

Account of Purley on Thames

From VE Day to VJ Day

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An article by David Betts published in Project Purley Journal 69 - EX R000035

Three months of events commemorating 60 years since the end of the 2nd World War kicked off in Pangbourne Village Hall on the weekend of 14/15 May with an ambitious first exhibition by the new Pangbourne Heritage Group to mark VE day.

The display – which illustrated military and civilian life in the area from 1939 to 1945 – was the result of months spent collecting and collating information by members of the new society. It painted a vivid picture of the war years with photographs, memories and memorabilia, models and even audio-visual displays. Our own Bernard Venners contributed a display of military vehicles and Marion Venners looked the part in a WVS uniform which she made herself. (Note: not WRVS – the ‘Royal’ came later.)

Much fascinating new information about wartime in Pangbourne and the surrounding areas was brought to light, including visits by General de Gaulle in the run up to D-day. At the heart of the exhibition was a celebration of the Bailey Bridge and the men who trained with them across the River Thames at Pangbourne before building them across the rivers of Europe.

Three months later and, as Parish Council Chairman, I was lucky enough to represent Purley at West Berkshire’s VJ Day 60th Commemoration service in Newbury on Monday 15th August.

VJ Day, which marks the anniversary of the final end of hostilities in the 2nd World War, is of special significance to this area because the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royal Berkshire Regiment were heavily involved in the conflict in Burma. They were both involved in the battle for Kohima – where the 2nd Battalion lost two officers and 56 men killed and 15 officers and 239 injured, with another 60 falling sick, in five weeks of fighting.

This victory, together with the 1st Battalion’s attempt to capture the Aradura Spur by a near vertical climb to around 6000 feet through dense jungle in the middle of the monsoon, spelled the beginning of the end for the Japanese in Burma, who began a strategic withdrawal.

Project Purley member and Royal Berks. historian John Chapman, current Chairman of West Berkshire Council, laid a wreath at the War Memorial on behalf of the Council and spoke at a service in St Nicholas’ Church. He received a presentation from the Burma Star Association for his part in organising the day’s proceedings, during which the Association’s Standard was laid up in the church.

An exhibition in the Newbury Museum at the Wharf until 31st August included objects used by or captured by the Regiment in Burma. These were on loan from their permanent home at the Wardrobe Museum in The Close, Salisbury – the museum of the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment.