitterly cold weather conditions.

### **Germany.**

In total Harold was at 11 different landing strips/airfields including one in Germany, at a town called Celle, in Lower Saxony. In Germany, the local people were initially very hostile and if they left their base they had to go in groups to avoid being attacked.

### **Passing on of History.**

Harold has given talks to children about his experiences in church on Remembrance Sunday and on November the 11th.

### **Heroes.**

The Legion d'Honneur citation also includes a statement that 'We must never forget the heroes like you, who came from Britain and the Commonwealth to begin the liberation of Europe by liberating France.'

The more one learns about the activities of our forces in World War Two the more one must agree what heroes they indeed were.

### **Any more Chevaliers?**

Harold wonders whether he is the first Old Morganian to receive the Award?

### **Details of his exploits were told by Harold to Roger Richards (Secretary of Old Morganians).**

*NB. Roger had asked your editor to get this out to members in "the next newsletter before the 2017 dinner." However, the June newsletter had already gone out to all members some weeks earlier so this account is produced here with the November 2017 newsletter. I am sorry that it could not be seen by members before the dinner as I understand Roger wanted to talk about it at the dinner, however "better late than never"! - Geoff. Marchant, Editor.*