

Buckinghamshire in World War Two

Armed Forces

Joining Up

Once war was declared by England and France against Germany fighting forces in Buckinghamshire were mustered in the following ways:

Regular forces of army, navy and air force were immediately deployed and most sent to fight in France.

Territorial forces, that is men who had civilian jobs but in evenings or weekends undertook military training, were the first to be called up and sent to France.

Conscription began whereby all men over the age of 18 were called up to serve in one of the three military forces of army, navy and air force. Many volunteered at their local army bases, others waited to be officially called up by letter. This was a lengthy process and by no means all men entered the forces: some men were exempted because of their job (eg. farmers), some were not fit enough, others refused to fight on grounds of conscience.

The Second World War touched the lives of more people in this country than perhaps any other war in the preceding few centuries. People from every walk of life were sent all over the world or worked in places that but for the war they would have never experienced. Women were not involved in hand to hand fighting but were put to other vital work: all the forces had women's sections – the WAAF (Womens Auxiliary Air Force), the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the WRNS (Women Royal Navy Service). Others worked in munitions factories or joined the Land Army (See **A Farming County**). The Womens Voluntary Service (WVS) carried out vital roles in Evacuation and wartime relief.

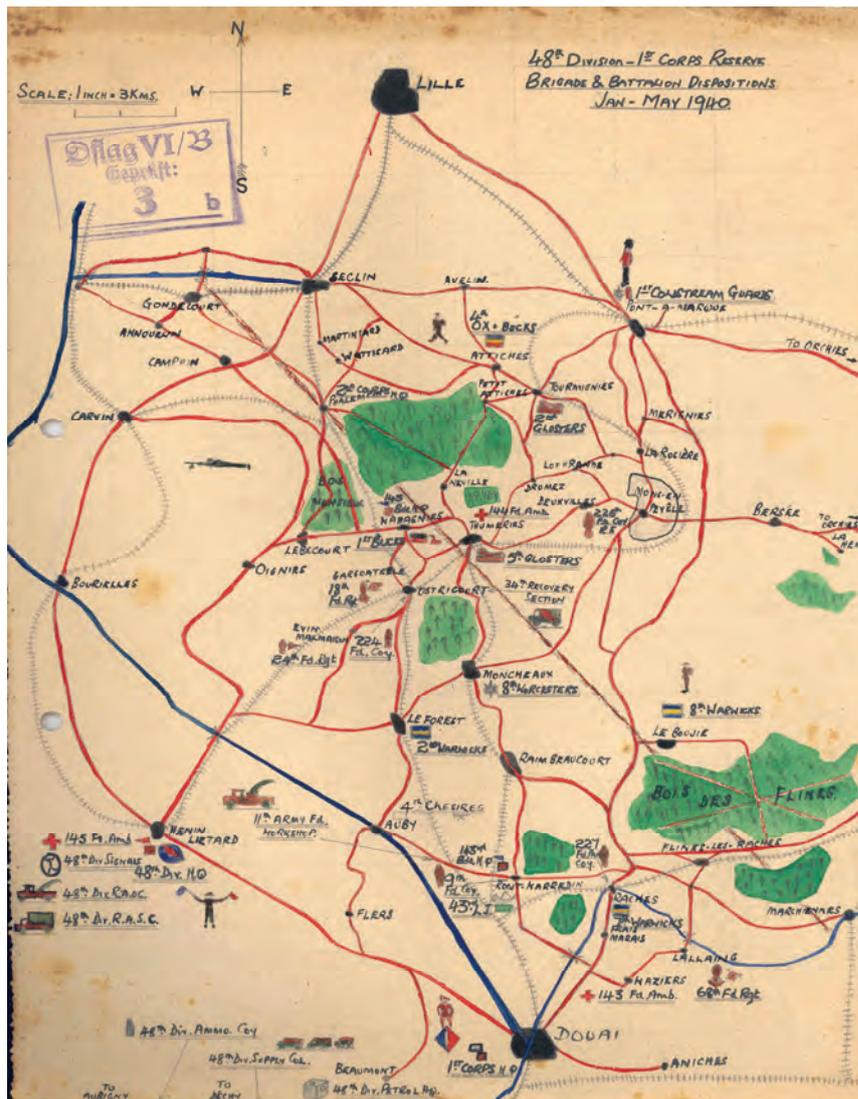
With the introduction of conscription men were posted to whatever regiment they were suited for and which needed manpower.

