

Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society

Remembering the men who are named on the WW2 memorial in Heslington Church

An illustrated talk by Rev. Peter Mott on 11 November 2023



I wish to thank my colleague Barbara King, for finding on the internet much of the information about the six individuals listed on our War Memorial for WW2, which has recently been relocated into the Church from the Village Hall; and also thanks to Michael French, the son of one of those listed, who still lives in Heslington, and has given me more family detail and pictures about his father George.

Two of the six names are from the RAF. I had assumed they had been based here at Elvington, but I was wrong.

Flight Sergeant James Cuthbert Burgon

James was born in 1922 to parents Robert and Isabella Burgon in Duns, Berwick upon Tweed. In 1939 he is recorded as working as a mail sorting clerk and telegraphist, with the post office in London.

James enlisted at Padgate, near Warrington, and joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, training to be a pilot after April 1941. RAF Padgate will be well-remembered by thousands of young men who were selected for RAF national service and on this site received their first taste of military discipline, ill-fitting uniforms and a severe haircut.

Progressing from RAF Reserve Volunteer to RAF Pilot, Sgt James C Burgon, trained with the 53rd Operational Training Unit, formed in February 1941 at RAF Heston, to the west of London. He was being trained as a fighter pilot using the Supermarine Spitfire, a single seater British aircraft.

James died on 8th September 1942 having reached the rank of Sergeant. He was based at Llandow, Glamorgan; during a low-flying training flight from there he flew into trees near Llangattock, Monmouth.



James was buried in Heslington churchyard. His home address given in the burial register was "Heatherlea", Thief Lane, Heslington - presumably that of his parents at the time. He is also commemorated on the Duns War Memorial (left). His death was commemorated for several years by his grandparents on the 8th September in the Berwickshire News and General Advertiser.

Flight Lt John Bernard Humpherson DFC

John was born 6th July 1916 and brought up in Enfield, Middlesex, the elder son of Sidney and Lilian Humpherson; he was educated at Brighton College.

He joined the RAF on a short service commission in October 1936. From 16/1/37 he attended the Flying Training School at RAF Tern Hill in Shropshire, then moved to RAF Church Fenton, near Tadcaster on 7/6/37. During the Battle of Britain in 1940 he flew Hurricanes from Biggin Hill.

He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in August 1940 for "acts of valour, courage, or devotion to duty whilst flying in active operations against the enemy". From 21/8/40 he was moved around every few weeks from RAF Unsworth, Co. Durham, to RAF Tangmere, W. Sussex, RAF Drem, E Lothian, then back to RAF Unsworth, still flying Hurricanes.

From 20/12/40 he transferred to the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment at Boscombe Down, Wiltshire, and thence on 6/1/41 to be a test pilot on heavy bombers at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough.



He died 22/6/41, aged 24 - Boeing Fortress bomber took off from RAF West Raynham, in Norfolk, on a high altitude test flight. The aircraft encountered difficulties resulting in crashing near Catterick Bridge, North Yorkshire. 7 of the 8 aircrew died. Flt Lt. Humpherson was on board as a test pilot and scientific observer.

John was buried in Heslington Churchyard 26/6/41 - the mystery is why was he buried in Heslington? - we can find no link to the village.

He had married Barbara Gilgryst on 6th October 1939*; they had 2 children: Michael and Anne. A year after John's death, she married another Hurricane pilot, Walter Griffith in Clifton Church, York. Walter was also killed only three months after the wedding. In 1946 she married for a third time, to Dudley Godsland.

