

## Pte.R.Ward – The Queen’s Royal Regiment (West Surrey)

Although this soldier’s name is shown as ‘R.Ward’ on our memorial, this is regrettably incorrect. The entry refers to Arthur Ward who was born on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1919 in St John’s Road, Westcott, the son of Arthur James Ward and Elizabeth Lily Ward (formerly Rose). A next of kin list produced in 1954 shows that Arthur and Elizabeth lived at 57 St John’s Road, and this is almost certainly where their son, Arthur, was born and grew up.



In early 1940 Arthur ‘Nobby’ Ward was serving in the 1<sup>st</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment which, as part of the 44<sup>th</sup> (Home Counties) Infantry Division, landed in France on 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940 when the German Army Group B invaded Holland and continued into Belgium. At the same time Army Group A attacked through the Ardennes. Using *blitzkrieg* tactics Army Group A advanced rapidly towards Sedan and then turned north towards the Channel coast. A series of Allied counter-attacks failed to halt the German advance which reached the coast on 20<sup>th</sup> 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 24<sup>th</sup> May the Germans halted for three days, perhaps in the belief that the Allied armies were caught and could not escape. The BEF Commander, General Lord Gort, ordered the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions to establish a defensive perimeter with French units round Dunkirk to allow the rest of the BEF, including the 44<sup>th</sup> Division, and their allies to withdraw to the port for evacuation. The Allied troops were harassed continuously during their retreat; roads were congested and progress was slow. On 27<sup>th</sup> May the 44<sup>th</sup> Division was subjected to heavy, relentless bombing for two hours while

**waiting to cross the Yser Canal at Poperinghe, and more attacks followed on the night of 27<sup>th</sup>/28<sup>th</sup> May. The Division suffered heavy casualties during these attacks and most of its vehicles and guns were destroyed.**

**We do not know the exact circumstances of Arthur Ward's death; he died on 27<sup>th</sup> May, possibly during the air attacks which took place that day at Poperinghe, or from wounds received earlier. He is buried in Meteren Communal Cemetery which contains a small group of British graves from the First World War and the graves of six British soldiers who fell in the Second World War. Meteren is on the main road to Dunkirk, about 30 miles to the south of the port.**

**The German Army's pause outside Dunkirk allowed time for the British to organise 'Operation Dynamo' to evacuate the Allied armies from France. Hundreds of small ships, including lifeboats, paddle steamers, fishing boats and private launches, crossed the Channel to help with the evacuation. Some took troops directly back to England; others ferried men from the beaches to larger ships waiting offshore. The troops and their rescuers were attacked from the air throughout the operation and 243 ships were lost. Despite this, over 338,000 men of the allied armies were brought safely back to England. The loss of the Battle of France was a catastrophe for the Allies; over 10,000 British troops had been killed and thousands more taken prisoner, but much of the BEF and substantial French and other Allied forces had been saved to continue the war.**

