

## **Bill Phillips - Obituary.**

The Reverend Bill Phillips, who died on 8 September 2016 aged 104, was a Parachute Regiment chaplain captured at the battle of Arnhem who then played a leading part in the annual commemoration service that is held in the Dutch town.

Uneasy about the much-postponed operation after being told "It stinks" by an intelligence officer, he landed as a member of 3rd battalion on a potato field in the village of Wolfheze to little opposition on September 17 1944. The Dutch came out of their houses, offering apples. But as the battalion advanced towards the bridge that was their object, he came across the body of an American officer as German fire steadily increased. Leaping over walls with a medical officer he reached the back of the St Elisabeth Hospital, where nuns were tending British and German wounded. After waiting for the MO to return from the operating theatre, he noticed a German soldier with a rifle standing by the door, and was wondering why nobody had taken it from him when an orderly asked: "Are you in the bag, too, sir?" It seemed an ignominious and depressing end to Phillips's career in action.

As a prisoner he felt a total failure and the lowest form of life. He was first marched off with hands on head to be put into a garage with an elderly German soldier who made disparaging remarks about Hitler. After being deloused, he was taken by a train that kept breaking down to a barracks in Brunswick, where he came to realise he was luckier than many prisoners elsewhere. The daily diet was a third of a loaf of heavy German bread, watery soup and sauerkraut for every man. But there were opportunities for amateur dramatics, games and books, though eventually the bitter cold ended the acting. Twice weekly Red Cross parcels dried up, the sound of American bombing grew nearer. But the spiritual life flourished. There were daily services, preparations for ordination and a group met in freezing basement, wrapped in blankets, for prayer and bible study. A midnight communion service held at Christmas was a considerable comfort, and when it was learned that the local boys had nothing, Phillips noticed that it was an officer from a humble background who suggested they be given food.

After learning that Arnhem's burgomaster and the Parachute Regiment were organising a ceremony he determined to participate. Over 50 years he took part in more than 15 annual services, joining the march to the cemetery where some 1,700 veterans lie, preaching, reading the Airborne Forces Collect and singing of Abide with Me alongside veterans, local Dutch and many others from all around the world. The most poignant moment occurs when the town's children silently lay a bunch of flowers on each grave, look at the ages on the gravestones and remember that they are the children of the future. "Something unique came out of this," Phillips recalled. "The pilgrimages were a unique inspiration, which was the peak point of my entire ministry".

The son of Congregationalist missionaries Edward William Leigh, was born in Bangalore, India on July 6 1912, and came home aged six to go to Eltham College, where he was asked to stay on an extra year to be head boy and captain of the rugby and cricket teams as well as the Kent Public Schoolboys. On going up to St Edmund Hall, Oxford, to read History in 1930 he was strongly attracted by the Oxford Movement which led him to go onto Wycliffe Hall and seek ordination. However,

while admiring the pacifist clerics Dick Sheppard and Donald Soper and attending the Oxford Union debate on whether to fight for King and Country, Phillips retained his vigorous interest in rugby, which he said aided him in his ministry.

He earned a Blue as a wing forward in 1933 without having played in the position before (to the disapproval of the Times). As a swift, courageous tackler, who ran in straight lines, he went on to play regularly for both the university and Blackheath. In 1936 he moved to Gloucester, which counted two other clergymen in the team.

Noting his lack of funds, the club bought him a new pair of boots and paid for the hire of a car so he could return to his duties as assistant chaplain at Dean Close School, Cheltenham. After marrying in 1938 Nancy Wilson, who was to give him three girls and two boys, Phillips took charge of a new parish outside Brighton, but was reported to the police for supposedly saying people would have a duty to help the Germans if they landed on the Downs. This earned a visit from an officer. To demonstrate his loyalty he became a special constable, parading on the Brighton front, and then wrote to George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester who, to his surprise, advised him to join up.

The Chaplains' depot soon sent him to Sandhurst before he volunteered for the Paras to end up on the staff of the future General Sir John Hackett, who introduced a period of the day, known as "padre's hours" and asked him to attend orders of the day. On being replaced Phillips was so furious he came near to mutiny, and asked to be sent home. The request was turned down, but he still took part in the operation.

After being discharged from the Army in 1946 he settled down to parochial work first in Ide Hill, Kent, before moving to Sussex as vicar of Moulescoomb, and Kingston with Iford, which he combined with the rural deanery of Lewes before retiring to Upton St Leonards in Gloucestershire. He helped out with parish work and at 65 was still capable of bringing down his friends in a fine tackle, though he now only played golf at Painswick, where he would have a half of beer after his round. Bill Phillips also painted landscapes and portraits and, into extreme old age, read his Bible and The Daily Telegraph while enjoying the rugby and University Challenge on television.