Son Michael's christening

[View](#)

L to R: John King, John Humpherson, Barbara Humpherson, Michael H, Grace Gilgryst, Unknown lady, Richard Humpherson



28 Sep 1940



Flight Lieutenant John Bernard William Humpherson

BIRTH 6 Jul 1916
London Borough of Enfield, Greater London, England

DEATH 22 Jun 1941 (aged 24)
Catterick, Richmondshire District, North Yorkshire, England

BURIAL [St Paul Churchyard](#)
Heslington, York Unitary Authority, North Yorkshire, England

PLOT Grave 93

MEMORIAL ID 109756386 · [View Source](#)

[SHARE](#)[+ SAVE TO](#)[SUGGEST EDITS](#) ▾

Sgt. Harry MacDonald

Harry was born in 1917. His father, also called Harry, was killed at the second Battle of Ypres before he was born. He was brought up in Heslington by his mother Lily. He married Lilian Vining, January 1941 in Middlesex, and had a son, Keith McDonald born 1943. He served in Base Signals Radar Unit, RAFVR

He died at sea 7/11/44, aged 27, on LST 420 - a purpose-designed "tank landing ship" capable of transporting vehicles and personnel to anywhere in the world. She had served in the Mediterranean and in the invasion of Normandy.



This image shows an LST with its bow doors open to disembark passengers and cargo.

Background for final operations. The weather was very poor and had resulted in a relative lull in aerial fighting in North West Europe. This presented the 2nd Tactical Air Force with an opportunity to conduct necessary servicing, repairs and overhaul of radar installations in North West Europe as "partial downtime" was unavoidable in the process and the defences could not be "down" when the Luftwaffe was active. The process involved taking a radar installation "off line" but leaving the site still functioning on its alternative systems.

All such major maintenance after the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944, until November 1944, had been accomplished by small "Mobile Signals Servicing Units" (MSSU) which had been enormously successful.

The tactical plan was for the "No. 1 Base Signals and Radar Unit" (BSRU) which had completed eighteen months training at the Signals Battle Training School, to land in France once the Normandy bridgehead was sufficiently stable; but due to the MSSU's success and the greater rate of territorial advance than expected, the BSRU had been held in England until a more suitable time. It was eventually decided to move the unit, its vehicles and personnel to a site at Ghent, Belgium where workshops were set up and equipment began to arrive. On receipt of movement orders in the marshalling area in Essex, the 303 men of the unit began boarding *LST-420* which took aboard 19 officers and 250 personnel of No. 1 BSRU with their 50 vehicles, equipment and supplies.

On 7 November 1944, a small convoy of vessels comprising 5 LSTs crossed the English Channel bound for Ostend, Belgium. The weather had been very poor for a week and a severe storm was rising. By mid-afternoon when they arrived off the Belgian coast conditions were terrible, and as a result they were refused permission to enter port at Ostend due to concerns that an accident in the harbour mouth might cause considerable disruption in the supply line for land forces. The convoy duly altered course back towards England planning to shelter overnight in the Thames Estuary before returning to Ostend on the following day.

At approximately 15:00, within sight of Ostend the bow section of *LST-420* struck a German mine which tore a large hole in the ship's hull causing it to break into two parts. The ship's galley fires were lit at the time due to the evening meal being prepared and gallons of petrol from the damaged fuel tanks of the vehicles caught fire enveloping the stern section of the ship in flame. *LST-420* sank very rapidly and due to the heavy seas only larger vessels were able to attempt to rescue survivors in the water. Only 31 or 32 men of the BSRU were saved from life rafts.

Harry is buried at Oostende New Communal Cemetery*. The headstone inscription reads:
IN MEMORY OF MY DEAR HUSBAND. IN THE GARDEN OF MEMORIES, WE MEET
EVERY DAY

Lance Corporal Victor Gordon Shaw

Victor was born in York on 15th April 1926. His parents were Alfred and Hilda Florence Shaw nee Wallis of York.

His father Alfred went to school in Heslington and his father was the local carpenter. Alfred was one of five children on the 1911 Census, and the family were living in Heslington Village. His mother Hilda Florence Shaw was born in Selby. Her parents were Inn Keepers and she spent her early years in Cawood. By the 1911 Census the family had moved to The Grey Horse Inn, Elvington. Hilda, was still at school. On 22nd August 1923 Alfred and Hilda married at Heslington Church.

