



# WFA SUFFOLK BRANCH

## Branch Briefing

January 2024

Our Website : <https://suffolk-wfa.org.uk>  
Our Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/WFASuffolk>



## Tonight's talk

Stephen Barker : The Flying Sikh



A Happy New Year to all !!

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**MY GRANDFATHER** Gary Johnson



This is the only reasonable photo I have of my paternal grandfather while on active service. (he is to the left of the carcass, under the 'I' on the side of the lorry)

On the back is written '*St Nazaire, 14th September 1914*'

All I know is that he went to work with Waring and Gillows as a 'horse driver' in the late 1900's, changing to 'Motor Lorry Driver' when Warings converted their horse drawn fleet to motor lorries around the turn of the decade (1911/12 I believe).

The conversion itself was part funded by the War Office (as evidenced by the wording on the N/S/R quarter panel of the lorry). In time of war the lorries (and their drivers) reverted to War Office control.

When war was declared he quickly found himself, and his truck, in France in support of the BEF. Number on the back of his medals is CMT-5087 - Pte J C Johnson (ASC)

He survived the war (although clearly had a very close shave in the vicinity of Hill 60 as there are several post war photographs of this location - but no details) and ended up as a bus driver until retirement. (I think his route onto the busses was via driving a war surplus lorry (as motor busses were in very short supply immediately post war) on demobilization)

Can anybody add any further detail I wonder?

## SUFFOLK BRANCH BIG COACH TOUR 2024 Keith Cooper and David Hedges

It is very encouraging that we are approaching a full coach for this trip so I hope you will join us. Please contact Keith on keith-cooper@hotmail.co.uk or David Hedges on david.j.hedges@btopenworld.com.



### Suffolk WFA – Twenty things you haven't seen in Picardy

Saturday 29 June to Tuesday 2 July

Limited to 20 Spaces

£710:00 - £150 Single Supplement

#### Tour inclusive of

- 29 seat coach & driver throughout
- Return channel crossing
- Clive Harris as guide
- 3 nights Amiens Centre Hotel Moxy B&B
- All museum and fort entry fees

Saturday 29 June – Collect from Suffolk 29 seat coach and driver – Crossing to Calais, stop at Flixecourt on route to Amiens to visit the site of the BEF Camouflage Factory and the location of the Fourth Army Battle School as mentioned by Siegfried Sassoon in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*  
*Overnight Hotel Moxy Central Amiens*

Sunday 30 June – 1916 Day – passing the RFC base for Somme Operations at Longeau and General Rawlinson's HQ at Querrieu, we then visit the site of the Grandstand where the general staff watched the attack go in on the 1st July, we will follow the Suffolk Regiment attacks at Orvillers (2nd July), Guedecourt (October) & Boom Ravine (February 1917) before ending with a visit to the Thiepval Memorial to hear of a couple of lesser known stories of individuals commemorated on its walls.  
*Overnight Hotel Moxy Central Amiens*

Monday 1 July – 1918 Day - Morning visit to Villers Bretonneux to study the British & Australian defence in April 1918, then we follow the incredible journey whippet tank 'Musical Box' in August 1918 before ending the day with a visit to the Cantigny Battlefield, 28 May 1918 and the US 1st Divisions first offensive of the war. A walk around Amiens town that evening including a visit to the famous Salon Godbert ends our day.  
*Overnight Hotel Moxy Central Amiens*

Tuesday 2 July – Depart Amiens for Calais via a relaxed visit to explore Montreuil, GHQ for the BEF and the recently restored equestrian statue of Sir Douglas Haig as well as his forward Headquarters at Beauquesne



## Minutes of the Suffolk WFA 2023 AGM. Wednesday 13th December 2023

Venue: RBL Stowmarket

1. Apologies John Booty, John Burns, Brian Davies, Geoffrey Robinson

2. Approval of 2022 Minutes and matters arising – approved and no matters arising

3. Chairman's Report – Colin Woods

My year as Chair has passed remarkably quickly. It doesn't seem that it's been 12 months since Taff stood down.

The Branch seems to be running OK and the numbers at meetings are holding firm, with a slight reduction since Covid. It is great disappointment that we haven't been able to run the Spring Walk, due to many outside factors.

I now can post meetings on Facebook, with about 200+ people viewing it. Also thanks to John Burns for maintaining our website.

Tom has done a fantastic job in getting speakers to the meetings and the next 12 months are nearly booked up.

Thanks to the following: Terry for doing a great job in arranging and running the raffle. Brian, as treasurer, for keeping the branch solvent, David for compiling the branch briefing, Keith for his endeavours to attempting to get us on a summer tour, and Jean for taking donations at the door.

