

Pte J.A.H.Taylor – Queen’s Royal Regiment (West Surrey)

James Alfred Harry Taylor was born in 1909, the son of Alfred and Emily Taylor of Westcott. In 1928 James married Doris Chambers; they had a daughter, Sheila Margaret, born in late 1929, and lived at 35 Watson Road.

In early 1940 James was serving in the 1st/5th Battalion of the Queen’s which, as part of the 44th (Home Counties) Infantry Division, landed in France on 3rd April 1940 to join the British Expeditionary Force. The BEF, as it was known, was holding a line alongside the Belgian Army and the French 1st Army in readiness for any German advance that may be made through Belgium and northern France.

The front had been relatively quiet up to that time, but what became known as ‘the phoney war’ ended on 10th May 1940 when the German Army Group B invaded Holland and continued westwards. At the same time Army Group A attacked through the Ardennes, advanced rapidly towards Sedan and then turned north towards the English Channel. A series of Allied counter-attacks failed to stop the German advance which reached the coast on 20th May, separating the BEF and neighbouring allies from the other French Armies to the south. On reaching the coast the German armies threatened to take the Channel ports and trap the BEF and their allies before they could be evacuated.

On 24th May the Germans halted for three days, perhaps in the belief that the Allied Armies could not escape. The BEF Commander, Field Marshal Sir John Gort, ordered the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 50th Divisions to establish a defensive perimeter with French units round Dunkirk to allow the rest of the BEF, including the 44th Division, and their allies to make their way to the port. The troops were subjected to frequent air attacks during their retreat; roads were congested and progress was slow. On 27th May the 44th Division was held up crossing the Yser Canal and heavily bombed; more attacks followed on the night of 27th/28th May. The Division suffered heavy losses and lost almost all of its guns and vehicles during this period.

The German Army’s pause outside Dunkirk allowed the time for the British to organise ‘Operation Dynamo’ to evacuate the Allied armies. Hundreds of small ships ranging from lifeboats, paddle steamers and fishing boats to private launches crossed the Channel to Dunkirk to take men off the beaches or the harbour mole, and ferry them out to larger

ships or take them straight back to England. Although this operation took place under heavy air attacks, over 330,000 men were brought back safely.

Sadly, James Taylor was not among the soldiers who returned. He died on 28th May 1940, almost certainly during the severe air attacks carried out that day on the 44th Division. He is remembered on the Dunkirk Memorial which bears the names of more than 4,500 casualties of the British Expeditionary Force who died in the 1939-40 campaign, or who died in captivity, and who have no known grave.

In 1949 James' widow, Doris, married Henry Kateley and continued to live at 35 Watson Road until her death in 1972.