The National Service (Armed Forces) Act imposed conscription on all males aged between 18 and 41 who had to register for service. Those medically unfit were exempted, as were others in key industries and jobs such as baking, farming, medicine, and engineering. According to the England and Wales register of 1939, Alfred and Hilda had moved to 72 Poppleton Road. Victor was the second of 7 children, still at school. Moving on from 1939 to April 1944 Victor would have had to enlist for National Service. Victor served as Lance Corporal in the 1st Battalion, Highland Light Infantry, City of Glasgow Regiment.

The Highland Light Infantry was a Scottish regiment formed in 1881 and drew its recruits mainly from Glasgow and the Scottish Lowlands. For whatever reason Victor was put into this regiment. During the Second World War, 1st Battalion served in France and had to be evacuated from Cherbourg in June 1940. It then remained in Britain until June 1944, when it took part in the Normandy landings, followed by the Battle of the Bulge in January 1945.

It served during Operation Market Garden (an Allied military operation fought in the German-occupied Netherlands from 17 to 27 September 1944. Its objective was to create a 64 mile salient into German territory with a bridgehead over the Dutch part of the R.



Rhine, creating an Allied invasion route into northern Germany.) going on to the liberation of Holland later that year. It went on to serve throughout the remainder of the North-West Europe campaign. Victor was not 18 years old until 15th April 1944 so it is likely that after his initial training he would be sent to France on or around June 1944.

He was only to serve in the army for around 6 months because on the 4th January 1945 he was killed in action - probably during the Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Ardennes offensive. This was a major German counter-offensive campaign on the Western Front taking place from 16th December 1944 to 25 January 1945.



Victor died in Belgium on 4th January 1945 and is buried at Hotton War Cemetery.
A personal inscription on the headstone reads –

ETERNAL REST GIVE UNTO HIM, O LORD; AND LET PERPETUAL LIGHT SHINE
UPON HIM.

Hotton was the western limit of the German offensive. Of the 666 burials here, 340 are soldiers (21 of whom have never been identified) and 325 are airmen who died in the Allies' desperate attempt to retain mastery of the skies during the German advance.

Trooper Wilfred Crawford Nicholson



Wilfred was born in York in September 1920. His parents were Charles Nicholson and Mary Crawford. His father was born in Heslington and was son of the miller, living at the Mill House. He married Mary in 1899.

By 1911 the family had moved back to Heslington, living at 5 Low Field Terrace. Charles worked as a painter on the NE Railway. Wilfred came from a large Heslington family. It is likely that he attended Heslington school along with others in his family. By the time of the 1939 England and Wales Register Charles had died, and Mary and her family were still living at 5 Low Field Terrace, Heslington.

The Royal Armoured Corps was created on 4th April 1939 just prior to the start of WWII by combining the Cavalry Wing and the Royal Tank Corps. As the war went on many other units became mechanized and joined this Corps. The 9th Battalion, Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment was re-raised in 1940, and were then converted to the 146th Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps. They were sent to India and saw action in Burma.

It is not known when Wilfred joined up. He died on 1st February 1943, aged 23. He is commemorated in the Rangoon Memorial, Taukkyan War Cemetery. The memorial commemorates 25,000 British and Commonwealth fighters with no known graves. There is also a Cremation Memorial, with the names of 1,000 WW2 Hindu or Sikh casualties who were cremated according to their faith. The cemetery is the largest of the three war cemeteries in Burma (now Myanmar). It was begun in 1951 for the reception of graves from battlefield cemeteries all over Burma. There are now 6,389 Second World War Commonwealth service persons buried in this cemetery, 867 of which are unidentified.



Rangoon Memorial, Taukkyan War Cemetery

The Burma Campaign

(N.B. There was a programme on Channel 4 TV on 4th November 2023, about a film made in 1943 for soldiers in India to send messages home. They were all quite cheerful, but the programme went on to describe the terrible conditions when they got into Burma.) After the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the Japanese army drove the badly equipped and badly led British and Chinese forces out of Burma*. The border with India was forested and mountainous, whereas the British and Indian armies had been trained for desert warfare in North Africa.



