

White Spear and Francisca Spider Fire - Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th March 1962

Thanks to Graham Keogh Francisca Troop Sep 60 to Apr 63 for these photos



Extract from Daily Mirror and Daily Sketch - Monday 12 Mar 62 - thanks to Harry Beresford

Young soldiers die in camp

BOY HERO OF
'SPIDER' BLAZE



Jr. R.S.M. John Wraith . . . hero.



DEAD: John Albiston, aged 16, of Aberdeen.



DEAD: John Ball, 16, of Peterborough.

By CHRISTOPHER MORRIS
TWO boy soldiers were burned to death in a "spider block" camp blaze yesterday.

Flames shooting 100ft. high trapped them in a drying room.

The death blaze was at the Royal Signals' Junior Leaders' Regiment station at Denbury, Newton Abbot, Devon.

Asleep

The boys were sleeping in the "spider block"—so - called because dormitories radiate from a central hut like a spider's legs.

The two who died were both aged 16. They were:

Junior Signaller John Ball, of Southwick Grange, Oundle, Peterborough, Northants, and

Junior Signaller John Murray Albiston, of Faulds-gate, Kinnorth, Aberdeen.

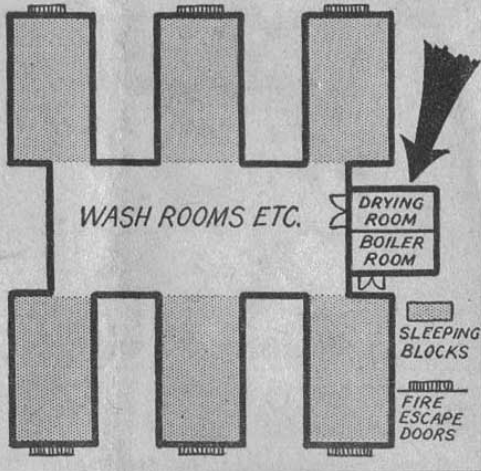
Hero of the blaze was 17 - year - old junior RSM John Wraith, of South Shields, Co. Durham.

He stopped panic among the 640 boys, many of whom rushed from their

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Boys who survived comb the ashes for belongings lost in the blaze. Behind them, arrowed, are the boiler and drying rooms in which the boys died. The map, below shows the layout of rooms in the spider block.



Fire kills two boys

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barracks wearing only pyjamas.

John helped to organise the rescue of about 90 boys sleeping in the blazing section.

He also joined officers and NCO's in a bucket chain to damp down other wooden huts.

Later he said: "All the boys behaved magnificently, especially the junior NCOs.

"They arranged fire-fighting pickets, and only the heat and flames forced them to give up the valuable work they were doing before the arrival of the fire services.

EXCELLED

"There was no panic whatsoever. All the boys got out in orderly manner."

John's CO, Lieut.-Col. Alan Holifield, said last night:

"He excelled himself in looking after the boys, and shepherding them out of burning buildings."

A roll-call was held as firemen from Torquay and Newton Abbot fought the blaze.

That was when it was discovered two boys were missing.

The 90 boys from the wrecked barrack block had to be found new beds last night.

Many of them lost all their personal belongings in the blaze.



Fire Hero

HERO of the fire that killed two boy soldiers at a Devon camp yesterday was Junior RSM John Wraith, 17 (above). He shepherded boys from their blazing huts, called the roll as they paraded in pyjamas, and ordered a search for the missing victims. Then he organised PT in the gym to take the boys' minds off the tragedy.

FULL STORY—SEE BACK PAGE.

RSM John, 17, is camp hero

FIRE KILLS 2 BOY SOLDIERS



John Albiston

John Ball

By MIRROR REPORTER

TWO boy soldiers who volunteered for special week-end duty died in a mystery blaze at their camp early yesterday.

The fire destroyed a "Spider" block—so called because it has six dormitories leading off from the centre

—at Denbury, near Newton Abbott, Devon.

The bodies of the two victims were found in a clothes-drying room next to the block. They volunteered to guard colleagues' clothes and equipment which were soaked on a cliff exercise the day before.

The dead boys—members of the Royal Signals Junior Leaders Regiment—were: John Albiston, 16, of Kincorth, ABERDEEN; and John Ball, 16, of Southwick, near OUNDLE, Northants.

Hero of the night was 17-year-old John Wraith, a junior regimental sergeant-major from South Shields, Co. Durham. When the fire alarm was given by sirens, he calmly took charge of the 540 boys, aged fifteen to seventeen, at the camp.

Roll-call

He sent boy soldiers racing round the blazing block alerting sleeping colleagues. Some were pulled from their bunks by boys who dashed from the shower-baths with only towels wrapped round them.

RSM Wraith paraded the boys in their pyjamas for a roll-call—and discovered that two were missing.

