



PROBUS RECORDER



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM, DORSET
(www.probus-gillingham-dorset.org.uk)

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Chairman's Notes

You will wish to know that on the 28th January three of our members, together with their wives, joined Yeovil Probus Club for their New Year lunch at an Italian restaurant in Yeovil. We were made most welcome and enjoyed each other's company as well as an excellent meal. We look forward to hosting a return visit later in the year.

On the home front, Roger Ellis has unfortunately resigned as Secretary at very short notice, but Colin Chamberlain has kindly volunteered to take on the role in addition to arranging our lunches. On that score, this month's lunch at the Walnut Tree was very good indeed and our thanks go to Colin for its success.

As mentioned at previous meetings, and in the Recorder, the position of Welfare Officer remains unfilled. I appreciate that currently we remain a men's club, but unless a volunteer comes forward, we may have no alternative but to accept the kind offer of a member who would be willing temporarily to front the task – but only with his wife's assistance.

Andrew

WELFARE & SOCIAL

Welfare

Please note the final paragraph of our Chairman's Notes above.

Social - March Club Events

4th March 2025 (Men only)	Custer's Last Stand - 1876 <i>James Porter</i>
18th March 2025 (Wives/Partners)	Darwin, Fitzroy & The Voyage of HMS Beagle <i>Dr James Taylor</i>
	Members' Lunch <i>The Plough Inn, Manston</i> <i>12.30 for 1pm</i>



FEBRUARY TALKS

4th February 2025

THE PEENEMÜNDE RAID 17TH/18TH AUGUST 1943

John Smith

4th February 2025

John Smith provided an interesting talk on Operation Hydra, the RAF raid on the V1 and V2 missile development works at Peenemünde in North-eastern Germany in August 1943. He illustrated his talk with models of the aircraft involved and included some fascinating insights into the tactics of Bomber Command and the German counter measures.



Peenemünde is a small port on the mouth of the River Peene flowing into the Baltic in north-eastern Germany, close to the modern-day border with Poland. The area around it was used as the German Army's research station to develop new weapons: the rocket propelled V1 flying bomb and the V2 ballistic missile. A V3 supergun was also planned but had not been developed by the end of the war. The V1 with a newly developed turbojet engine dropped and detonated when its fuel supply ran out. These "Doodlebugs" first landed on London in June 1944. They were unguided and erratic, but their unpredictability terrorised civilian populations. The V2, first deployed in September 1944, was the prototype ballistic rocket, a much more sophisticated weapon. It was launched into space and dropped without warning onto its target. The RAF raid on Peenemünde was designed to destroy German capability to develop these weapons.





Based on various strands of intelligence, the British identified Peenemünde as the site of secret weapons development and launched **Operation Hydra**, a massive bombing raid that took place on the night of 17/18 August 1943. 596 heavy bombers (Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters) took part in the raid in three waves, targeting the accommodation blocks housing the scientists and workers on the site, the experimental works, and the weapon production lines. The nature of the target was kept

secret and only revealed to aircrew in the pre-operation briefing room, behind locked and guarded doors. To increase precision, the pilots were ordered to fly at 7-9,000 feet, rather than the normal altitude of 18-19,000 feet. Unusually, the raid was coordinated by a Master Bomber, Group Captain John Searby, who carried out his task whilst circling over the target. A squadron of Mosquitoes was sent as a diversion towards Berlin and the first wave of bombers encountered relatively little anti-aircraft fire. However, by the time of the third wave German night fighters had been deployed and the RAF suffered heavy losses. It was the first time the Germans used their *Schräge Musik* - upward-firing cannons fitted to the ME Bf 110s. These attacked the vulnerable and undefended undersides of the bombers. As a result, forty RAF aircraft were shot down, a loss rate of 6.7% of the force that had been dispatched. 243 airmen were killed, and others became POWs.



Extensive damage was done on the ground, but later assessments of the effectiveness of the raid downplayed its success. Only two of the top scientists were killed and the damage done to the rocket development programme was not decisive. Some of the marker flares had drifted off target in strong winds and the German smoke screen was quite effective. Moreover, 600 slave labourers were killed by “friendly fire” when their prison camp was hit.