Most campaigning ceased during the monsoon May - September. General Irwin ordered a coastal attack on the Arakan peninsula, beginning in September, which went disastrously wrong, leading to a retreat in April 1943. (He was then sacked.) It was presumably during this action that Trooper Wilfred Nicholson was killed.

Meanwhile General Slim was training a new army with a strategy to fight in the jungle. This meant a massive effort by Indian, British and American engineers to build a new road and rail track up to Imphal to bring up supplies. Churchill appointed Admiral Lord Mountbatten as supreme commander of British forces in SE Asia, to the dismay of the general staff in Delhi, who were senior to him; they argued you could not fight the Japanese in the jungle, nor in the mountains, nor during the monsoon, and they could not supply advanced troops by air.

Mountbatten overturned all this, appointing Slim as commander of the newly-formed 14th Army of British, Indian and Gurkha troops, preparing to fight the Japanese in the mountains and jungle; he also supported General Wingate and his idea of sending long-range penetration British and Indian forces behind the Japanese lines, supplied by air, to destroy their road and rail communications. These were the "Chindits"* - the name derived for the Indian word for a lion. Their actions were the only successes against the Japanese in 1942-43, but at great cost in terms of allied casualties. The Allied high command questioned whether their achievements were worth the human and material costs; the Japanese high command found them all too successful in breaking up their supply lines.

Meanwhile General Slim was building up the 14th Army and supplies for an offensive in the Arakan in March 1944, but the Japanese attacked first in February, with Operation Ha-Go. They used the same tactics that had been successful in previous years, making

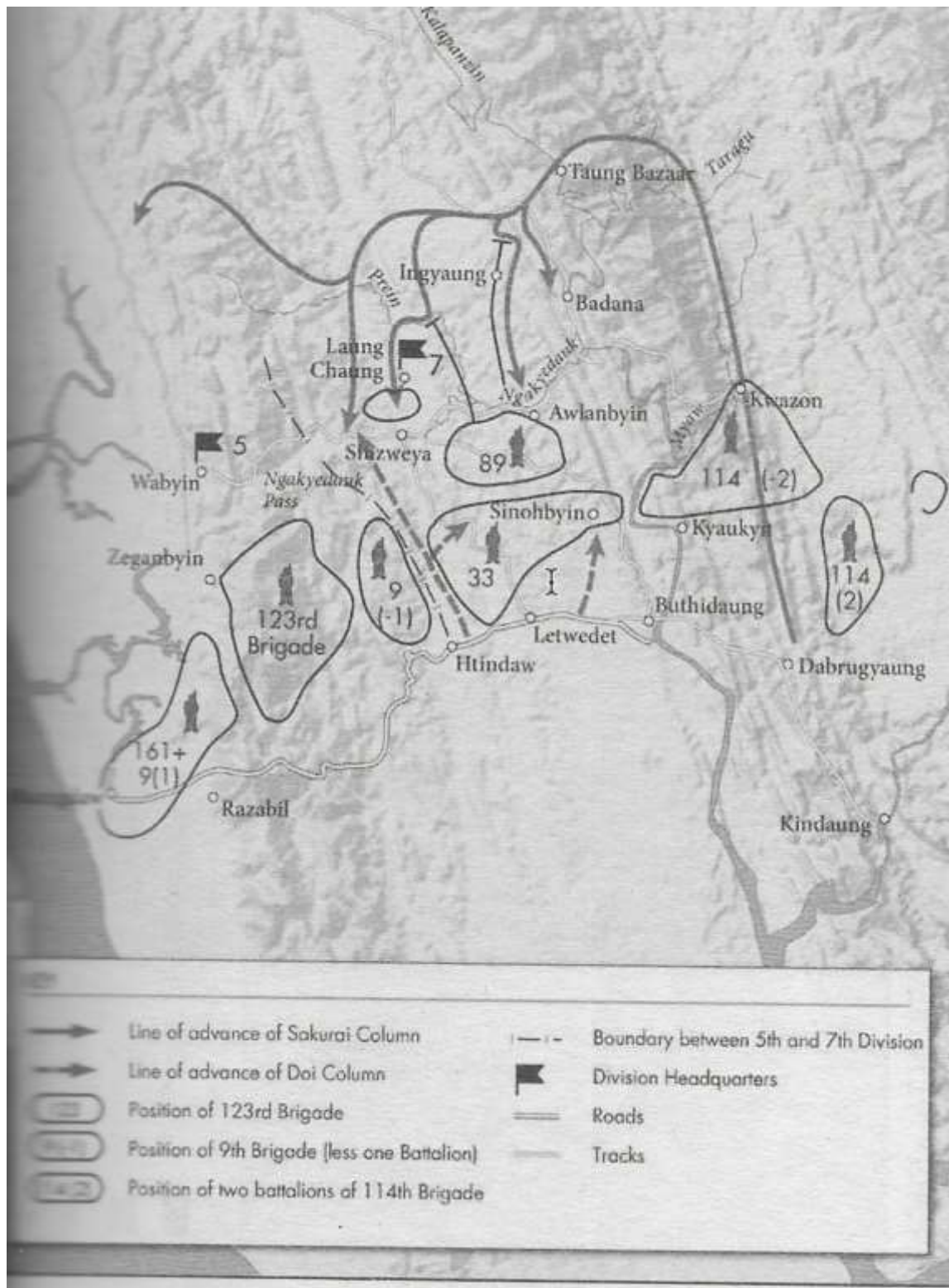
lightning advances, travelling light, infiltrating round the rear of Allied positions, surround them, and then make an all-out attack to over-run their positions and seize their supplies, in order to advance further (the jungle equivalent of Blitz-Krieg).