Many thanks to Kelly for supplying the buffet, which always goes down well. Maybe a mince pie tonight.

2024 Summer Tour is currently being put together, hopefully we will have news tonight on prices etc.

4. Secretary's Report – David Hedges

Sorry to advise our Secretary John Booty cannot be with us due to an ongoing challenging illness. In practice the Branch receives very little by way of correspondence etc, requiring the attention of a Secretary. We will discuss the role at committee when John returns.

5. Treasurer's Report- Brian Davies

[Sec: I sent Brian's financial report by email to all regular members to save excessive printing.

I can email a copy if you did not receive it david.j.hedges@btopenworld.com]

Sorry I can't be with you this evening but I will be at an "alternative pantomime" at the London Palladium - only joking. Although the number of people attending meetings has not yet recovered to pre-Covid levels, the income has been offset by the increase in individual donations from £4 to £5. This has resulted in a small surplus on the year. Thanks to Terry for organising the raffle which continues to provide a significant income. Also, to Tom who has organised an excellent range of speakers from a limited budget. I would also encourage tax paying members to complete a Gift Aid form which enables us to claim 25% of your donations. Xmas Greetings to you all and wishing you a Prosperous & Healthy New Year.

6. Speaker Secretary's Report – Tom Mudd

I hope you approved of the 2023 speaker programme – and indeed the speakers and subjects I have selected for 2024. I am always happy to receive suggestions for topics and speakers for future meetings.

7. Battlefield Tours Report – Keith Cooper

2023 suffered with the last echoes of Covid. I hope 2024 will restart our well-supported and renowned tours

8. Election of Officers – All officers are willing to stand again for 2024

Colin Woods - Chairman

Brian Davies – Treasurer

John Booty - Secretary

Tom Mudd – Speaker Secretary

Dave Hedges – Vice Chairman \* and Tours

Keith Cooper – RBL Liaison and Tours

Terry Groom – Raffle

Jean Licence – Door entry management

\* Dave Hedges was "non – exec" in 2023. It is proposed to make him Vice Chairman to allow him to chair the meeting if Colin is absent. (He will also assist Keith in tours planning)

Members approved the re-election of all the committee members, and the 'promotion' of David Hedges to Vice-Chairman

The Chairman thanked John Burns who has done an excellent job reviving the Branch Website this year.

10. AOB none

The Chairman to close the meeting

## GALLIPOLI Trevor Smith

‘I’m not a w\*\*\*\*r, I’m a serious historian!’

Read on to discover what prompted Peter Hart to make that shocking announcement

If you’ve ever contemplated exploring the Gallipoli peninsula, there are a few factors to consider: Will Turkey remain a safe destination? Are you fit enough to walk the often-rough terrain? More importantly, how much longer will World War One expert and battlefield tour guide extraordinaire Peter Hart live? After all, he’s getting on a bit.

The Imperial War Museum’s former oral historian has just published his dates for 2024 tours (13-20 May & 30 Sept-7 Oct), and I would recommend them as my wife and I finally got round to going last September, and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Each day we set off for a different battlefield location and followed in the footsteps of the men who served there in 1915. Peter explained all the points of interest, which he brought to life with recordings of combatants from both sides, along with maps and photographs. An excellent Turkish guide, who came with an effusive recommendation from no less than Great War enthusiast and Lord of the Rings film director Peter Jackson, further expanded on his country’s viewpoint. I particularly enjoyed Peter’s habit of choosing members of the party to role play, getting us to read out testimonies from the men on the ground. It helped us to get into their mindset. Naturally, it was the posh-sounding people who ended up with senior officers’ parts. I, however, was repeatedly selected to play a slovenly private!

I realised the reason was that after one particularly arduous day, when we gathered for a few post-dinner refreshments and lots of banter, we called Peter a w\*\*\*\*r. The next morning he stopped in front of our breakfast table, coffee in one hand, toast in the other, looking for all the world like a shamed schoolboy. He announced with his head bowed: “I’m not a w\*\*\*\*r, I’m a serious historian!”

The whole trip was very informative and also great fun, Peter being a renowned bon viveur. Breakfast and dinner was included and an excellent packed lunch with ice cream was delivered to us on most days, plus there was a plentiful supply of free bottled water.

The itinerary may change slightly from trip to trip to cater for individual clients who wish to see a spot where a forebear fought. For instance, Peter was able to pinpoint where one of Kim’s relatives fired a howitzer with the Royal Garrison Artillery and where the grandfather of another member of the party was forced to crash-land his RFC reconnaissance plane.

Early highlights included visiting the Kilid Bahr Forts and watching ships entering the Dardanelles, just as they did back then. Other places that fired the imagination were V Beach, the Helles Memorial and an overgrown field containing some astonishingly well-preserved French guns.

