

International Brigade Plaque

Middlesbrough Town Hall



Prelude

In Spain on the evening of 17th July 1936, a pre-planned Army revolt began; rebel soldiers disarmed Officers loyal to the Republican government, before declaring a region free from governmental control. The army's rising was supported by the fascist Falange Party and some Civil Guard units, who often acted on their own. In Morocco, Mallorca, and some other areas the rising was generally successful. However, in most areas, including the major cities of Madrid and Barcelona, the rebels were met with bitter and effective resistance from loyal members of the Civil Guard and from workers' militias who seized arms despite government instructions.

As the air force and the navy remained loyal to the government the resistance in the major centres made it likely that the army coup would fail, as had an army coup in 1932. This time was different however, the unruly officers received significant support, the most noteworthy being the British Government: MI6 operative Major Hugh Pollard chartered a plane, piloted by another MI6 operative Cecil Bebb, they collected Franco, effectively in exile on the Canary Islands and flew him to Morocco. The German Air force (Luftwaffe) then transported the 18,000 strong, brutally trained Spanish Army of Africa from their barracks in Morocco the short distance across the Mediterranean to the Spanish mainland, where as head of the only unified army in Spain Franco quickly replaced the imprisoned de Rivera as leader of the Falange Party, proclaiming himself Head of State and Government under the title El Caudillo.

On 14th September 1936 a non-intervention pact was agreed with Germany, Italy the USSR, France, USA and the UK the major signatories. Franco, however, continued to receive substantial military support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in direct contravention of the agreement. In October, in order to maintain the non-intervention policy, the Soviet Union called on the Communist International (Comintern) to organise Brigades of Volunteers. The International Brigades offered Stalin an opportunity to support the Spanish Republic without breaking the non-intervention pact, he was trying to form an alliance against Hitler, therefore he had no wish to alienate Britain and France.

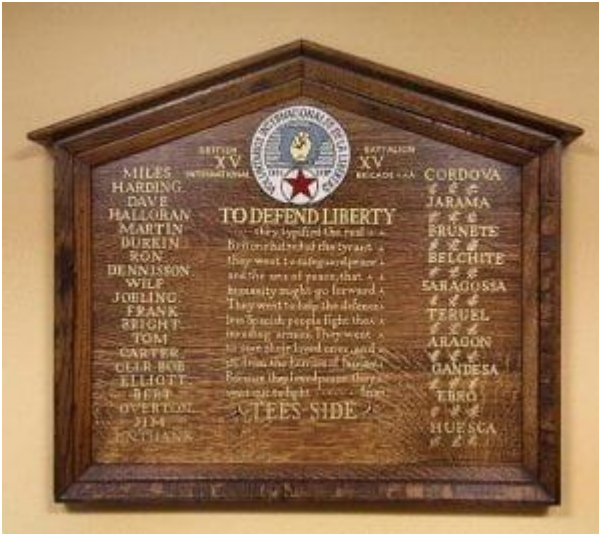
The French and particularly the British imposed strict non-intervention regulations; in Britain on 9th January 1937, with all-Party support, the National Government invoked and amended The Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870; the 1870 Act had made it illegal to recruit mercenaries, the 1937 amendment now made it illegal to also volunteer as a mercenary. The Merchant Shipping (Carriage of Munitions to Spain) Act passed the same day, made it illegal to send anything that could be of military use to the Spanish Government. The French-Spanish border was closed, and Royal Navy Warships enforced what was effectively a naval blockade of Republican Spain.



On the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in September 1936, Middlesbrough born **David Marshall** had travelled to Spain to join the forming International Brigades in Barcelona, along with Esmond Romilly he joined one of the first International Brigade groups, the German Thaelmann Battalion, with whom he fought to defend Madrid. On 12th November 1936, a sniper's bullet hit him just above his ankle. He was removed by stretcher under heavy fire, then transported to a field hospital. After treatment in Alicante he was repatriated to England at the end of 1936 where he began campaigning for aid to be sent to the Spanish Government.