The Americans launched a further raid on Peenemünde a year later. The raid caused more comprehensive damage, but by this time many of the V weapons had been dispersed. It was thought later that the RAF raid had delayed the deployment of the V weapons by only two to three months. However, setting the German weapons programme back by two months did save lives. The toll of deaths and injuries from V1s and V2s, when

they were launched against Britain in 1944 was 4,900 a month. At the time there was also considerable concern among the Allies that the Germans’ deployment of new weapons would disrupt the Allied landings in Europe. The delay caused by the Peenemünde raid meant that the invasion of France was well advanced by the time the V weapons were introduced.

The most engaging Probus talks are those that trigger thoughts in the listeners beyond the content of the talk. And so here are three thoughts that occurred to your Scribe.

- Firstly, the V weapon programme demonstrates just how technologically advanced the Nazis were in devising new means of delivering destruction to their enemies. This was not lost on the Americans, who, when the war ended, spirited away Wernher von Braun and other rocket scientists who had worked at Peenemünde to develop their own rocket programme. The knowledge that the Germans were also working on nuclear fission, as well as the delivery mechanism for a bomb, introduced a further element of urgency in the race to produce an atom bomb.
- Secondly, the bombing campaign in the Second World War was a hit and miss affair. Bomber Command was not an instrument of precision. Its tactic was one of indiscriminate carpet bombing of urban areas, as much targeted at damaging civilian morale as destroying the enemy's productive capacity. The Peenemünde raid, the largest RAF attack on a single target in WW2, was notable for its inaccuracy as much as its scale.
- A third thought is the precariousness of the lives of aircrew and their incredible bravery. WW2 bombers were not built for comfort, and they were extremely vulnerable. Once in position, the crew could not easily get out in an emergency. The prospect of being hit by flack, shot down by night fighters or colliding in mid-air with other aircraft was very real. And yet the crews went out night after night, never knowing if it was their turn not to get home.



The Chairman thanked John for his very interesting talk. After inviting questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines

18th February 2025

D51 'DEBORAH' – OPERATION FINAL REST

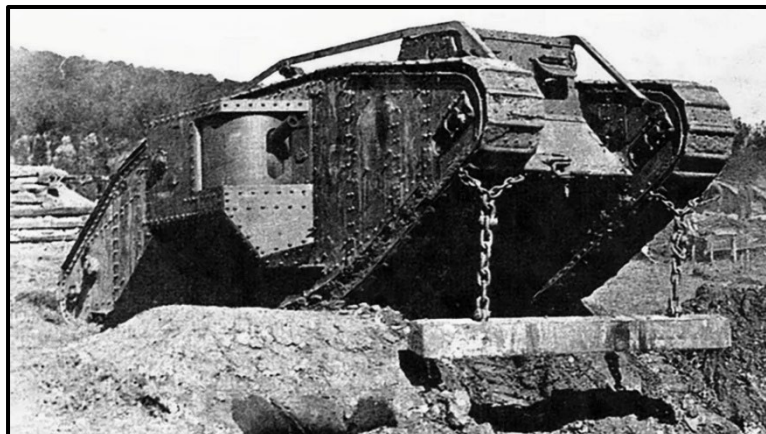
Roger Weeks
Mayor of Gillingham
18th February 2025



Roger Weeks, Mayor of Gillingham and a former Warrant Officer in the Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers (REME) gave a talk on the task of moving a WWI tank from a barn to a museum within in the village of Flesquières in Northern France.

Roger Weeks explained that he had been a soldier in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers Corps (REME) and had led an interesting career, mainly with Airborne Forces, which, as he put it, involved parachuting out of aeroplanes with a spanner and a screwdriver. Recovering from an accident towards the end of his Regular career, he was posted to a Reserve Unit - 118 Recovery Company of 104 Battalion REME based in Northampton. As he put it, not unkindly, the unit consisted of enthusiastic amateurs who despite being “part time” soldiers, showed considerable commitment in giving up their weekends and holidays to serve the Army. Roger explained that at the time he joined the unit, he looked forward to his job as being a useful, quiet prelude to his retirement, which would also bring his Army pension.

What he didn't know was that his Commanding Officer was to have a bright idea – undertaking the task of moving the long-decaying remains of a WWI tank, which was made even more interesting by being located not in the UK, but at Flesquières in Northern France where it had ended its life in WWI. This is approximately 5 kilometres south-west of Cambrai and about 5 kilometres south of the main road (N30) from Cambrai to Bapaume. As Roger discovered very quickly, this ‘bright idea’ had already developed with the backing of the major firm of Alvis, a Defence contractor, and a plan was drawn up to move the tank from the farmyard in which it was currently rusting away to a barn at the other end of the village. The tank concerned was a Mark IV which started out looking like this.