We walked Gully Ravine from start to finish and imagined the troops’ long-ago refrain of “Tramping Up the Gully”. The days that followed saw us on a journey from Beach Cemetery to Walkers Ridge via Plugge’s Plateau, Braund’s Hill, Johnson’s Jolly and Lone Pine.

Evocative sites such as Quinn’s Post, Bloody Angle, The Nek and Russell’s Top followed in quick succession. Then we took in Chunuk Bair and the always popular walk down Rhododendron Ridge, ending the day at Anzac Beach with a spectacular view of a rock formation known as The Sphinx.

We travelled by boat to the island of Imbros, which is now in Greek hands, and were amazed that the remains of an officers’ camp are still in situ – complete with china fragments of their dinnerware. We also visited the site of an RFC base.

The final day provided a full exploration of Suvla, including Lala Baba Hill; Chocolate Hill (so called because of the colour of the soil); Green Hill Cemetery (where actor David Niven's father is buried); Suvla Point; Hill 10 and Scimitar Hill. The day ended with group photographs on both W Hills and the Anarfarta gun battery.

As Peter says: "Gallipoli was a lunacy that could never have succeeded, an idiocy generated by muddled thinking." Nevertheless, it remains a fascinating place to see. For more information, go to Peter Hart Battlefield Tours on <https://phbt.uk>



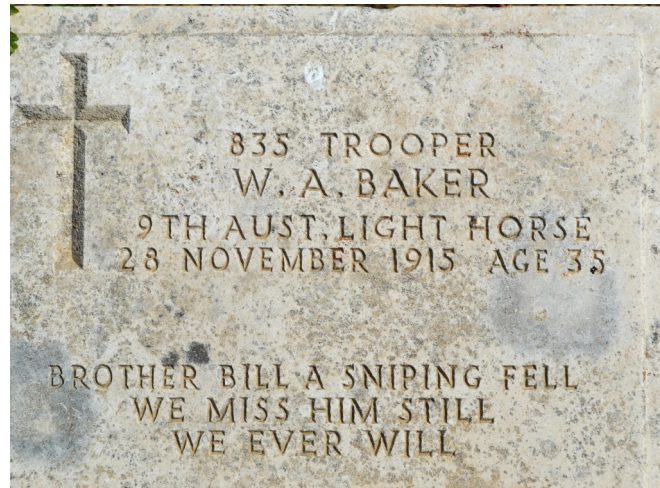
A rusting lighter on V Beach, which would have ferried troops to shore



The ascent to Plugge's Plateau provides a beautiful panorama



The rock formation dubbed The Spinx by the Anzacs; they'd seen the original while training in Egypt



Australian irreverence extends to their grave stones: Brother Bill a sniping fell, We miss him still, we always will.



The up-and-down terrain includes a walk down Rhododendron Ridge



David Niven's father, Lt W E G Niven, is believed to lie in Green Hill Cemetery



The tour group pose on the Anarfarta gun battery, one of Peter Hart's traditions



Following on from my previous article about a Silver War Badge (July Briefing) - another visit to Norfolk recently turned up this one from an antiques centre in Holt. Labelled as being a metal detecting find, it clearly shows the effects of being in the ground for over 100 years and the fastening pin is missing.

The number on the back quickly connected me to G/76555, Private William Ambrose Betts of the 29<sup>th</sup> (Works) Battalion, Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex) Regiment. Fortunately, his records survive giving details of his service.

William was born on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1878<sup>1</sup> in North Elmham, Norfolk, the son of Henry and Mary Ann Betts.

In 1911 he was single and living with his parents in High Street, North Elmham - he was employed as a Cowman. William was conscripted and called up on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1916. Over the following weeks he was transferred to the Royal Fusiliers, back to the 29<sup>th</sup> Middlesex then to the 17<sup>th</sup> Queens (Royal West Surrey) and finally back to the 29<sup>th</sup> Middlesex, on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

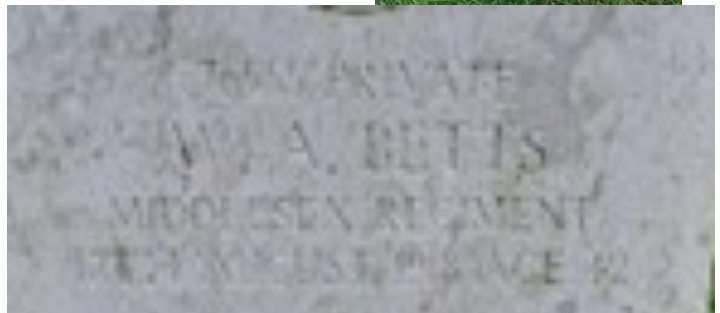
His records show that he had significant health problems at the start of his brief military career. Although passed as "B2" fitness<sup>2</sup>, William appears to have had a double hernia and was "very deaf" according to the RAMC Captain who examined him. In his "Description on joining - Distinctive marks" it was noted that he had a tumour behind his right ear. He also had rotten teeth. William was just under 5ft 5ins (1.65m) tall and weighed only 103lbs (7 stone 5 lbs/ 46.72kg).

