

CZECHS AND CHECKERS

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The first Czechoslovak soldiers in England during the Second World War

This article is based on text and photographs supplied by Heinz Vogel

Following the invasion of the remaining parts of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 (Bohemia and Moravia), Czechoslovaks started to escape from the country in earnest – people feeling threatened by the Nazis, and others who just wanted to fight for the liberation of their country.

BIRCHINGTON-ON-SEA, KENT

Of those finding refuge in England, those anxious to volunteer for an army or air force to fight their enemy, gathered together in a smart mansion called Beaconsfield in Birchington-on-Sea, with the assistance of the Czechoslovak Welfare Association in England.

Their numbers grew until by the spring of 1940 the house was filled with about three dozen men waiting to be called. They named the house “The First Czechoslovakian Home and put up a plaque to that effect on the gate pillar outside, in Alpha Road.

Under their leader, Richard Pollak, these Czechoslovak Soldiers kept themselves fit while waiting for the Call, and did their best to be of assistance to the local community. Their Male Voice Choir and Gymnasts / Actors also took part in various publicity and fund-raising events.

The men participated in a Czechoslovak Social evening in King George’s Hall, London, on the 27th / 28th February 1940 under the patronage of Dr Edvani Benez, then best known as Second President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. All things considered they led a happy, useful life there – some of them in the company of other family members, accommodated in ‘digs’ in the village.

In due course, however, the Call came and they left Birchington for France on the 7th May 1940, to join their comrades who had been forming a brigade in the French Army at Agde, near Béziers, in the south of France.

Two Infantry Regiments were forming there, with a total of some 6,000 officers and men; 2,262 in the First Regiment and 2,593 in the Second Regiment. On the 5th June, two days after the last men of the British Army had been evacuated from Dunkirk, these two regiments were called upon to enter the war in time to join the French Army in its rearguard retreat southwards. Their orders were to attempt to hold the enemy at every major river on the way.

RETREAT & EVACUATION

The first troops of the First Infantry Regiment left Camp Agde on the 7th June for Auxicourt, Cote-d’Or, about 20 km south east of Troyes and 10 km north of Châtillon-sur-Seine. All troops arrived in position by June 9th. On the 11th June they were ordered to leave Auxicourt to join the 23rd (French) Infantry Division (11th June) on the retreat from the Battle of the Somme and by now of the Aisne.

There, the Division was put on reserve, with its Headquarters at Oisser, north of Meaux, Seine-et-Marne, while the rest of the tired, ill-equipped, outnumbered men of the 7th Army took up defensive positions along the Oise, Novelle, Omer and Morin.

By the 17th June the 1st Infantry Regiment retreated to the Coulommiers area, owing to developments elsewhere. The following day the two battalions were positioned at Coulommiers to defend the Grand Morin River, with one battalion being kept back in reserve. This was their first encounter with the enemy, whom they resisted all day until being obliged to retreat late in the evening.

From then on the pattern was set with re-positioning and retreats for the next 10 days, until they reached Nantran, in the Dordogne on the 23rd June - that is nearly one week after the French surrender and the establishment of the Vichy puppet government on the 17th June. However, their luck – for what it was – held out and at Nantran they entrained for Narbonne, from whence they covered the last 65 kms to Agde and Sète by foot.

They were eventually evacuated on the 27th June on some of the last boats to leave for England – a tortuous journey via the Middle East and Gibraltar, arriving at last at Liverpool on 13th July.

Having landed in the UK, the Czechoslovak Army re-assembled in a camp set up in Cholmondeley Park, near Malpas in Cheshire, to re-form and join the British Army, in which they were ultimately going to take part in the liberation of Europe in general and Czechoslovakia in particular.

BEACONSFIELD HOUSE TODAY

As for Beaconsfield House, having been converted into three (it is in fact four) separate dwellings, divided by high shrubs and fences, it is barely recognisable and inconspicuous – only the word “Beaconsfield” engraved on one of the remaining gate posts and the bevelled edges on the pavement outside where the driveways were, hints at a greater past.

[The house is now no: 25, 27, 29 and 31 Alpha Road]