—at Denbury, near Newton Abbott and Torquay, who had arrived within ten minutes, later found the missing boys dead.

Again Sergeant Major Wraith knew the drill. He organised P.T. classes in the gym — "to keep the boys warm in their pyjamas, and to take their minds off the tragedy."

RSM Wraith said last night: "There was no panic. All the boys behaved magnificently — especially the junior NCO's. They arranged fire-fighting pickets till the firemen arrived."

The young sergeant-major is the star of a new Army recruiting film—about a platoon fighting terrorists—which is to be shown in schools.

When one of his companions collapsed from fatigue during a moor exercise recently, RSM Wraith carried the boy miles to safety.



Obituary as printed in the Junior Mercury Apr 62

J/SIG JOHN MURRAY ALBISTON

John ("Sandy") Albiston was a Scotsman, and came from Aberdeen. He was Scottish in many ways. His friendly nature and broad accent combined to make him a personality who was well known and liked throughout the Regiment.

He had a sense of humour which seldom failed, and which was infectious in that others laughed with him readily and often.

He was a keen basketball player and regularly represented the Regiment, even becoming a member of the Regimental team in his first term with the Troop, which is quite an achievement. He was always keen to take part in other activities, whether it was the Social Club or the Camp Theatre. We shall miss "Sandy" because of his personality and humour.

To his parents and family we offer our deepest sympathy.

J/SIG JOHN BALL

John ("Vic") Ball came from the village of Southwick, near Oundle, in Northamptonshire. He had two brothers (one of whom is serving in the Royal Signals) and a sister.

John only came to the Troop in January of this year and, because of his sincerity and willingness, quickly made many friends. Most of his pleasures in life were to be found out of doors; he was keen on the countryside and the challenge, which it offered. Thus he enjoyed Adventure Training most of all in his work here.

At games he again displayed a spirit of adventure, always being keen to learn and to improve and displaying great determination, which was probably the most noticeable aspect of his character. John was still young, but possessed a wealth of goodwill, and the friendliness, which he offered to us all, will be remembered for a long time.

To his family and friends we offer our deepest sympathy



Wolborough Cemetery – Newton Abbot



St Mary's Church – Southwick near Oundle



The below is a transcript of the report from the Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser dated April 3rd 1962

Misadventure Verdict on Boy Soldier

A verdict of death by misadventure was returned by a jury at a Newton Abbott inquest on Friday on two boy soldiers who died in a fire at Rawlinson Barracks, Denbury, Devon.

The boys – John Murray Albiston, of Faulds Gate, Kincorth, Aberdeen, and John Ball, of Southwick Grange, Oundle – died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Both aged 16 they were Junior Signalmen in the Junior Leaders Regiment.

The Coroner (Mr John Hutchings) told the jury that there was no suggestion that the fire was caused by someone smoking. "One boy was a non-smoker and the other was apparently short of both cigarettes and money at the time". He said.

Neither was there any evidence that the fire was caused by heat from the pipes. There was some evidence suggesting that the fire might have started high up near the ceiling.

Cable damage?

"It may be that the electrical cable had been damaged, and there could have been a short circuit causing a fire which could have spread very rapidly". There might also have been a short circuit in or near the damaged socket. "It is difficult to see in what other way the fire could have been caused". He would not have thought there was anything very wrong about, either of these boys sleeping in the drying room. "This was a wooden building and once fire starts it will spread through the building. It is very difficult to see what could have been done to put out this fire in the condition it was when it was found."

Mr C B James, representing the Treasury, expressed sympathy with the relatives of the two boys on behalf of the War Office.

When the Coroner commented on the fact that dental records had to be used for the identification of bodies, Major Edward Roland Smith-Owen, RAMC of the Medical Reception Centre at the barracks, said: "Because of the effects of the fire it would have been impossible to identify them by any other means."

Dr A E Millar, of Kingsteignton, Devon, said the boys died from carbon monoxide poisoning which probably rendered them unconscious before the fire reached them.

Junior Signalman James Francis Walker, (16), said that on March 10th he had been with his troop on a 24 hour exercise that involved sleeping out in tents and sleeping bags. "When we got back the tents and the bags were taken to a drying room and hung up," he said. "That was the normal practise. But this was the first occasion when it was arranged that someone should remain there to look after them. Albiston and Ball both volunteered to do that".

Not smoking

"I was with them for a short time in the drying room". He said the electric light was not working properly but both boys had flash lights. They were just getting into their sleeping bags when he left them to go to the television room. He did not see either of them smoking. The boilerman at the camp, Oswald John Knox, of Lower Park Farm, Denbury, said that on the Saturday evening he had banked up the coke fired boilers. The radiators and the water supply were "nicely warm" but not excessively hot, this was normal.