He was admitted to hospital on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 1916 at Purfleet and the medical report reveals that he had been treated previously at Gressenhall Hospital in Norfolk, for three months in 1911, for "lung trouble". He was suffering from night sweats and was losing weight in the period leading up to his current admission to hospital. The diagnosis was that he had tuberculosis in his left lung. This was not attributed to his army service for pension purposes. Accordingly, he was discharged from the army, as no longer fit for war service, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1917.

I can only guess what the following months were like for William but presumably on returning home he would have tried to earn a living again and was wearing his Silver War Badge when he lost it in one of the fields around the village<sup>3</sup>.

William died on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1918 at the stated age of 42<sup>4</sup> and was buried in the churchyard of St Mary's, North Elmham. He is commemorated on the village war memorial.

I visited his grave shortly after finding out where he was buried and the badge has been sent back to North Elmham village. It is now in the care of the author of a book commemorating the men of the village who died in the war.



### NOTES

1 North Elmham Baptism records via *Ancestry*

2 "Free from serious organic diseases, able to stand lines of communication in France or in garrisons in the tropics. Able to walk 5 miles to and from work, see and hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes".

3 Efforts have been made to trace the location of the find but with no success. The find was sold to a shop in Fakenham along with some cap badges. The shop then sold it on through their cabinet in the antiques centre.

4 Commonwealth War Graves Commission record. On Williams attestation form, completed on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1916, he gives his age as 40 years and 3 months although his birth date was 18<sup>th</sup> April 1878 (as given on his baptism record) making him 38 years and 6 months at the time of attestation and 40 years old when he died.



## **DID YOU KNOW ????** Ed Erbes

Submariners were banned from the first Armistice Day Parade in Whitehall by an admiral because he regarded them as pirates who targeted civilians. Their response was to wear skull-and-crossbones badges and held their own commemorations on the Thames Embankment, in Blyth and Dundee a week early. This has become a tradition that continues to this day.

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## **LEST WE FORGET** Kelvin Dakin

### **7925, Corporal James Gill Palmer, 2nd Battalion, Suffolk Regiment**

Born 1892 in Hawstead, but not traced in 1901. No details of parents have been found although "Gill" may have been his mother's maiden name. There were at least two families with this surname in the village around this time. (Two are on the war memorial)

He enlisted around January 1909 and by 1911 he was at Aldershot with the 2nd Battalion and a Lance Corporal.

He crossed to France on the 16th January 1915 with the 1st Battalion and was admitted to hospital for a gunshot wound to the scalp on the 19th April 1915. He married Ada Rose Clarke in the Bury St Edmunds District in the last quarter of 1915. At some point he was transferred to the 2nd Battalion where he was killed in the mine explosion at The Bluff on the Ypres-Comines Canal, 22nd January 1916. The History of the Suffolk Regiment 1914-1927 describes the incident:

*"During the third week of January, the miners, who were tunnelling in front of the Bluff, became aware that the enemy were counter-mining. On the night of the 21st - 22nd just after the battalion had returned to the line, a terrific explosion occurred. The ground shook violently and an immense column of earth shot up in front of the Bluff, carrying away the south-eastern face of it. The explosion was not followed by any bombardment or attack and for the moment no one realised what had happened. Men in trenches next to the canal were buried several feet deep; ammunition boxes were hurled hundreds of yards and all the surrounding trenches, upon which the battalion had spent so much of their labour, as well as the system of tunnels within the Bluff, collapsed completely."*

His widow's address was at Sapiston Heath, near Ixworth, but James has not been found recorded on any local memorial but is commemorated on the Menin Gate.

## **THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD ....**

**Talk at the Norwich Branch  
Tuesday 6th February**

**Steve Smith: 'Private G/5203 Frank Smith (A jolly good chap!).'**

**Our next month's talk  
Wednesday 14th February**

**Andrew Lock : Redan Ridge 1917**

Please send any contributions for the *Branch Briefing* to:  
David Hedges, 99 Cliff Road, Felixstowe, Suffolk, IP11 9SA  
telephone: 01394 272677 and email:david.j.hedges@btopenworld.com  
Next Committee meeting: tba  
Approach a committee member if you want any issue raised.