Chindit soldiers fording a river

But this time it did not work. General Slim had trained the troops to form a defensive box and stand firm, supplied by air. He had also persuaded high command that tanks could fight in the jungle, and were needed. All this depended on gaining air superiority, which was achieved with the help of newly arrived Spitfires, and support from the USAAF, who were also supporting General Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese National Army. US General Stilwell led their troops in N. Burma.

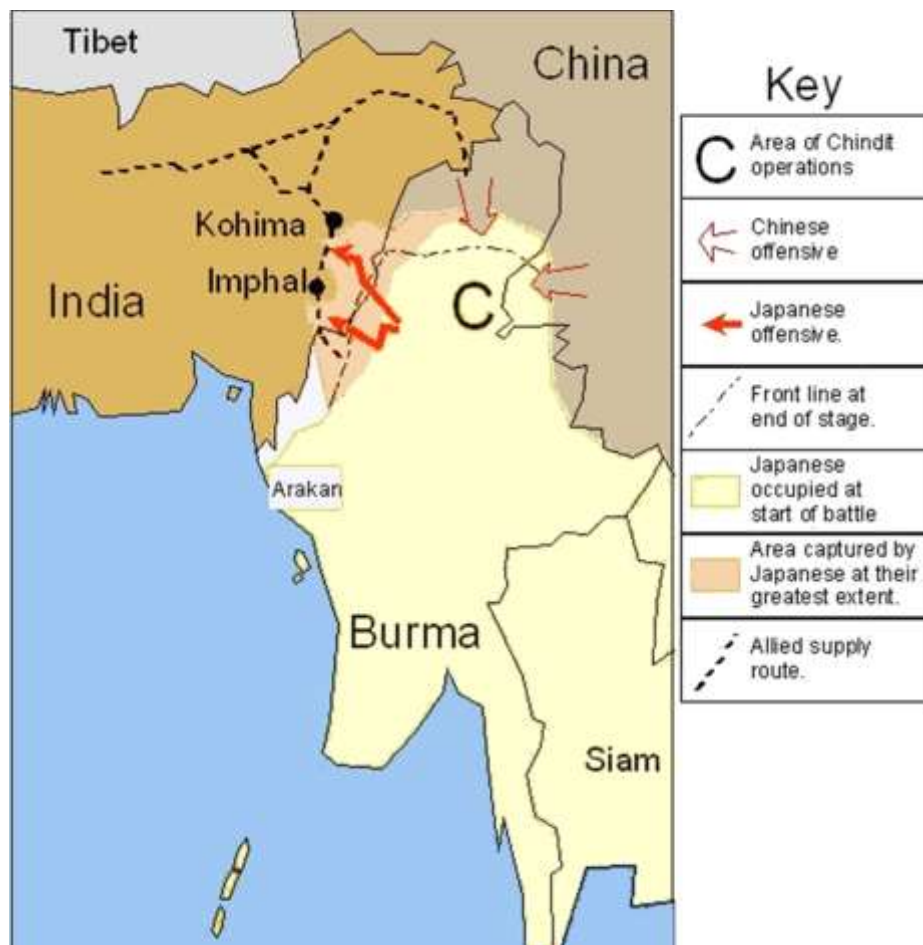
The Japanese columns attacking in the Arakan were defeated as they ran out of supplies, having failed to over-run the British army bases. Offensive Ha-Go was called off on February 25th, leaving 5,000 Japanese dead. This was the first defeat for the Japanese, and showed it could be done. But the conditions for the allied troops were terrible: with the heat, humidity and monsoon rain, disease, flies, leeches, and lack of supplies. More troops died or were invalided out by disease than by enemy action. Neither the Allied nor Japanese high commands recognised the difficulty of fighting in the dense jungle-clad mountains. Despite the failure of operation Ha-Go, the Japanese followed up in March 1944 with attacks towards the East, over the mountains to take Kohima and Imphal, and thence to sweep into Assam and down through India. Their advance was held up by heroic resistance by various small allied units along the way. By 29th March, Imphal was cut off.



Operation Ha-Go

On April 6th the siege of Kohima began; it was raised on April 18th, but battle there continued until June. The heroic defenders held out against repeated attacks. In order to supply them, Mountbatten had to "borrow" American transport planes intended to supply the Chinese army, flying over the "hump" of the Himalayas - to the fury of the American high command, who had no interest in rescuing the British Empire, but with the approval of Churchill who did.