Members of the British Tom Mann unit in Barcelona in September 1936. Left to right: Sid Avner, Nat Cohen, Ramona, Tom Winteringham, George Tioli, Jack Barry and David Marshall

The Teesside International Brigades Memorial



The text on the plaque reads:

TO DEFEND LIBERTY . . . they typified the real Britons hatred of the tyrant, they went to safeguard peace and the arts of peace that humanity might go forward. They went to help the defenceless Spanish people fight the invading armies. They went to save their loved ones and us from the horrors of fascism. because they loved peace they went out to fight from . . . TEES-SIDE

The Teesside International Brigades Memorial is an oak board, with a triangular pediment top. The lettering and International Brigade crest are hand painted. It shows the International Brigades Crest, the names of ten volunteers who fell, an inscription and a list of XV Brigade Battle Honours.

The idea for a memorial arose during a 1939 meeting in the offices of the Young Communist League (YCL) in Middlesbrough, on Marton Road, it was to be a memorial to their friends and comrades who lost their lives fighting Fascism with the International Brigades. We believe **George Short** chaired the meeting, the people attending included: George's wife **Phyllis** International Brigaders **Tommy Chilvers**, **Otto Estensen**, **David Goodman** and **David Marshall**. **Harold Bennet** attended, but we have no records for the others who were also present. It is possible that the Teesside memorial is the first to be produced in the UK, it is certainly one of the earliest memorials to International Brigaders in Britain. **Harold Bennet**, from Kent, was visiting relatives, he was a carpenter and French polisher, he asked to make this memorial especially; as he was aware he was losing his sight, sadly he lost his sight almost immediately after the completion of the memorial.

Born in Middlesbrough, **Tommy Chilvers**, who served in the Anti-Tank Battery of the XV International Brigade from May to August 1937 painted the lettering and crest on the Memorial. I have recently been told local Communists call it 'Tommy's plaque.'

Names on the Teesside memorial

Joseph Myles Harding, Born 1909, Stockton – Scaffolder. Arrived in Spain 22nd January 1937, Killed 23rd September 1938. Ebro

David Halloran CP, Born 1898, South Bank, Middlesbrough – Bricklayer. Arrived in Spain 17th February 1937, Killed 27th February 1937. Jarama

Martin Durkin, Born 1915, Eston, Middlesbrough – Painter. Arrived in Spain 5th November 1937, Reported missing, March 1938. Death cert. issued 30th August 1938. Aragon

Ron Dennison (William Meredith) CP, Born 1914, Bellingham, Northumberland – Labourer. Arrived in Spain 14th January 1937. No.2 Company Commander, Killed 6th July 1937. Villanueva de la Canada, Brunete

Wilf Jobling CP, Born 1909, Chopwell, Northumberland – Labourer. Arrived in Spain 27th January 1937. No.2 Company Commander, Killed 27th February 1937. Jarama

George Bright CP, Born 1877, Thornaby on Tees – Labourer. Arrived in Spain 14th January 1937, Killed 12th February 1937. Jarama

Thomas Carter CP, Born 1904, Hartlepool – Labourer. Arrived in Spain 7th January 1937, Killed 27th February 1937. Jarama

Robert Elliott CP, Born 1900, Blyth, Northumberland – Town Councillor. Arrived in Spain 7th January 1937. Political Commissar No.2. & No.3 Company, Killed 8th July 1937. Brunete

Bert Overton CP, Born 1904, Stockton – Docker. Arrived in Spain 1st January 1937. No.4 Company Commander, Killed 8th July 1937 Brunete

John Unthank CP, Born 1910, Eston, Middlesbrough – Labourer. Arrived in Spain 10th January 1937, Died (Benicasim Hospital, of wounds sustained at Jarama) 2nd April 1937

Recruitment

The North East recruitment of volunteers was organised by a small group of close friends. **George Aitken**, **Wilf Jobling** and **George Short** were all graduates of the International Lenin School in Moscow. **George Aitken** and **George Short** were the two Communist Party District Secretaries for the North East of England. **George Short** was a Communist Party Central Committee member and Teesside Secretary of the Communist Party organised, National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), he and his wife Phyllis originated from Chopwell, it was known as 'Little Moscow' as it had a Communist Club and Henry Bolton's Socialist Sunday School.