As the war progressed the Buckinghamshire regiments increasingly comprised non-Buckinghamshire people, and similarly men from Buckinghamshire served in regiments from all over the country. All the Bucks regiments played an important part in the war and fought at great cost; the defence of Hazebrouck in 1940 was commended even by the Germans as “truly worthy of the highest traditions of the British Army”.

The Territorial Army: The Buckinghamshire regiments

For many centuries in this country there had been reserves of local men with some military training who could be called upon at short notice in the time of war. Buckinghamshire supplied a mounted yeomanry regiment and two infantry regiments. By 1939 the yeomanry had become an artillery regiment and was known as the 99th Field Regiment Royal Artillery. The infantry regiments formed the Bucks battalions of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and had six companies in Buckinghamshire: Aylesbury, Amersham, Wolverton, Marlow, Slough and High Wycombe. Together they formed part of what was called the Territorial Army. In the run-up to war the numbers in the Territorial forces had increased greatly and once conscription started men from all over the country were added to the originally local regiments.

This attractive map shows the positions of British forces in Belgium in 1940 just prior to the retreat to Dunkirk. The Buckinghamshire Battalions were sent here after the outbreak of war this was probably drawn up by one of the soldiers. We do not know who drew it or when or why. However the POW camp stamp in the left corner suggests it was drawn by a soldier who became a prisoner of war. (ref AR 6/2002)



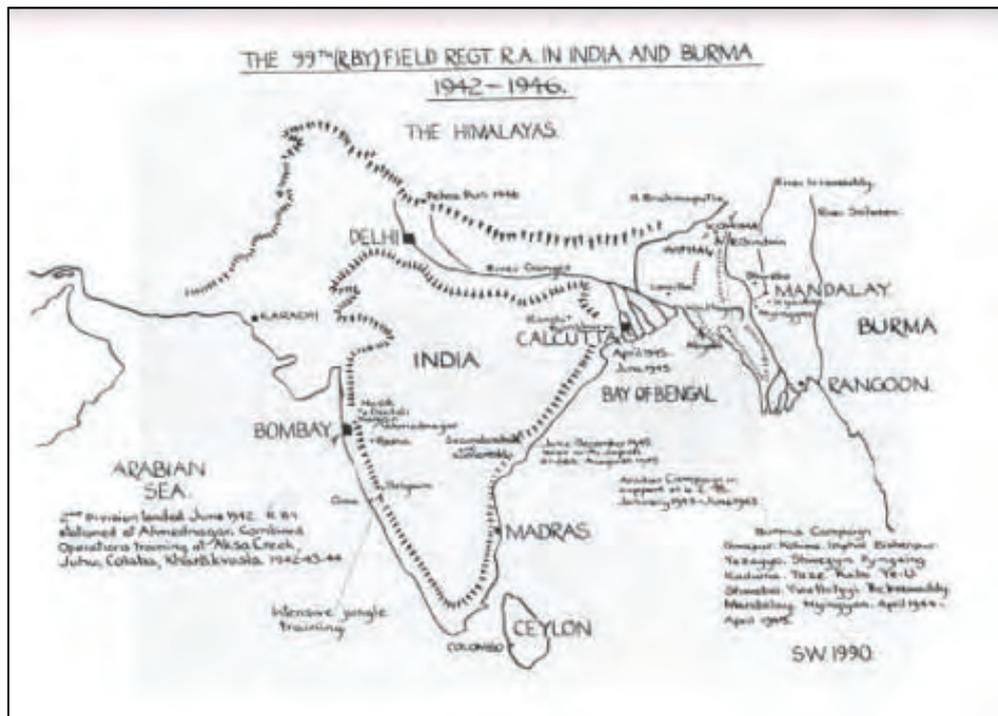
Hazebrouck and the 1st Buckinghamshire Battalion

