

The following is an obituary written by **Richard Sayer** for the Telegraph.

**KENNETH GEORGE MAYHEW RMWO. Born 18 January 1917. Died 13 May 2021.**

"We never forget that we have regained our freedom thanks to the courage and sacrifices of our allied friends...Major Kenneth G Mayhew volunteered for duty. His leadership and courage shown during the liberation of the Southern part of the Netherlands deserves our greatest respect. The Military Order of William (MWO) – the highest award for valour, conduct and loyalty – testifies to this and expresses our solidarity and lasting gratitude." Those words from King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands prefaced the 2018 official biography booklet honouring Ken Mayhew, the oldest of the four living Knights of the MWO. His award had originally been made in 1946, but Mayhew's modesty in staying out of the limelight was such that it was not until he was 94 years old that the Order rediscovered him, feting him at numerous events in his last decade. As the booklet states, his war-time comrades were the only people Ken Mayhew shared his experiences with. "That box remained closed for citizens and family". It is only from the history recounted in that booklet that any picture of Ken's war has emerged.

Born in Helmingham, Suffolk, the second of four sons of farmers Wilfred and Ada Mayhew, Ken attended Framlingham College from 1929 to 1934. He became a prefect but was by his own admission less interested in scholarly matters than in sport - at which he excelled, playing in the cricket, hockey and squash teams. The College was to remain of life-long importance to him, attending Old Framlinghamian events to the end of his life. After a traineeship with Fisons in Suffolk he moved into fertiliser sales in Norfolk, starting up his own successful grain and transport business post-war. With war threatening he joined the Norwich TA in April 1939 and on the outbreak of war was mobilised as a sergeant before going to Sandhurst. He was commissioned into the Suffolk Regiment as a 2nd lieutenant, joining up with the remnants of the 1st Battalion in Somerset on their escape from Dunkirk.

On D-Day as a Captain in command of a carrier platoon of lightly-armoured tracked vehicles he landed on Sword Beach where the Battalion's target of the Hillman bunker fortress was attacked and taken. From the bridgehead thus established on 28 June the Suffolks mounted an attack on the Château de la Londe just north of Caen, encountering German Tiger tanks for the first time. Operation Goodwood saw heavy losses on both sides until Caen finally fell on 14 July. On 16 August, with the enemy being forced north from France, Mayhew's carrier platoon "Ken Force" was amongst the first liberators into Flers. As the advance through Belgium continued into the Netherlands Mayhew's platoon operated ahead of the main force, frequently accompanied by Dutch resistance, seeking intelligence on German positions. At the battle of Weert he deliberately drew enemy fire to reveal enemy positions, resulting in casualties to his men and to himself, before the town was liberated on 22 September. By mid-October Ken was promoted to Major, taking over a rifle company in the battle of Overloon and Venray. Tanks were unable to cross a ditch with steep banks but Ken pressed on across swampy terrain under heavy fire to cross the obstacle, thus liberating the town. Wounded in the face by shrapnel he was given the choice of treatment in Bournemouth or Brussels. He chose Brussels. He discharged himself, against doctor's orders, after 3 weeks, got a lift in a truck back to his Battalion, and resumed command of D Company.



In a very severe winter the company was dug in on the banks of the Maas at Blitterswijk, frequently encountering German night patrols, and short-staffed as men were evacuated with frostbite. On 25 February 1945 during the march to the Rhine he was wounded again, this time requiring repatriation to England. After treatment he was on recovery leave when the German surrender occurred in late April. He was posted to Gibraltar for 6 months before being demobbed at the end of 1946.

Ken's commanding officer recommended him for an award in these terms:

*He proved himself a magnificent and courageous company commander, showing a contempt for his own safety which shortly was to win for him the admiration of every man under his command. [At Venray] without hesitation Major Mayhew decided to continue the advance...he pressed forward, encouraging his men, doubling from platoon to platoon to give out his orders rather than send for his platoon commanders...At this point he was wounded. In less than three weeks however he was back with the Battalion, before he had fully recovered. He remained a constant source of comfort and inspiration to his officers, NCOs and men during the long winter months spent on the banks of the river Maas. His very tall figure, proceeding unconcernedly from man to man under the most dangerous conditions in action have won for him a place of admiration and respect achieved by the few in the campaign in North West Europe.*

On 24 April 1946 he was knighted by Royal Decree, signed by Queen Wilhelmina, the only Briton to have received the honour, with the Military William Order "for distinguishing himself during the battles leading to the liberation of the occupied territory of The Netherlands through the exercising of excellent deeds of valour, conduct and allegiance... an extraordinary devotion to duty and great perseverance...an inspiration for all in those glorious days."