Troop Sgt Douglas Livermore, said he told his junior corporal to look after the wet tents and sleeping bags and told him to tell JSgt Rayson to look after them as well.

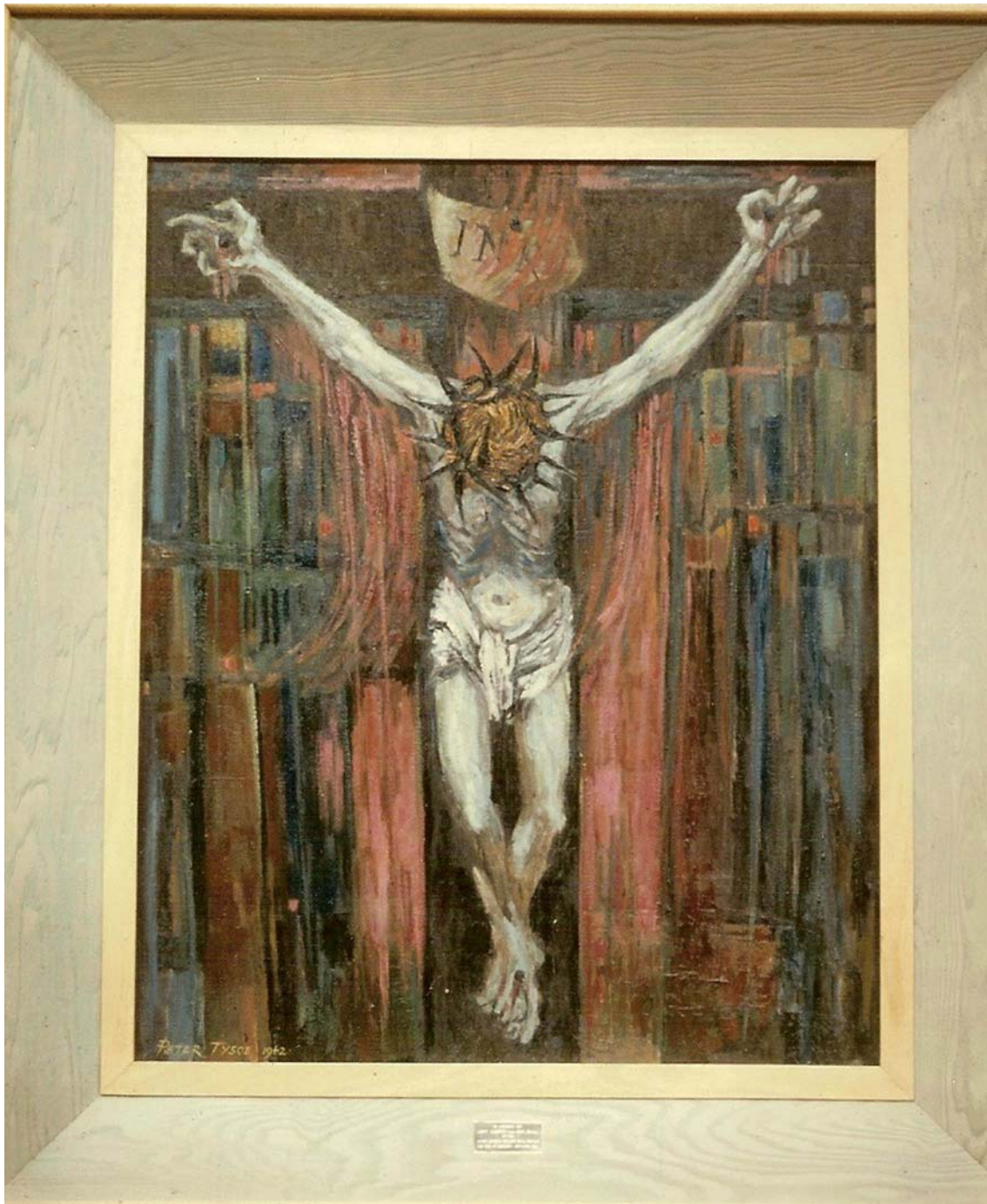
The Coroner: Is it considered to be part of the duties of these young soldiers that such responsibilities should be left to them? Troop Sgt Livermore: Yes, the emphasis at the camp is on leadership. He did not know of any instructions that the boys should sleep in the drying room. "But I don't see why not." He said. "They sleep under worse conditions than that."

Lamp broken

Ivor James House, a War Department Electrician, of Hampton Road, Newton Abbott, said that on March 10th found that the light socket in the drying room was broken at the point where the lamp was held, and the screws were missing. He found he would need steps to get into the roof before the light could be properly fixed. Mr House said his own opinion was that if a short circuit was caused this would not have caused the fire because a fuse would have blown.

Police Constable Peter Head said that a careful inspection had been made by the fire authorities and so far as he knew it had not been possible to trace the fire to any particular cause.

