



remembrance ni

## Belfast gunners died defending London in Blitz



The War Memorial and Roll of Honour of the 8th (Belfast) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery, are in Belfast Cathedral

**The 8th (Belfast) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery (Supplementary Reserve), was founded in the wake of the Munich crisis, and recruited mainly in the spring of 1939 from young men of the city and district of Belfast.**

The regiment was mobilised and at action stations, manning its guns in readiness to defend Belfast, before war was declared on September 3, 1939.

In October, the regiment left for practice camp in Cornwall, and thence to France where it joined the BEF before Christmas, in a middle of a bitterly cold winter.

Following the German invasion of the Low Countries on May 10, 1940, all units were soon in action, but the fortunes of war resulted in evacuation from Dunkirk, Cherbourg, St. Malo and other ports during late May and early June.

One troop successfully brought back four of its 3.7 AA guns and some vital gunnery instruments despite having received orders to blow them up.

Back in England, the regiment was soon in action again during the Battle of Britain and task of defending against the 'Blitz'

After training in Blackpool, they departed for Coventry, Plymouth, and Wolverhampton. By September 1940, the regiment had concentrated on London as enemy attacks intensified. On 2nd October 1940, they helped extinguish around 2,000 incendiary bombs burning the Harrow School.

On dates between 8th and 16th October 1940, Luftwaffe bombs fell on the regiment's barracks. Three men died and twelve more sustained injuries in these attacks.

**Gunner Robert Crawford** (1473864) served in the 21st Battery, 8th (Belfast) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment. He was born in 1914 in the Shankill area of Belfast, Co. Antrim and was the son of Jane Skillen.

In the 8th (Belfast) HAA, he saw action with the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk, France. In December 1939, the regiment occupied themselves with the defence of the port of Le Havre. 21st Battery moved to Arras, deployed there in May 1940. By then, fighting was intense and German tanks and machine guns surrounded Crawford's battery near St. Valery.

The gunner died on 13th October 1940 aged 26 years old. Robert Crawford's grave is in Belfast City Cemetery, Glenalina Extension. His headstone bears the inscription: Manly and brave, his young life he gave. In silence, we remember. His name is on the Roll of Honour which is displayed before the Regimental Memorial in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast.

**Gunner Thomas Wright Lannigan** (1475147) served in 21st Battery, 8th (Belfast) HAA during World War Two. Born on 22nd September 1906, he was the son of Robert John Lannigan and Jane Stranaghan Lannigan (née McCullough) of Belfast.

Robert and Jane had five children, Andrew Lannigan born in 1904, Isabella Lannigan born in 1908, Robert Lannigan born in 1911, Daniel Lannigan born in 1912, Hugh Lannigan born in 1915, and Thomas. Thomas also had at least one half-brother, Wallace Jordan Ferguson born on 12th June 1923.

The 1911 Irish Census records Thomas and his family living at 24 Disraeli Street, Shankill, in the house of Hugh McKay

and Isabella McKay. During the Second World War, three of Thomas' brothers served in the British Army and one brother served in the Royal Air Force.

On 16th October 1933, Thomas married Isabella Todd in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast. Isabella died two years later on 26th June 1935. He later married 22 year old Alma Reynolds in St. Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, Co. Antrim on 16th December 1935.

In July 1939, Thomas Lannigan joined the territorial army in Belfast, Co. Antrim. After training, he joined 8th (Belfast) HAA. Regiment, Royal Artillery. In 1940, 21st Battery fought in the rearguard during the retreat from Dunkirk.

The Belfast-born Gunner died as a result of enemy action in Middlesex, England on 16th November 1940 aged 34 years old.

His funeral took place on 20th November 1940 at a burial plot belonging to Mary Anna Todd Fee. At his time of death, Thomas' given address was 23 Disraeli Street, Belfast, Co. Antrim. He spent leave time there with his mother Jane Ferguson six weeks before he died. His grave is in Belfast City Cemetery, Glenalina Extension.

**Gunner Robert Robinson** (1465720) served in the 8th (Belfast) HAA. Regiment, Royal Artillery. Family and friends in Belfast knew him as "Charlie", he served in 21st Battery, which saw action in Dunkirk, France in 1940.

Born in 1907, he was the son of John Robinson and Maria Robinson of Shankill Road, Belfast. He was the husband of Sophia Robinson also from Belfast.

Gunner Robinson died on active service in London, on the night of 13<sup>th</sup> -14th October 1940 aged 33 years old. At the time, 8th (Belfast) HAA had a base at Clapham Common in the British capital. Records show Luftwaffe bombs falling in the area during the first two weeks of October 1940.

Robert Robinson's grave is in Belfast City Cemetery, Glenalina Extension.

**Gunner Ernest Tinsley (1456311)** served in 21st Battery 8th (Belfast) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment during World War Two. He died on 22nd November 1940 aged 33 years

Belfast-born Ernest Tinsley was the son of Agnes Tinsley. He was the husband of J Tinsley of Belfast. Ernest's grave is in Belfast City Cemetery, Glenalina Extension.

### **Belfast gunner survived the Coventry blitz**

**Sergeant George Herbert Menary** served as a gunner with 21st Battery, 8th (Belfast) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment. He saw action in 1940 with the British Expeditionary Force and as part of the evacuation from Dunlirk in 1941.

In 1940, he received a promotion to Bombardier while based in Coventry during the Luftwaffe's Blitz on major UK cities. One year later, in 1941, another promotion came, this time to Sergeant.

After serving in Europe and the United Kingdom, Menary found himself in India and Burma where he was Pay Sergeant for 21st Battery. He died on 01/04/1949

He was born on 22/11/1906 in Belfast. George Herbert Menary's grave is in Dundonald Cemetery

## **After the blitz Burma**

After their duty in England, in the spring of 1942, the regiment embarked for the Far East in the Belfast-built liner RMS "Britannic," and after a long voyage finally reached Bombay. The guns and equipment disembarked at Karachi and both elements assembled at Lahore before driving some 2,000 miles in convoy down the Grand Turk Road to Calcutta. Action stations were taken up there, and later in East Bengal, before moving south to join XV Corps in Burma.

For two and a half years the regiment took part in the Arakan campaigns, firing effectively against the Japanese Air Force and even more extensively against ground targets when their accuracy at long range earned them the nickname "The Twelve Mile Snipers." Some elements took part in the famous battle of the "Admin Box" at Ngakyedouk ("Okeydoke") Pass, and several officers and men received awards for gallantry following this heroic stand which proved to be the turning point in the Arakan.

## **Acknowledgments**

Lt Colonel Murray Barnes

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at [houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com](mailto:houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com)

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