

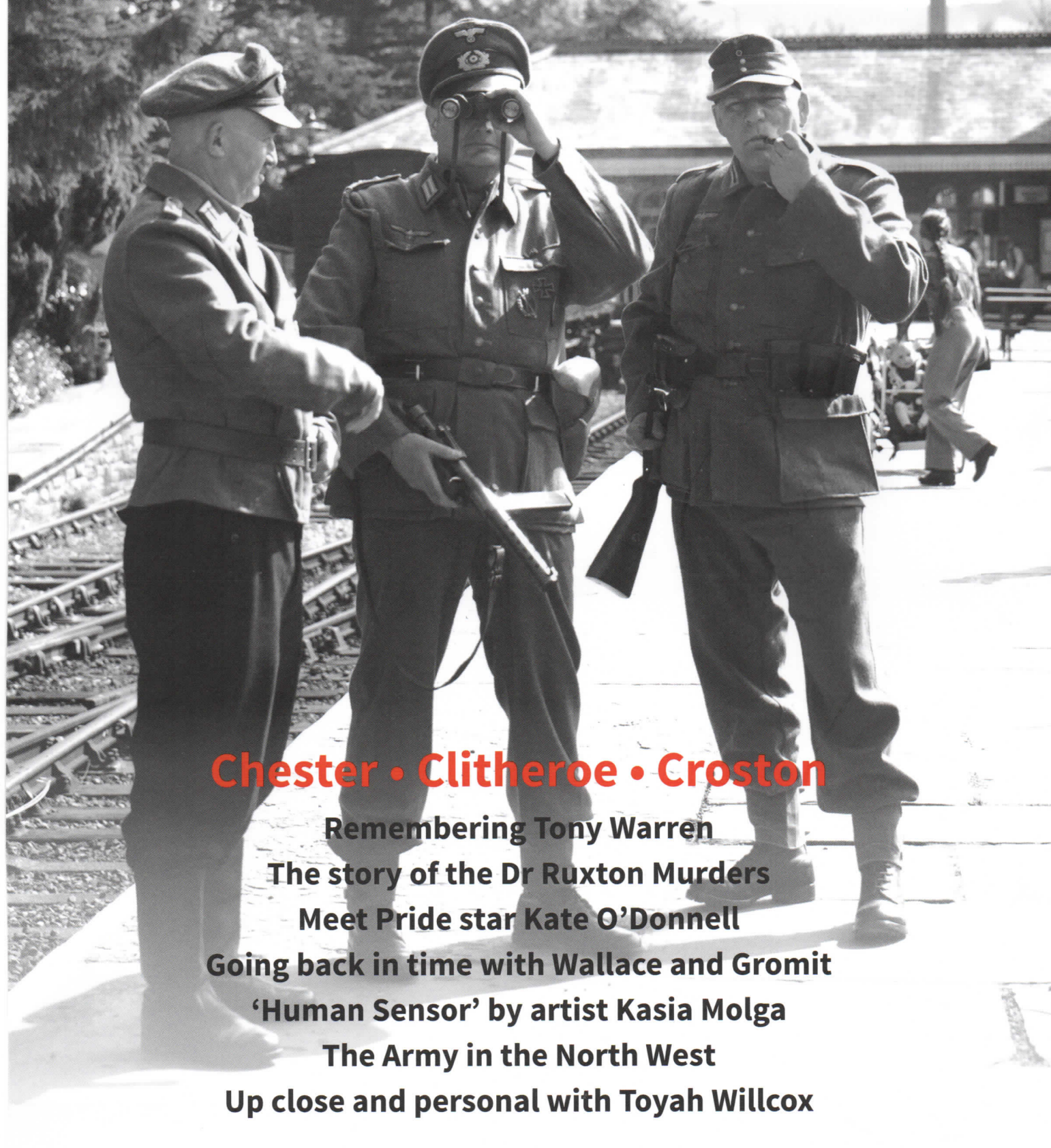
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Remembering Tony Warren

The story of the Dr Ruxton Murders

Meet Pride star Kate O'Donnell

Going back in time with Wallace and Gromit

'Human Sensor' by artist Kasia Molga

The Army in the North West

Up close and personal with Toyah Willcox



The Army in the North West

Andrew Harris reports



LEFT: The army training to evacuate a casualty

ABOVE: The Combined HQ of the Army in the North West and 42 Infantry Brigade at Fulwood Barracks in Preston

The major units are the 2nd Battalion of the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment (2 LANCS) based at Weeton Barracks near Blackpool, the 2nd Battalion of the Mercian Regiment (2 MERCIAN) based at Dale Barracks in Chester and 3 Medical Regiment at Fulwood Barracks in Preston. They all have a service record to be proud of and have featured prominently in many deployments. The Band of the King's Division is also based at Weeton Barracks.

The Army has changed dramatically in recent years. The previous strength of 102,000 regular soldiers was reduced to 82,000 mainly due to the need to save money after the financial crisis of 2008. There was also the forlorn hope of a reduced risk of conflict and an increased role for the Territorial Army which was rebranded and reinvented as the Army Reserve to bring the Army up to its previous strength. This has gone well in our region with successful recruitment to 55 units, detachments or headquarters at 34 locations in 24 cities and towns and one island – the Isle of Man. Together with the regular units these lift the Army's presence in the North West to 4% of the national total.