In January 1940 the First Bucks Battalion was sent to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force which tried to help the French army prevent Hitler invading France. Until May they spent most of their time in Belgium digging defences and repairing roads, but once the German armies crossed into Belgium the British and French armies began to retreat. After several days of continual forced marching the 1st Bucks Battalion was given the job of defending the Belgian town of Hazebrouck. Hazebrouck lay at a strategic point on a major road through Belgium and the Battalion's job was to defend it in the hope of delaying the oncoming German troops. They took up positions at key points in the town on the 26th May and the German army arrived in strength the next day. They fought the German tanks and large number of German soldiers with little more than hand grenades and rifles. Their heroic defence bought the British army a vital 48 hours, but the Battalion was virtually destroyed. Their commanding officer, Major Heyworth, a 33 year old from Beaconsfield who had been working as a Treasury solicitor only a few months earlier, was killed in the fighting. Elliott Viney, a member of the family who ran the Hazell, Watson and Viney printing works in Aylesbury, took over command and only surrendered to the Germans once they had completely run out of ammunition. He and the troops with him spent the rest of the war as prisoners in camps in Germany and Poland. Other survivors managed to make it to Dunkirk and were rescued from there with the remainder of the British army. Back in England the Battalion was reconstituted at Hereford and its numbers built up with new recruits. In August 1940 only one third of its members were from Buckinghamshire.

*Hazebrouck. 27th May 22.00 hours.
After this hour the town can be said to have been in the possession of the enemy and it is not possible to speak of the "Battalion's" activities any more until June 5th when the survivors of the Hazebrouck engagement began to assemble at Hereford. It has however been possible to obtain accounts of their doings from a number of Officers who came back and these are attached as appendices. Of the fate of Bn.HQ little is known and from accounts it appears that they were subjected to heavy shellfire and were surrounded. The building in which they were located was strong and the chances that a considerable number survived the shelling are fair. From reports that have come in it seems that the enemy were taking prisoners and there is a prospect that many Bn. HQ personnel may still be in enemy hands.*

*(signed) Hugh Saunders.
Capt.Adjt.
1st.Bucks.Bn.Oxf&Bucks.Lt.Infty.*

Extract from the War Diary of Hugh Saunders recording the capitulation of Hazebrouck made on his return to England. This official report shows that they had no idea of what had happened to many of those left, whether they were dead or alive. (AR 6/2002)



Map showing the postings of the 99th Field Artillery in India and Burma, 1942-46 (From *Strike Home- The Royal Bucks Yeomanry, 1794-1967* by Steve White, 1995)

Brief Chronology of the Buckinghamshire regiments during WWII

1st Bucks Battalion

- Jan. 1940 sent to France
- 26-28 May 1940 Defence of Hazebrouck
- August 1940 Anti-invasion duties in Devon
- Nov 1941 Moved to Lincolnshire
- Mar 1943 Selected for training as a Beach Group
- 6 June 1944 Landed at SWORD beach in Normandy as part of the No.6 Beach Group in the D-Day landings
- June 1944 Part of the defence of Ouistreham
- February 1945 Designated a Target Force battalion designed to seize and hold installations of special interest.
- August 1946 Disbanded

2nd Bucks Battalion

- Jan-June 1940 Part of the Portsmouth Garrison Reserve
- June 1940 Northern Ireland
- Feb 1943 Returned to England and participated in Home Guard "BUZZ" exercises
- July 1944 Disbanded

99th Field Artillery (formerly the Royal Bucks Yeomanry)

- Jan 1940 Sent to France and proceeded to Nomain in Belgium
- May 1940 retreat through Belgium and France
- June 1940 Evacuated from Dunkirk and reconstituted at Halifax, Yorkshire
- June 1940-March 1942 Anti-invasion duties in North Yorkshire
- March 1942 Embarked for India
- Jan 1943- Based in India they fought in Burma against the Japanese until the end of the war.
- May-June 1944 Fought in the Battle of Kohimo, a decisive victory forcing the Japanese for the first time into retreat across Buma and south-

east As



Photograph of men from Hazell, Watson and Viney Printing works who served in the Bucks Regiments. (From *With the Colours* D/HWV)

Those who died in the war

There is no figure of how many from Buckinghamshire died on Active Service during World War II. Families were informed by telegram of missing or dead relations.

After the war villages, churches, factories etc. clubbed together to raise plaques to those from their community who had perished fighting for their country. These were often added to existing memorials raised after the First World War.

