



## ARCHIVE UPDATE No 54

### PILGRIMAGE TO DUNKIRK

On the 26 May 1940 Edwin (Ted) South, the seventh child and youngest son of Samuel and Maud South, a sapper in the Royal Engineers, died of his wounds suffered in an air attack on the village of Les Moeres during the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force to Dunkirk. Enlisting in January 1940, Ted was in France by the end of the month as a member of 677 General Construction Company, an under-trained and ill-equipped Company of 258 men and 6 officers, under the command of Major Eric Cole. Their mission was to construct airstrips and repair bomb damage to existing airfields.

Sixty eight years later, in May 2008, a small group of family members (and friends) followed the route taken by Ted from the arrival of the Company in France to his last resting place in Dunkirk Town Cemetery. Using the History of the Company written by Major Cole in August 1940 and deposited in the Royal Engineers' archives, a bespoke tour was arranged with the War Research Society (Battlefield Tours).



The Party  
John Short (left); Ian Bowyer;  
Ken Barker, Chris South;  
Janet South; Mike Pegrum



Route through France taken by 677 General Construction Company

As a member of the Transport Section it is likely that Ted accompanied the advance party under Lieutenant Stead to France that sailed from Harwich to Calais on January 26 1940 in order to set-up temporary billets at Albert in cattle sheds and other farm buildings. The main body of the Company followed on 30 January sailing from Southampton to Le Havre and then by train to Albert railway station where they were met by the transport section and conveyed to their quarters.

After several days at Albert orders were received to proceed to Dieval and establish quarters at the site of the new airfield on the outskirts of the village. An encampment of Nissen huts, erected earlier by the Pioneer Corps, were occupied although at first conditions at the camp were poor. There was no fuel for the stoves in the huts and the boiler used for cooking had frozen and burst. Over the days following their arrival, the Company set about turning the site into a permanent camp. Trenches were dug to drain the water that had accumulated and materials, including picks and shovels, abandoned by the previous occupiers were salvaged. There was a shortage of equipment and the Company had arrived without surveying staffs, measuring tapes, saws, planes, chisels, rulers, screwdrivers or trowels; the only tools immediately available comprised a cook's saw and spanners from the vehicles' toolkits. Tools were improvised and purchased from the nearby village. Empty petrol cans were converted and used as fire buckets, trays, drains and flashings.

During the 3 months at Dieval parties of sappers from the Company were sent to repair and maintain other airfields. As a member of the transport section Ted would have become familiar with the roads of the area conveying men and materials to and from the sites. The normal routine was changed dramatically on 10 May 1940 when the German troops entered Belgium and Holland. Orders were received that General Construction Companies were to be regarded as infantry and Major Cole commented '*This was, of course, a shock at first, for the Company had not been trained as such, in fact had not fired a rifle as yet, even for practice*'. A decision was taken to evacuate the British forces through the port of Dunkirk. The Company diary graphically describes the confusion that followed in gathering the Company together and the move to Hondschoote nearer the coast where billets were arranged in empty houses, barns and farms. A further move was made to the small village Les Moeres 8 miles from Dunkirk where the company was given the task of defending the canal perimeter of the British foothold '*at all costs*'. It was during a German air attack on the village that Ted received his mortal wounds. First aid was given and he was taken by a passing ambulance to the hospital at Zuydcoote on the outskirts of Dunkirk where he died on 26 May 1940.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT TED SOUTH AND THE HISTORY OF 677 COMPANY CAN BE FOUND IN UPDATES 15 & 46

*'We arrived to everyone's surprise, at the time originally given, with the result we awaited at a siding until 6.30 hours, miserable in cold and rain...Lt. Stead appeared to meet us at 6.30 hours more dead than alive...'*

*Major Eric Cole*



Railway Station at Albert



Grand Place, Albert

*'HQ was set up in a stable centrally in Albert, guards mounted, whilst men paraded in the Grand Place to drill and be taught musketry.'*

*Major Eric Cole*

*'Within the next two or three days the whole Aerodrome had been surveyed and boundary pegs prepared for marking out. The runways and Taxi-tracks were set out as quickly as possible.'*

*Major Eric Cole*



Site of quarters and airfield outside Dieval



Café in Deival

*'I shall have a walk down sometime this afternoon...when I get down to the village I hope to get some Eggs & Chips and a slice or two of French Bread...'*