A prodigy of Henry Bolton, **Wilf Jobling**, was also from Chopwell, he was one of the three NUWM Executive Committee members, along with the Communist Councillor for Blyth, **Bob Elliott**. Newspaper reports show **Wilf Jobling** speaking alongside **George Short** from the platform at Stockton's May Day rallies prior to the Spanish Civil War. This network of friends vetted and organised the volunteers; the Stockton Brigadier **Otto Estensen** has written *George Short* as his Communist Party contact on his *Biografia de Militantes* held in the RGASPI Archives. **David Goodman**, a Middlesbrough Brigadier, writes in his *From the Tees to the Ebro* that **George Short** recruited him, and later attended Brigadier reunions on **David Marshall's** boat in London. In a fragment of an interview held by Manchester's Labour History archive George Short describes part of the process:

I used to meet them and before they left the area, that night, they'd have a cup of tea and a bite at our house, and then I would say to them, you know, 'make up your mind. If you don't want to go – no hard feelings. You're going there; you may not come back.' We never had one withdraw. We lost the flower of the party. [George was quite upset at this point so I turned off the tape recorder](CP IND Kett 5 4001 – Labour History Archive, Manchester)

George stated in another interview in the 1960s that recruiting for the International Brigades was one of the hardest things he did, because he knew that many would not be coming back; of the twenty one volunteers from Teesside, eight did not return. Once selected the volunteers would be organised into groups which would travel to Spain, via London.

The Volunteers

Richard Baxell has shown that of the 2,300 volunteers that came from Britain, Ireland and the Commonwealth, roughly 80% were members of the Communist Party (CP) or the 'more socially

acceptable’ Young Communist League (YCL) and Labour League for Youth (LLY), but there was no bar on volunteers who were not Communist. It is estimated that several hundred volunteers had been National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) activists. In recent research Martin Sugarman suggests that a significant number, over 20%, of the British Brigade volunteers were Jewish. The volunteers came from overwhelmingly working-class backgrounds, with the largest number from London, almost a third, then Scotland and the Northern industrial cities providing the bulk of the volunteers. Only a small number were unemployed with large numbers involved in industrial occupations, such as labouring, construction, ship-building and mining. The average age for the British Brigader was twenty-nine.

A significant number had already fought fascism in their own towns and cities, Cable street seems to have been an important watershed for many. Alternatively, a group of 25 men were sent out by the Independent Labour Party (ILP), this does not include George Orwell, who found his own way to Spain, he joined this group when his application for the British Battalion was rejected, the ILP men joined POUM militia units. We also find a dozen, mostly Irish Catholic men, fighting for the Fascists.

The men shown on the Teesside memorial reflect most of these statistics well. All ten men were in employment when they left for Spain. **George Bright** being Jewish ensures that the men reflect the disproportionate number of Jewish volunteers; unlike Newcastle and Leeds, less than 0.2% of Teesside’s population were Jewish. Eight of the ten were members of the Communist Party, with most of them activists of some standing. **George Bright** for example was a CP member and NUWM activist, he was described in Spain as *‘an uncompromising fighter for Trade Unionism’*, and *‘was well known to Copeman [later Commander of the British Battalion] from the unemployment rallies both had attended in London.’* **George Bright** at 60 was the oldest Brigader in the British Battalion which increases the average age of these ten volunteers to 33.

The Communist Party on Teesside were particularly successful in their use of non-violent direct action to further their aims, especially against Fascism at home and abroad. From 1932 George Short had organised an almost continuous disruption of the recently formed British Union of Fascists’ (BUF) meetings in Stockton and Middlesbrough.