Captain Phillip Guy Rogers, of the Royal Corps of Signals, who was in charge of fire precautions at the camp, said the boys had been carefully instructed on their responsibilities in the event of fire, and notices were posted throughout the barracks.



Extract from Junior Mercury Sep 62

“CHRIST ON THE CROSS”

MEMORIAL PAINTING UNVEILED IN ST. GEORGE’S CHURCH, DENBURY

"On Sunday, July 29, during the last morning service of the Summer Term, the Commanding Officer unveiled a painting of "Christ on the Cross," which will hang in St. George's Church. Denbury, as a permanent memorial to two Junior Leaders, John Albiston and John Ball, who lost their lives in the fire on the night of March 10 last.

Attending the service were Mrs Albiston and her daughter.

The idea for this form of memorial came about when the Padre, the Rev R Wood, and LtCol A Holifield were discussing various possibilities after Church, in the Officers Mess one day. At this stage Peter Tysoe, civilian lecturer who runs the Art Club, mentioned that he had previously produced a sketch of "Christ on the Cross" which might be of interest. On seeing the sketch, the Colonel and the Padre decided that this would be very suitable memorial if it could be painted on a larger scale and suitably framed.

Subsequently, Peter Tysoe was "commissioned" to paint the picture, all materials being paid for by a collection, which had been made previously by Junior Leaders and given to Padre Wood for a memorial for the two boys. The artist gave his services free as his own contribution to the memorial.

Mr Tysoe had originally produced his sketch in a small form during the last Easter leave, and he now had to re-think the problems set by producing the idea on an area of five feet by four feet, rather than on a sheet of paper eleven inches by nine inches. The idea had to be reinterpreted rather than just copied from the original. He decided that tempered masonite (a harder form of hardboard) rather than canvas would be more suitable to execute the work on, as the picture would have to be transported if the Regiment moved from Denbury Camp. Before the actual painting began, the board had to be prepared with a ground of two coats of pure white lead paint.

Work on the painting commenced early in June, and was carried out in the open air in the garden of the painter's home in Torquay, the weather at that time being favourable! About five weekends were spent on the work; shorter periods of painting were not considered by Mr Tysoe, as he found it difficult to "get into" the spirit of the work if he had to leave it during the course of the day.

Painting a picture on a theme that people know intimately and which has been painted countless times since the earliest days of the Church is no easy matter for the contemporary artist and Mr Tysoe says that he has attempted to create a work which will say and mean something as profound as can be found in the religious pictures of the past, without resorting to pure imitation. His aim has been to produce a work which owes to the past, and yet says something which has direct relevance to people existing now and as a contemporary artist, he has used the visual language of the twentieth century, not that of a past age, to say something to all who look at this painting.

The face of Christ has not been shown. The head is shown hanging forward; the central theme being the Crown of Thorns intermingled with the hair. Probably the most controversial points of the painting have been the hands, which are painted to show some of the agony of the Cross, and to contrast with the hanging quality of the remainder of the figure. Around the figure the background is treated in a symbolic manner, and is meant to depict the chaos and rending of the temple veil, which accompanied the Crucifixion. Linking in with this is the colouring below the figure, suggestive of fire, which caused death at Denbury.

Framing the picture was undertaken by the artist, and considerable time and trouble was taken in finding suitable material for the task. However Mr Tysoe eventually found some richly grained pine boarding in a Newton Abbot wood-yard and, together with invaluable help from Mr Turle (unit draughtsman) and Sig Waudby (unit carpenter), this impressive painting to the best possible advantage.

Mr Tysoe studied art at the Oxford School of Art for four years, obtaining the National Diploma in Design at the end of his time there. He then went on to Goldsmiths College of Art of London University, where he took his Art Teacher's Certificate. He has taught Art in HM Prison Oxford, at Tulse Hill School in London, which is one of the largest schools in Britain (2,300 boys on the roll when he was there), and lectured on the History of Art at the Oxford School of Printing.

From 1959 to early this year he was a lieutenant in the RAEC and served at Denbury as 2IC Junior Wing and he now teaches here as a civilian. He is a member of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen as typographer and wood-carver and has just exhibited with the Guild at their annual exhibition at Totnes, although he finds it difficult to find time to produce as much carving as he would like.

Attending the memorial presentation were representatives of Westward Television and the local Press, and wide publicity was given to the event. The Westward newscast on the following Monday contained a very full-filmed report of the service and the unveiling of the painting.

As it was the last Sunday in the Regiment of the Rev R Wood, it also served as a reminder of his efforts for the general improvement in the state of the Church which he has brought about during his stay at Denbury and he will have the pleasure of knowing that he was at the "birth" of a project which will add greatly to the new St George's Church when it is built."