*Ted South*

*'[I was] taken ... to a position near the church when suddenly three or four bombers swept the whole street with machine gun fire and ....small High Explosives.'*  
*'In three or four minutes what had been a peaceful country village was reduced to comparative ruin and casualties were inflicted.'*

*Major Eric Cole*



Grand Place, Les Moeres – looking west



Grand Place, Les Moeres – looking east

*'Your son [Ted South] was hit ... on his chin, but whilst he must have been in pain he was endeavouring to assist others more seriously hurt...his courage was an example to us all'*

*Major Eric Cole*

*'...a French ambulance came by and our wounded taken on board'*

*Major Eric Cole*

*'.. the sad news reported by the Belgian Red Cross of the death of your husband Sapper E L South 1912550 Royal Engineers who died in hospital at Zuydcoote on the 26 May of last year'*

*British Red Cross*



Hospital entrance at Zuydcoote



Laying the wreath

1912550 SAPPER  
E. L. SOUTH  
ROYAL ENGINEERS  
26TH MAY 1940 AGE 24

YEARS WILL NOT DIM  
THOSE HAPPY MEMORIES OF HIM  
R.I.P.  
GWEN, MUM, DAD AND FAMILY

Dunkirk Town Cemetery

Plot 2 Row 20 Grave 26



Chris South (left); Ken Barker; John Short

## Dunkirk Trip 24-27 May 2008

Saturday 24 May 2008

Collected from London Colney at 7.30 am via Ashted to Dover arriving at 10.30 am and embarked on 12.40 pm ferry docking at Calais at 3.15 pm (French time) and passing site of the Field of the Cloth of Gold on journey to Vimy Ridge.

Vimy Ridge is site of major offensive undertaken by Canadian Forces in April 1917 and was visited by 677 Company as an Easter 'treat' in 1940. Walked through trench-lines of allied and German forces which were 50 yards apart at some places. Visited the memorial erected by Canadian Government to their 66,000 war dead which was unveiled by Edward VIII in 1936. The memorial has recently been refurbished and was re-opened by Queen Elizabeth in April 2007.

On journey to hotel stopped at Thiepval to visit the largest war memorial in the world designed by Edwin Lutyens and unveiled in 1932 to commemorate the 72,000 soldiers who fell in 1916 at the battle of the Somme and who have no known grave.

Arrived at Tabl Hotel, Cambrai, for over night stay.

Sunday 25 May 2008

Journey to Albert which was the first temporary billet for 677 Construction Company and visited the railway station where the troops de-trained to be met by the transport section and the town square where the Company was drilled.

Onwards to Doullens for coffee. The town was the venue of a meeting between the allied war leaders in March 1918 attended by the French President, Haig, Petain and Foch. Inspected ruined church of St Pierre.

Journey to the permanent billet at Dieval where airstrip was built and local enquiries by War Research Society had established possible location in the fields that had since reverted to agricultural use. No obvious traces of wartime activity although local football team continue to have a presence. Returned to bar in village for lunch and possibly establishment mentioned in Ted's letter.

Passed through Bethune and Rappel mentioned in diary on way to the airfield at Merville where Company was engaged in maintenance and bomb damage repairs. Local aero club holding open day and able to speak to local historian who explained that an airstrip had been constructed on land owned by a local nobleman and airplane pioneer with site subsequently taken over by military authorities.

To Ypres for hotel and return to town for ceremony at the Menin Gate which was attended by contingents, with brass band, of the Royal British Legion and the Sikh community.

Monday 26 May 2008

Re-tracing journey of Company on retreat from Dieval through Cassel, site of the 'Grand Old' Duke of York's march 'up the hill', to the temporary quarters at Hondschoote. Lunch in bar and conversation with elderly inhabitant.

Onwards to Les Moeres where Ted sustained his injuries. Isolated straight stretch of road with houses on either side for approx ¼ mile and limited cover. Visited local cemetery which has graves of other soldiers from the Company.

Then to the hospital at Zudycoote and Bray Dunes and The Mole from which Dunkirk evacuation was organised. Return to hotel.

Tuesday 27 May 2008

Departed hotel at 9 am and traveled to Dunkirk Town Cemetery – the last resting place of Ted South. Wreath laid by John and entries made in visitors' book.

Approach road to Calais harbour blockaded by French fisherman but able to board earlier ferry.

KLB 6/08