

Not Even Elephants Take This Long

Veterans Outing Gestation In All Its Detail

Planning the Veterans Visit to NMA

This information about the planning of the Veterans Visit on September 7th 2021 was provide by **Des Knowles**, the person who did more than anyone else to guarantee its success. In the autumn of 2019 Berkhamsted Rotary Club approached our Club, enquiring if we would enter a joint initiative to mark the 75th Anniversary of VE Day in June 2020. Although there was little support or enthusiasm at our Business meeting it was agreed that because of his enthusiasm for such an event Des could do a feasibility study.

Following a discussion about a variety of potential venues, the National Memorial Arboretum was selected as the most suitable for the potential guests.

The next step was to invite coach company quotes and that by Barnett's Coaches, offering a >40% discount in support of the visit to the NMA, was an offer that could not be refused.

£500 was allocated by both the Hemel Club and the Berkhamsted Club, which allowed Des to "get the ball rolling" and with the venue and a date in June 2020 decided it was necessary to start a promotional campaign. Flyers were printed (*see below*) and these were distributed to Clubs, pubs, community centres, shop windows and superstores just as the Covid pandemic and first Lockdown arrived. A tentative rearrangement for September 2020 soon became an impossibility and a third date was proposed for June 2021 but by April 2021 it became clear that exposing veterans to the Covid virus at that time would not be a wise move and it was agreed to postpone to September 2021 by which time all veterans were likely to have had both vaccine injections and, hopefully, the pandemic would be on the decline. The promotion campaign was restarted with an updated version of the flyer together with radio broadcasts, local newspaper articles and word of mouth with contacts in the veterans' community and contacts suggested by the local council.

By early June there were some 25 veterans registered and the projected costs of £1100 had been covered by the £500 budgets from both Rotary Clubs and a grant approved from Berkhamsted Town Council and BRC to underwrite the balance. It was at this point the Dacorum Borough Council Armed Forces Day grants were brought to Des's attention, offering £500 to organisations arranging events to mark the day. Des applied, submitted an outline of the proposal and the projected costs of £1100. A couple of weeks later he heard from DBC and was taken aback when told the grant had been approved, not for £500 - but for £1100!

It was then "full steam ahead" to try and fill 40 seats with veterans and partners or carers. By mid-July it became apparent that all the seats were not going to be filled and vacant seats were offered to front line NHS staff. Despite circulation through the West Herts NHS Trust and Hemel GPs not a single person took up the opportunity. The opportunity was extended to military widows (widowers) and MOD civil servants, which resulted in a few more seats being taken, bringing the total to 37, though three withdrew in the days before the trip because of hospital appointments. The group included a 98 year-old RAF Lancaster wireless operator, a 97 year-old Royal Marine, a 91 year-old ex paratrooper, plus a number of WRAC ladies.

To remove concerns about identifying and caring for guests during the day Des decided to split the group into four sub-groups, each hosted by one of the four Rotarians (**John Brabner** and **Stuart Latto** from BRC together with **John Stevens** and Des from HHRC) on whom veterans could call if they were experiencing difficulties. To recognise members of the group from a distance and to provide some identity, 50 Rotary lanyards were bought at a cost of £35 which Des collected from a company in Ipswich while on holiday. 50 badge holders in five different colours were purchased (one colour for each sub group with 10 left for "staff" on the day). Each badge holder showed the veteran's name, their host Rotarian's name and contact number for the day, with a £10 note as the contribution to their lunch costs.

In late July Des contacted the office of the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire (who, for those who are not aware, is the Queen's representative in Hertfordshire) enquiring if he would wish to attend the departure to recognise the service the veterans had given the country over many years. Des was surprised, but pleased, to receive an acknowledgement advising that the Lord Lieutenant had a personal commitment that day but one of his deputies (Commodore Tom Hennessey RN) (**seen above with Des and Beverley Funnell**) would be delighted to attend. More paperwork with protocol procedures to deal with!

The Tesco's store in Jarman Park sponsored the event by providing 84 individual bottles of water and also a large tray of chocolates, Kit-Kats and sweets. Sainsbury's in Apsley provided hand sanitizer and face masks. Jim Nodder of BRC approached Waitrose in Berkhamsted for sponsorship and was rewarded with a £250 voucher (£200 more than their usual policy). Des then started to worry about 40+ people - some of whom were very elderly and some with mobility issues - gathering by the bus stop on the busy Leighton Buzzard Road at 9.00 in the morning. Barnett's Coaches had kept to their quoted cost of £500 from January 2019 despite the impact that Covid restrictions would have had on the business model. On raising his concerns with them they advised they would upgrade the coach, without increasing the cost, to a 56 seat coach fitted with a disabled lift. DBC car park manager permitted the removal of the height barrier at Gadebridge P&R, allowing the coach access, and the group to assemble in the car park rather than by the side of a busy main road. So, **after many months of sterling work by Des**, all was set for the visit, which will be described in the following report.

A Day with the Vets

Some Observations by John Stevens

The twenty-eight military service veterans, together with their carers, wives and partners assembled in the car park at Gadebridge Park. Former Rotarian Tom Derbyshire came as photographer, with his wife Margaret. The party was completed by Caroline Wallace of DBC who assisted Des with the application for the Council's generous grant, Lynda Ashton, a first-aider, whose services were fortunately not required, and Graham Coulson a military historian. Despite this there were still spare seats in the coach. During the boarding process Stuart Latta played the bagpipes as entertainment (and again on arrival at the Arboretum). When all were seated the Deputy Lieutenant for Hertfordshire, Commodore Tim Hennessy came on board to wish us all a good day and exchange a few words with some of the passengers.

During the journey Des distributed bottles of water to all passengers and offered the sweets and chocolates all kindly donated by Tesco. We were met at the Arboretum by a volunteer who gave us a brief outline of the facilities of the site and we then assembled for a group photograph by Tom. A Land Train tour of the Arboretum having been arranged for 1300 hours, most of the party then took lunch in the restaurant in the spacious recently built building which also housed the large shop. The DBC grant covered £10 vouchers towards the cost of lunch for the veterans and their wives, partners and carers.

Des had ordered four mobility scooters, three of which were taken up by the veterans. Two drivers, both ladies, caused Des some anxiety during the day both as to their previous experience of the normal speed of such vehicles, and their adherence to timekeeping.

The Land Train made its way round the Arboretum with a recorded commentary which was most helpful. Perhaps it is now common place but the commentary invited us to look out of the green and red sides of the train rather than the right or left, a fact fully understood by the naval veterans. We then had about an hour or so to look round other parts of the vast site – the chapel had some interesting items in it – and, of course, a visit to the shop strategically placed close to the exit to which we eventually made our way to the waiting coach.

Des having rounded up the two mobility scooter drivers successfully, the coach left promptly at 3.30 for the return journey which was uneventful apart from a delay of about twenty minutes caused by a heavy traffic jam. However we duly arrived back at Gadebridge Park, Des being thanked by John Brabner on behalf of everyone (and by many as they left the coach) for a superbly organised and most enjoyable day. As each of the veterans and their wives, partners and carers left the coach they were given a sizeable bag of 'goodies' kindly donated by Waitrose.

There have been a number of texts, cards and notelets thanking Rotary for a tremendous and memorable day having been "treated like Royalty and nothing was too much trouble"

You can see all the photographs taken on the day, and listen to veteran Jim and Des Knowles in conversation with Matt Hatton on Radio Dacorum by clicking on this link.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y034Mipd4jG5-9iPeNwslgfc177uyT3X/view?usp=sharing>