

## **Operation Nightingale - the recovery of people, not just artefacts, through archaeology.**

9<sup>th</sup> November 2015

This lecture was billed as being given by Diarmaid Walshe, RAMC but our speaker for the evening was Sgt Percival, an Instructor at RAF Cosford, who was well up to the task!

Report by David Black

Operation Nightingale was developed in partnership by the The Rifles, the British Army's largest regiment, and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), which manages and maintains MOD land and property. The project arose from a discussion between Richard Osgood, Senior Historic Advisor within (DIO), and Sgt. Diarmaid Walshe of 1st Battalion, The Rifles.

Sgt. Walshe, who was responsible for the medical care and treatment of soldiers, including injured personal returned from operations overseas, had identified a growing need for some form of occupational therapy and recovery. He was looking for a pastime that could help restore fitness confidence and self-esteem to the wounded, and felt that archaeology ticked all the right boxes. The DIO was supportive because archaeology promised an additional practical benefit: it could help in the management of the many historic monuments on MOD land!

The Operation Nightingale project was developed to utilise both the technical and social aspects of field archaeology to help in the recovery and skill development of soldiers injured in conflict; mainly, but not exclusively, in Afghanistan. The project helps injured soldiers (physically and mentally) to either return to their regiment or prepare for civilian life. It aims to equip participants with choices for their future careers and life path, and demonstrates that they have skills and talents. It gives them work experience and employment prospects. Put simply, the aim of Operation Nightingale is "getting guys back into society through archaeology" and "the guys love it."

It might seem strange to try and use archaeology in this way but there is a close correlation between the skills required by the modern soldier and those of the professional archaeologist. These skills include surveying, geophysics (for ordnance recovery), scrutiny of the ground (for improvised explosive devices), site and team management, mapping, navigation and the physical ability to cope with hard manual work (the army is good at digging holes!) often in dreadful weather conditions.

[The Army has a track record in Archaeology. It may not be widely recognised by the general public, but many of the founding fathers of modern archaeology were senior figures within the British Army; including Lt-General Pitt Rivers, and Brigadier Mortimer Wheeler].

Sgt Percival outlined some of the more notable dig sites that Operation Nightingale has been involved with.

### **Barrow Clump, on Salisbury Plain.**

An Anglo-Saxon Burial Mound called Barrow Clump contained burials that were being destroyed by badgers that were digging their setts within the softer infill of the graves. Operation Nightingale was given the special task of conducting an excavation to rescue the graves that hadn't yet been destroyed and to assess what damage had been done. This excavation was conducted with the support of Wessex Archaeology

over three summers, starting in 2012. One of the diggers subsequently went on to work for Wessex Archaeology and another is studying for a degree in archaeology.

### **Exercise Mars Tablet, at Vindolanda.**

Under the supervision of experienced Vindolanda archaeologists, the team has excavated part of the late 4th Century barrack blocks within the south east quadrant of the last stone fort, which has ten layers of occupation.

### **Exercise Bateleur Eagle, Holme Fen, Cambridgeshire**

This most recent excavation, carried out in association with Oxford Archaeology East, commenced with a geophysical survey (both GPR and metal detecting) that located the wreckage of a Spitfire flown by Pilot Officer Harold Penketh.

P.O. Penketh, with just 14 hours' experience on Spitfires, had been taking part in a battle intercept climb to high altitude with two other Spitfires from 266 Squadron at RAF Wittering when the accident happened on November 22 1940. The cause of the crash was thought to be a failure of the pilot's oxygen system, which would have rendered him unconscious.

RAF Engineers took the best part of a week to recover pilot's body which was taken for burial in his home town of Brighton, but most of the remains of the plane, which had plummeted vertically into the ground at high speed, were left behind in the peat bog.

The team first had to dig down 1 metre into the fen before they found the excavation hole left by the RAF recovery team. They were surprised by the good state of preservation of the finds, which included leather boots, woollen gloves and flying jacket. There were lots of bullets. Penketh had been on a combat mission, a flight intended to intercept enemy aircraft – not on a training flight. Some of the bullets had “cooked off”, caused by the fire that occurred on impact, but most were almost pristine, with the maker's name and year of manufacture clearly readable. After three days digging they found the tip of the propeller, which implied that the engine was still there – and “then they started finding bits of Harold” (see **Note**). This was unexpected and changed everything. Some of the diggers had to be taken out of the trench and assigned to other tasks. The Police were contacted, and they closed down the dig until a coroner gave permission to carry on with the recovery. They subsequently recovered the Merlin engine, still recognisable, and Harold's flying helmet.

### **Lessons Learned**

Sgt Percival rounded off his talk by setting out some of the lessons that had been learned.

- Use the web and social media to keep contact with participants
- Use plain English, not military terminology
- Make them a key part of the project
- Don't treat them as “trowel fodder”
- Listen to what they want as regards training and skills.

**Note.** Back in 1940 it was normal procedure for RAF recovery teams to claim that they had recovered a body when they had only managed to recover as little as 15% of the body parts.