The Mk IV tank had a crew of seven. It was slow moving with a maximum speed of 4 mph and was extremely uncomfortable due to noise and the fumes from the engine. D51 was referred to as female (tanks were popularly classified as male or female depending on the type of weapons they had). The name 'Deborah' was a later designation bestowed by the Mayor of Flesquières, Phillipe Gorczynski, whose girlfriend had been called Deborah. On 20 November 1917, D51 was hit by German artillery and disabled. Five crew members died that day.

The tank D51 'Deborah' had been involved during the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917 in the attack on the German Hindenburg Line, a series of heavily defended fortifications. The attack was not the first time tanks had been used on the Western Front, but it was notable here, because of the rapid advances made on the first day. The tanks had assisted a British breakthrough after months of stalemate. Unfortunately the initial advances were not sustained. Indeed, soon afterwards, the Germans launched the biggest counterattack against the British Expeditionary Force since 1914. However, through the use of tanks, combined with precision artillery bombardment, the advance into Flesquières demonstrated their potential for making warfare more mobile.



Following the end of WWI, the wrecked tank, covered in mud and vegetation, had rusted for most of the next 80 years. At some stage it had been moved to a small walled farmyard. The task of removing the 23-ton carcass was complicated by its cramped position in the farmyard, the narrowness of the village streets through which it had to be transported, the presence of low overhead electricity and telephone cables, and the tightness of the entrance to the barn in which the tank was to be installed. This was a barn which was being converted into a Museum to commemorate the 1914-18 war.



Further technical complexities related to the limitations of the equipment available to the soldiers. This consisted of Foden recovery vehicles, and Scammell EXEs plus a trailer. The



Foden

Foden's maximum lifting weight was 12.5 tons, and this reduced hugely to 4.5 tons with the boom extended. These heavy trucks were notoriously difficult to manoeuvre, with a wide turning circle on full lock. The Scammell EXE was an old lorry, and the



Scammell

trailer was not big enough for the intended load - it had only a 15-ton limit. The 23-ton tank would stick out on all sides. In addition, there was a very tight time constraint. The whole task had to be completed in a single weekend because the part-time soldiers had to return to their day-jobs immediately after the weekend. Adding to the pressure, there was considerable public interest in the local area and high political expectations in an act of international cooperation between old allies. Furthermore there was a great deal of media

attention; the operation to move the wreck was to be filmed by Sky TV.

All Roger's instincts were telling him that the job could not be done. His worst fears were of damaging buildings or getting the tank stuck in the middle of the village as a permanent memorial to misjudgement and failure. On a planning visit to the site he told the assembled local dignitaries that the constraints appeared insuperable. However, after a visit to the graves of the D51 crew members in the local cemetery, Roger was struck forcefully by the bravery and sacrifice of the crew members of D51. As a result he bowed to the weight of expectation and agreed honour the crew members by giving the task a try.

The operation did not go without a hitch. Removing the wreck from the walled farmyard with inadequate equipment was just the start of the problem. There was an outline overall plan, but expediency became the order of the day and most of the decisions were made 'on the hoof'. Through a combination of skill, ingenuity and luck, the team of reservists, some of whom were lorry drivers in civilian life, succeeded in transporting the load through the narrow streets of the village, with inches to spare. They even had to raise overhead cables with the help of broom-handles. The final challenge involved manoeuvring the trailer through the barn doors that were at right-angles to the adjoining road and depositing the load onto a plinth inside the cramped confines of the space available in the Museum. At one point, one of the heavy Fodens was even leaning against the brick wall of the barn, threatening to bring the whole building down. But by some miracle the tank was lifted, winched and man-handled into position. The heavy equipment was extracted from the barn and the reservists returned to UK in time to resume their day-jobs on Monday morning.

Today the wreck of D51 stands as a focal exhibit of the Museum commemorating the awful hostilities that devastated the region a Century ago. It is a testament to the lives of those who died. The operation to move D51 (Deborah) is testament to the group's willingness to attempt the impossible and to soldier-on against all the odds.



The Chairman thanked Stephen for his very interesting talk, and after inviting questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines

N.B. SHOULD YOU WISH TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ACTION AT FLESQUIÈRES AND D51'S PART IN IT, THE STORY CAN BE 'SEEN' [HERE](#) ON YOUTUBE. (Ed.)



ENDPIECE (Editor)



We're all feeling the pinch these days.