The Army Reserve battalions of our two infantry regiments can deploy independently or fill gaps in the regular units. They achieve a presence throughout the region. Although 4 MERCIAN is headquartered in Wolverhampton it has companies in

Widnes, Crewe and Stockport whilst 4 LANCS are based in Preston with a presence in no less than 8 other locations throughout old Lancashire and Cumbria: Lancaster, Blackburn, Bury, Manchester, Liverpool, Barrow, Carlisle and Workington. 3 Medical Regiment in Preston is complemented by 207 and 208 Field Hospitals with a presence in eight locations plus C (64) Medical Squadron in Chorley. The 4th Battalion of the Parachute Regiment is in St Helens whilst artillery, royal engineers, cavalry, intelligence, logistics, signals, military police and REME units are throughout the region. The bands of the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment and the Royal Artillery are based in Liverpool and Bolton respectively.

7,000 Army Cadets form the army's third – and largest - force in the region. With units at about 120 locations they are easily accessed at all except the most rural areas. It aims to instil in cadets aged 12-18 "a sense of discipline, self-esteem and achievement that comes from working as part of a successful team". They learn new physical and mental skills which help the some who later join the Army and the many who go on to be better and more confident citizens.

The Deputy Commander of 42nd Infantry Brigade and the Army in the North West is Colonel Phil Harrison who takes an holistic view of their role in combat and in the community. He explains that the mix of regular

The North West is important to the Regular Army. Although the region has no major garrisons like Aldershot or Catterick, 20% of its soldiers – and a whopping 25% of the infantry – are recruited in the region. Despite this only 3% of the Regular Army is based here so apart from three major regular units all 'our' recruits to the Regular Army are based elsewhere.

and reserve units in the region enables commanders to “select forces for the job” by drawing on the wide range of personnel and units available. Colonel Harrison is also keen to use the role of the Army as a force for good in the community. This takes many forms but four examples stand out:

- In 2001 other agencies were struggling to cope with an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease amongst cows and sheep in Cumbria and Lancashire. Brigadier Alex Birtwistle – then North West Army Commander – was brought in to head the Army’s role in the mass slaughter and burial of nearly a million animals at a site at Great Orton in Cumbria. The logistical challenge was enormous and many farmers doubted that the outbreak could be brought under control but Brigadier Birtwistle and 150 soldiers from 42 Brigade – as it was then called - were praised for their “calm, logical efficiency” which provided strong and effective leadership and the crisis was dealt with. The Brigadier said later “We’re not proud of what we did – but we’re proud of the way we did it.”

- In December 2015 Cumbria and Lancashire faced another crisis when Storm Desmond caused rivers to break their banks so that many people had to be warned and assisted. The civilian authorities requested help from the military and within hours 90 soldiers from 2 LANCs were deployed to the stricken areas including the evacuation of residents from the St Aidans district of Carlisle which was inundated

by several feet of floodwater. Military vehicles proved very capable of accessing flooded routes and the Army also worked with an RAF Chinook to help fill gaps in the flood defences. Major Nick Higgins of 2 LANCs modestly said “Our guys have been assisting other agencies in what has been a very demanding effort . . . I hope we have helped to alleviate some of the distress affecting these communities.”

- Working with the community is not always a crisis. The annual Preston Military Show at Fulwood Barracks is one of the main family days staged by the military in the north west. The latest – held on the 18th June - is pictured and attracted thousands of local people to watch displays, see military equipment, meet soldiers, hear music and tackle a climbing tower and (inflatable) assault course. The day culminated in Massed Bands and a Sunset Ceremony. Other such events enable people to learn about the Army whilst having a good day out.

- The Reserve Forces’ & Cadets’ Association act as a catalyst by promoting the benefits of the military experience and working with employers in the North West to enable their employees in the Army Reserve to make the most of the opportunities available. Employers recognise that their employees gain skills and confidence in their training and deployments – and that benefits their organisations.

Of course the main roles of an Army are to prevent conflict and - as a last resort – fight wars.

Soldiers from across the North West are in





ABOVE: Soldiers from 2 LANCs helping with flood relief
LEFT: Hot & weary: Jungle training for 2 LANCs in Belize
RIGHT: Colonel Phil Harrison at Nelson Mosque



Central America this summer to test themselves in jungle warfare techniques and helping to train the future leaders of the Belize Defence Force. Based at the British Army Training Unit Support at Belize's Price Barracks soldiers from 2 LANCs spend much of the five weeks living in the jungle to learn how

to survive and fight in some of the toughest conditions in the world.

In October this year the Army Reserve Battalion 4 LANCs will for the first time lead a deployment – with 2 LANCs and 4 MERCIAN - for 6 months to the 'Green line' in Cyprus which separates the estranged Greek

and Turkish communities on that divided island. This is an important role under a UN mandate to ensure peace by – literally – holding the line. It is the first time that this reserve unit has had this responsibility and shows that the Army Reserve is truly an integral part of the British Army.



ABOVE: Steve Wotherspoon, Regional Employer Engagement Director of RFCA
LEFT: Not signing up at the Preston Military Show



About 7,000 of our teenagers benefit from training, team work and increased self-confidence

42nd Infantry Brigade commands two Regular and two Reserve Infantry Battalions on operations at home and overseas. It also has a new role for Defence Engagement in East Africa. The Brigade's soldiers have already deployed to Uganda and Burundi – and Mali in West Africa - to train and work alongside soldiers from these countries.

The North West is important to the Army – but the Army is also important to our region. It is providing about 16,400 jobs for our people at any one time and enables upwards of 2,000 Army Reservists to develop their skills and character. About 7,000 of our teenagers benefit from training, team work

and increased self-confidence. We get all this and more from the Army in the North West.

Andrew Harris (mailto:andrewharris.co.uk) acknowledges the help he received from Colonel Phil Harrison and Army Press Officer Jason Teasdale in the preparation of this article. The pictures are by Andrew Harris or are Crown Copyright.