The siege of Imphal was broken on 22nd June. On 8th July Japanese General Mutaguchi ordered a general retreat from India. On 27th January the Burma Road was re-opened, so that the Americans could resupply General Chiang Kai-shek direct by land. On 9th March Mandalay was attacked, and on May 1st Rangoon was captured.



Japanese attacks on Imphal and Kohima



Kohima Memorial

"When you go home tell them of us and say for your tomorrow we gave our today"

Lt. George William French

Born on 23rd July 1916 at Spring Villa* (now Spring Field) in Heslington Village. He was the eldest son of George and Beatrice French, who moved to Spring Villa, to set up a Market Garden business. He had a younger sister - Joyce and a younger brother - Philip. George, (known as Billy to his family and friends), went to Heslington School in 1921, and then on to Fishergate School. He left school and went to work at York Glassworks - in Fishergate, where he became a manager.

He was baptised and confirmed at St. Pauls Church in Heslington, where he was a very active member - he ran the Sunday School until he enlisted.



Billy was a keen cricketer and was the opening batsman for Heslington Village team. He was also a member of a local amateur dramatics society, and he loved to play the violin.

In 1940 he married Annie Ward who also lived in the village - they had been friends since school. Her father Harry fought in world war one and had been wounded 3 times - and still went back! His wife Ethel, was the daughter of John Kitchen, who had been the landlord of the Deramore Arms. His son Michael was born in 1942 at 47 Main Street in Heslington.