In Buckinghamshire there are over 500 such war memorials. Those who died are still remembered on November 11th each year on Remembrance Day.

The Commonwealth war graves Commission has a website on which most men and women who died in the war as a result of enemy action can be traced –

www.cwgc.org

A database of purely Buckinghamshire people who died in both wars and material about war memorials in the county is being compiled and can be found at

www.buckinghamshireremembers.org.uk



Remembrance day service around the war memorial at Gt. Marlow, c.1960
(phMarlow433)

A POW at Eichstatt

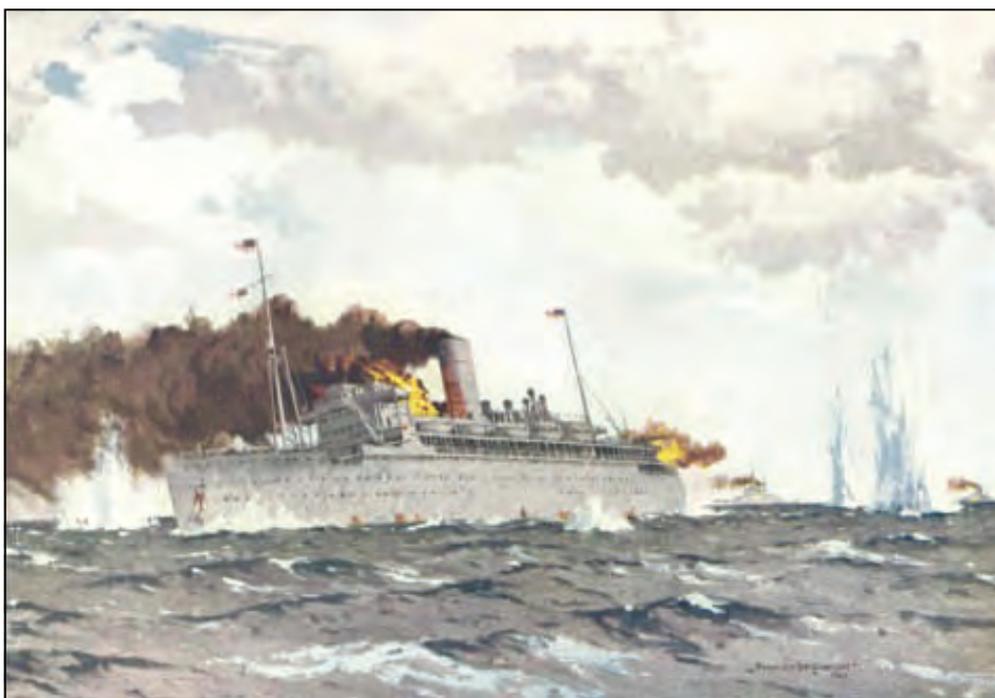
Having been captured at Hazebrouck in May 1940 Elliott Viney, later a director of the Aylesbury printers Hazell, Watson and Viney, spent the remainder of the war in German POW camps. Most of his time was at Offlag VIIB at Eichstatt in Bavaria. About 2000 POW's were held there and despite conditions he ran a library and organised professional courses of all kinds, exams coming by post from Switzerland. He also edited a POW magazine which was printed in a neighbouring town and an example of which is shown (right). (D/X 801/46/1)

The sinking of the *Rawalpindi*

Being so far from the sea, Buckinghamshire had little connection with naval operations. Many, however, enlisted for the navy including EC Kennedy from Farnham Royal. He was in fact a retired naval officer but volunteered his services when war broke out and was given charge of a P & O cruiser which had been re-fitted as an armed merchant cruiser.



While patrolling the Iceland-Faroes Channel the *Rawalpindi* found herself sandwiched between two of Germany's largest warships, the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. Despite being outgunned and outclassed, the *Rawalpindi* fought bravely and was believed to have inflicted severe damage to the German warships. Inevitably the vessel was hit and sank and most of the crew, including Kennedy, perished. The account of the ship's refusal to surrender and brave fight was widely reported in the newspapers and tribute was paid in the House of Commons. A memorial plaque to him was unveiled in St. John's church, Farnham Royal in 1947.



Painting of the last fight of the *Rawalpindi* on 29th September 1939 by Norman Wilkinson (D/X 113/58)