On Teesside the Communist party successfully campaigned against the British Union of Fascists (BUF). In September 1933 a 3,000 strong crowd, organised by George Short and his wife Phyllis, prevented the BUF’s National Propaganda Officer from speaking at Stockton’s Market Cross, this became known as the *Battle of Stockton*, it resulted in the BUF’s Teesside Organiser, Michael Jordan, resigning and acrimoniously leaving the BUF. George Bright took part in the infamous Battle of Cable Street in London on 4th October 1936. Subsequent Communist actions ensured the BUF failed to gain any legitimacy on Teesside. A week after Cable Street **The North East Daily Gazette** reported that on 12th October 1936, thirteen BUF members *‘had to take to their heels’* because *‘3,000 Communists and their supporters’* turned up to prevent the BUF’s National inspector for Yorkshire speaking in North Ormesby. Spain would see the continuation of the Communist Party’s anti-fascist activism.

To Spain

We know that the volunteers travelled together, **Frank Graham** tells us he left Sunderland on 15th December 1936 with two friends, Dolan and Lower. It is likely that **Aitken, Jobling, Elliott, Meredith, Graham, Bright** and **Overton** were some of the ‘responsibles’ for the North East Group; that is they were established party activists who were tasked with the welfare of the volunteers; ensuring discipline and political reliability. Once in Spain they would become officers and Commissars. In London the groups were sent to 16 King Street, the Communist Party offices, to meet the formidable ‘Robby’ Robson who would assess their suitability, in military and political terms. In February 1937 Robson moved from 16 King Street to 1 Litchfield Street as a result of the Foreign Enlistment Act, which made it a criminal offence to volunteer, and recruit, for Spain. From June 1937, when recruitment declined, the office became the headquarters of the International Brigades Dependents’ Aid Fund. On acceptance volunteers were told to purchase weekend return rail-tickets

from Victoria Railway Station to Paris, as this did not require a passport, at the railway station Special Branch officers would try to dissuade volunteers from travelling.

In France volunteers had to act with discretion as groups of volunteers would occasionally be arrested and repatriated. The recruitment of the International Brigades was coordinated by the French Communist Party in Paris. On arrival in Paris the volunteers would be met by their liaison, Charlotte Haldane, the wife of J.B.S. Haldane. It was in the red-light district of Paris that they underwent a medical examination and more checks on their political reliability. From Paris, until February 1937, they would travel to the Spanish border by train, on what became known as 'The Red Express' and then travel across the frontier by bus or train.

After February they would be smuggled past the non-intervention patrols, in groups, over the top of the Pyrenees. **Tommy Chilvers** and his best friend **Otto Estensen** were smuggled across the Pyrenees in May 1937, with Otto carrying his precious mandolin over the rough terrain. Some volunteers were smuggled onto ships which attempted to break through the naval blockade of patrolling Royal Navy warships and Italian submarines. Once across the frontier, they would be taken to the International Brigade headquarters at Albacete, where volunteers would be vetted again, processed and divided up by nationality to be placed into the different linguistic battalions of the International Brigades. British speakers were placed in the XVI Battalion of the XV Brigade.

The British Battalion

Bert Overton was the first Teesside man to arrive at the Madrigueras training base on 1st January 1937. Apart from **Martin Durkin** all the others named on the memorial would arrive at the base within four weeks of this date. This suggests that they continued to travel as a group throughout the journey from Teesside to Spain. **Bert Overton**, who had been in the Welsh Guards, in the British Army, was given the command of No.4 Company and sent to the Officer's school at Poco Rubico. Meanwhile at Madrigueras the riflemen's instruction came mostly from fellow volunteers with previous military training. **Myles Harding** was not a CP member, he was however a veteran who had served with the Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment – The Green Howards, he gave instruction to others in the Battalion, the following anecdote suggests he was a fine instructor:

