



As we draw closer to the next Remembrance Day, we thought it would be appropriate to release some of our findings of the local men who gave their lives in the two world wars on the anniversary of when they fell.

With the grateful and considerable assistance of Neil Patrick, the Chair of Draethen Community Group, I have been researching the 19 known fallen from the scant details inscribed on the St James' Church War Memorial and the commemorative tablet from the Ebenezer Congregational Chapel.

We hope to have completed all the histories by November! If anyone has further information on any of the men or their families, please contact me.

The first of our fallen died this day, 17th June 1940.

Private Bert Davies [13005230] of 73 Company, Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps (AMPC) was born, we believe, in Rudry on 1st June 1890. At 50 years of age he is the oldest of our fallen. At some point he moved to Ledbury and joined the Pioneer Corps. We have, as yet, been unable to find out more about his origins and family.

In May 1940, he was part of the British Expeditionary Force's withdrawal from France and among some 20,000 AMPC soldiers from 107 AMPC companies fighting in the channel ports. While the AMPC was primarily a labour force, it was also ranked as a combatant unit. In May 1940 an infantry brigade was improvised from several AMPC companies, known as 'Digforce' after its commander Lt Colonel Diggle, and fought to defend the Andelle and Béthune rivers against the advancing panzer divisions. One man in four had a rifle and many were considered 'old soldiers'.

The brigade was part of Operation Ariel to evacuate the BEF to England and Bert, along with others from his 73rd Company and seven other AMPC companies, in a two day, five mile queue, managed to board HMT Lancastria, a 16,000 ton Cunard White Star liner on Sunday 17th June 1940. All this as Luftwaffe bombers circled the harbour taking turns in making bombing and strafing runs at the ships below.

By 4.00pm with around 8,000 on board and within minutes of hauling up anchor, the ship was hit by a JU88 bomber – two bombs missed but one went through the dining salon and exploded in a lower deck and another is said to have gone straight down the funnel to the engine room. The ship sank within 15 minutes with heavy loss of life. The press reported 2,823 lost but according to army and ship's officers' counts, it was more likely around 5,000.

The bomber returned and made two more passes over the ship using machine guns and dropping incendiary bombs to ignite the thick spread of oil.

There were reports of many heroic acts like the unknown lone Bren gunner on one of the decks who kept firing at the planes even as the sea closed over him. Like the naked man covered completely in black oil who dived time after time into the sea from the safety of the rescuing ship to bring floundering people to its side where they could be hauled aboard. And the poignant scene of a mother, and her tiny baby being thrown into the water when a lifeboat capsized crying out to others drifting nearby, "My baby! My baby! Please find my baby!" Back came the answer, "It's all right, Ma, we've got her," as they held her baby well above the water.

So poor Bert perished along with at least 57 fellow members of his [73rd] Company, AMPC. Bert's body was never found and he is commemorated at the Dunkirk Memorial [Column 150].

The memorial notes Bert was the son of Thomas and Jane Blenkinsopp and we can only assume that his Mother Jane [Davies] was widowed and remarried but the information we have so far managed to glean is incomplete and unreliable. If you know any more, please get in touch.

Cllr Mike Garland