Although Billy was exempt from call up, as he was the eldest son of a farmer - he volunteered, to save his younger brother Philip from being called up. He enlisted in the West Yorkshire Regiment in 1940, where he saw action in Europe, North Africa and Burma (now Myanmar). He was Gazetted in February 1942 as a 2nd Lieutenant*. According to Forces War Records: at the time of George's death, he had risen to the rank of War Substantive Lieutenant. (Usually an officer who had held an acting rank, for a certain (limited) period of time, was converted into a temporary rank. Having held a temporary rank for some time resulted in a war substantive appointment.)



In 1942 2/5th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment was converted to armour, becoming 113rd Regiment Royal Armoured Corps. They continued to wear their West Yorkshire cap badge on the black beret of the RAC.

Stationed in the Sudan, 2nd West Yorkshire found themselves in the forefront when the Italians entered the war in 1940. Joining 5th Indian Division, the battalion saw heavy fighting in Abyssinia and Eritrea before serving in Egypt and Libya, with much action in the Western Desert.

George French in Jerusalem after El Alamein 1942

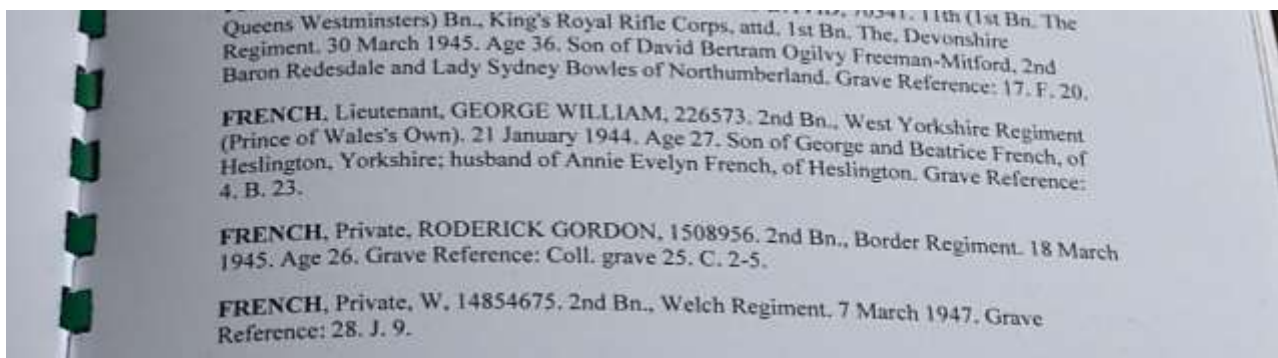
After the retreat to the Alamein line, the Division was withdrawn and moved to the Far Eastern theatre, where they were in action again in the Arakan in 1942-44.

Following the capture of Maungdaw, 2nd West Yorks were caught in the Japanese counter-offensive and completely surrounded at Sinzweya where they received a message from the Supremo: "Stand fast for 14 days and you will make history." Under constant attack they held out, in fact for 25 days, completely upsetting the Japanese plan. Their Corps Commander, General Christison said, "Never has any regiment counter-attacked so successfully and so often as in that battle. It is rare in history that one regiment can be said to have turned the scale of a whole campaign."

With no respite, 5th Indian Division was then switched North to join the battles for Kohima and Imphal, and when the sieges were lifted they took part in the hard fighting advance for 200 miles down the Tiddim Road to Kaleymo, in wild and mountainous country during the

height of the monsoon. It was during the preparation for the counter-offensive that, while capturing a machine-gun post, George was killed in action on 21st January 1944, aged 27, leaving his parents, wife and son Michael back in Heslington.

He is buried at Taukkyan War Cemetery. These pictures were taken by Michael's son Dominic, who got a 24hr visa to visit the cemetery, and placed the flower on the grave. George is also commemorated on his wife Ann's gravestone in Heslington churchyard.



Book of Remembrance at Taukkyan War Cemetery



William's grave in Myanmar (Burma) and his wife, Ann's grave in Heslington, where he is lovingly remembered.