Jack Edwards, a CP activist in Liverpool, arrived in Spain with no military experience, yet believed his training at Madrigueras, supervised by Joe Harding who had served in the British Army for ten years was, in the circumstances, very good. When Edwards later volunteered for the RAF during World War Two, his proficiency with a rifle was noted by an NCO who was somewhat puzzled by Edwards' claim that he had never served in the military. (Interview with Jack Edwards, IWMSA 808/3/2)

Officers, commissars and specialists received separate instruction, the 'responsibles' took leading roles in the British Battalion: **George Aitken** had been the Communist Party District Secretary for The North East Coast, had also served in the Black Watch during the First World War. Aitken would be appointed the Political Commissar for the British Battalion. **Frank Graham** would command a section of No.1 Company until later gaining promotion to Scout. **Bill Meredith**, a well know activist from Tyneside, would later command No.2 Company. **Bob Elliott** would be the Political Commissar for No.2 Company with **Wilf Jobling** his deputy Commissar. **Bert Overton**, as mentioned earlier, was put in command of No.4 Company; he would briefly command the British Battalion on the night of the 13th February. **George Bright** was assigned to the Battalion Staff.

The North East seems to be overly represented by Officers and Commissars. Later in the war Sunderland born **Bob Cooney** became Battalion Commissar, **Otto Estensen** was appointed Commissar for, and commanded, the Anti-tank Battery. **Dave Goodman**, a Middlesbrough born Brigadier became the No. 4 Company Commissar on his arrival in Spain in January 1938.

The Battle of Jarama

Just three weeks after their arrival in Spain the British battalion was rushed to the front, to stop Franco's assault on the East of Madrid. On 12th February, they faced Franco's elite 'moors' of the Army of Africa. **George Bright**, due to his age had been told to remain at the rear but on the first day of Battle he managed to find his way to the front line regardless. In his 1948 book *Reason in Revolt*, Fred Copeman, who would later Command the British Battalion wrote:

*Just then I came across George Bright. George was a carpenter, over sixty years old. He had come to Spain to do carpentry, being too old to fight. George had been well known to me during the unemployed struggles in London. I asked him what the hell he was doing here, and just as he opened his mouth to answer, there was a very quiet plop and a small red hole appeared in his forehead. He died instantly. His Union card fluttered out as he fell – A.S.W. I thought what an awful thing it was that he, at his age should be here, and yet I am certain he would not have wished for any other end. (*Reason in Revolt* p 89)*



Wilf Jobling. Shot at Jarama, February 27th, 1937. Wilf Jobling (born at Chopwell, July 25th, 1909) had played a prominent part in the working class movement before going to Spain.

David Halloran of South Bank lost his life at Jarama too, but it would be the loss of **Wilf Jobling**, the prominent NUWM organiser and gifted public speaker, that would catch the headlines at home. **Wilf Jobling**, born in Chopwell was in Blaydon when he volunteered. He was a prominent North East activist, in the YCL (Young Communist League), CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain) and NUWM (National Unemployed Workers Movement) He was sentenced to six months imprisonment in 1933 for leading a revolt against the Means Test in Durham. After spending two years at the Lenin School in Moscow he became the Communist Party organiser for the North East Coast, taking part in the 1934 and 1936 Hunger marches; he led the North East marchers to Hyde Park, London, on Sunday 8th November 1936., speaking to the 100,000 strong crowd. In 1934 he stood as a Communist Party candidate in the Chopwell ward of the Blaydon UDC. Imprisoned for 'working class activities' later in 1934. He initiated and organised the Blaydon Spanish Aid Committee before volunteering for Spain. **Margot Heinemann** recalled that it was Wilf that inspired her:

I remember there was a demonstration to go out to greet the contingent of hunger marchers from the north-east coast who were passing through Cambridge. And we marched out to meet them at Girton and marched back with them... And there was a meeting in the town in the evening which was addressed by the leader of the contingent, Wilf Jobling... And I remember that as a landmark because it was the first time it had ever occurred to me that the working class could have a leading role, or a central role in politics. Margot Heinemann IWMSA 9239