Ken believed in duty and in honouring those who had given themselves in service to their country. He attended commemoration services in The Netherlands, in France and in Belgium. In 1984 he was a leader at the 40th Normandy landings anniversary parade at Arranches. In 1994 at the 50th anniversary he was presented to Queen Elizabeth II at Bayeux Cemetery when his fellow Old Framlinghamian General Sir Patrick Howard-Dobson, then President of the Royal British Legion, who was escorting the Queen, noticed Ken in the crowds of veterans and brought the Queen over to speak to him – a moment never forgotten. In 2004, on the 60th anniversary, he was one of a crowd of 5,000 waiting in hot sun for the arrival of Prince Charles.

The happiest of all those chance moments of recognition occurred on 18 September 2011 when, at the age of 94, Ken attended the annual war veterans' commemoration at Venray. Ken was spotted in the crowd by a Dutch historian wearing the ribbon of the Knighthood of the MWO and he was joyously welcomed back by the Dutch from supposed death. Within six weeks he had been invested with the modern version of the insignia and, in May 2012, was received by Queen Beatrix. He was then given the medal of the City of Venray, having already been given the freedom of Flers in 1994.

In May 2014 Ken was guest of honour at the Dutch ambassador's residence in London to mark the 70th anniversary of the liberation of The Netherlands – at which he baptised the new Liberation Tulip. In 2014 he was, as the oldest living Knight, the guest of honour in the Hague at the televised Knighthood ceremony of the fourth living Knight. In 2016 the French Government awarded him the Legion d'Honneur.







On his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2017 the Dutch Ambassador to the UK delivered a personal letter of greeting from King Willem-Alexander. Ken and his wife Trish then attended a special celebration at the Dutch Ambassador's Residence in London, organised by Lt Col Rob Arts, Dutch Military Attache to the UK, with members of Ken's family, the Head of Framlingham College and Norman Porter representing the OF Society. Also present were the Commander of the Dutch Armed Forces who spoke of Ken as 'a role model for every soldier in the Netherlands'. Major Marco Kroon



RMWO was also there: he had been knighted in 2009 - the first new knight in 50 years. He was later to write that

he regarded Ken as 'one of my greatest heroes'. The next year Ken and Trish were guests at the [Buckingham Palace](#) banquet during the state visit of King Willem-Alexander and Queen [Maxima](#).



Sport remained a strong influence for Ken throughout his life. He played minor county cricket for both Suffolk and Norfolk, and hockey and squash for Norfolk. He took up golf at 70, carrying his own clubs until he was 97. At 100 he was honoured by the MCC, ringing the bell for the start of play at Lord's. In his 70s, before becoming a season ticket holder there, he received a letter from Norwich City addressed to Master Ken Mayhew inviting him to attend a gathering of junior members. Ken turned up, apologising that he was slightly older than the other kids. For Ken's 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday Rob Arts took him to a box at Spurs for the match against Norwich, where the goalkeepers on each side, Dutchmen both, presented Ken with signed birthday shirts from the two teams.

Lt Col Arts visited Trish to pay his respects. He later spoke of his great affection for Ken: "We Dutch will always be grateful to the British for their part in liberating our country in the war. Ken was one of our greatest war heroes, a true inspiration to all those members of our Armed Forces who have met this modest, kind, brave man whose bearing touched everyone from the highest in the land to the least. None of us will forget his presence."

Royal Anglian Lt Col Tony Slater, now retired, spent time with Ken in his last month: "Ken felt there were two formative influences on his life. The first was Framlingham College and in particular the grounding that its sport and its friendships gave him. The second was his military career in

the Suffolks – whilst life in the infantry was often horrendous, the comradeship in the regiment made him who he was. Always keen to foster and encourage the young Ken never talked about his war experiences but we all knew what he had done. He was a hero. His modesty and dignity meant that of all the veterans he was the exemplar of what we all try to live up to.

Ken's hope for the future was simply expressed. "I hope that I will be remembered as a righteous, reliable and modest man, who has fully enjoyed long-lasting friendships, interest in sports, industrial life and a most satisfactory social life. To the younger generation I would like to say: be courageous with respect to the convictions you have and do the things that you think are good for you. Appreciate your family and friends."

Much revered by all Framlinghamians, he was loved by all with whom he came into contact. A man with no 'side', he was interested in everyone and in everything.

He is survived by his brother, Jimmy, an ex-WW2 commando, a stripling of 101, by his wife Trish, 40 years joyously together and married for 29 years less two days, by a son and twin daughters by his first wife Betty, now deceased, and Trish's two daughters.