Wilf Jobling led a group of volunteers who arrived in Spain on 27th January 1937. He was appointed deputy to the Commissar in No.2 company, his close friend and colleague **Bob Elliott** was this Commissar. Wilf's Sweet-heart was fellow Communist **Maggie Airey**, who, with **Phyllis Short**, had marched in the Women's section in the 1932 Hunger March. It would fall to **Charlie Woods**, the new District secretary for The North East Coast to break the news of Wilf's death to his niece, Maggie, and for **Frank Graham** to hand over a last love-letter from Wilf. **Jack Lindsay** dedicated a stanza of his *Requiem Mass for Englishmen Fallen in the International Brigade* to **Wilf Jobling**:

*Where now is he, a voice among many voices,
 who said: In poverty's jail are bolted the guiltless,
 the thieves lock up their victims. His voice protested.
 Sentenced, he saw through a stone-wall the truth.
 Clearer that wall of privation than any arguments.
 He struck his hand on the stone and swore he would break it,
 he took a rifle and broke through that wall in Spain.
 Where is Wilf Jobling of Chopwell?*

Requiem Mass for Englishmen Fallen in the International Brigade – Jack Lindsay, 1938, in *Who are the English?* – Smokestack Books

Two other men who travelled in the North East Group to Spain, **Thomas Carter** from Hartlepool (who is listed on the memorial), and **Thomas Dolan** (one of **Frank Graham's** two companions) from Sunderland, are also given a stanza in this poem, they too were killed at Jarama, the first major engagement for the recently formed British Battalion.

*This war has roots everywhere, in the soil of squalor.
 He watched on the tarnished slates the glistening moon,
 a milky drip of light mocking the mouth of hunger,
 a promise of cleansing beauty, a pennon of freedom.
 and midnight, yawning, creaked with the ghosts of old pain,
 till resolution regathered like the moonlight flowing
 in through the cast iron bars at the end of the bed.
 Where is T. J. Carter of West Hartlepool*



Requiem Mass for Englishmen Fallen in the International Brigade – Jack Lindsay, 1938, in *Who are the English* – Smokestack Books

Alex and **John Unthank** of Eston were seriously wounded at Jarama, **John** was taken to Benicasim Hospital, where he would die from the wounds he sustained on 2nd April 1937. **Alex Unthank** can be seen in the photograph taken of wounded Brigaders at La Pasionaria Hospital, Murcia, which also shows **Bert Overton** with his arm in a sling. The high death rate at Benicasim Hospital was due mainly to the lack of medical supplies caused by non-intervention. Also at Benicasim Hospital at this time was Sergeant Major **Alex McDade**, he too had been wounded at Jarama, he is best known for writing the lyrics to *Jarama Valley*.

By the end of February the Battalion had exhausted itself, Fred Copeman had returned to the UK, Battalion commander Tom Wintringham was in hospital, leaving Jock Cunningham to take command of the battalion's 140 survivors; the British Battalion started Jarama with 500 men, just 72 hours later 136 were dead and over 200 seriously wounded or captured.



The memorial erected at Jarama by the men of the British Battalion. In this photograph one can just make out (4th and 12th down) the names of Thomas Carter

This high level of casualties is highlighted by the fact that half of all the British Brigaders killed fighting for the International Brigades in the two year conflict fell at Jarama. The Teesside brigaders reflect this: of the ten men named on the memorial, five were killed at Jarama, four were injured.

The battalion remained in the trenches at Jarama until 17th June 1937, In May after the French allowed Soviet arms and equipment into the Republic the XV Brigade was rearmed and reorganised, it was at this time that **George Aitken** was promoted to XV Brigade Commissar.



The XV Brigade Anti-Tank Battery. Otto Estensen playing his Mandolin, with Miles Tomalin playing his recorder.

Otto Estensen and **Tommy Chilvers** arrived at Madrigueras on 16th May 1937, Otto, from Thornaby, and Tommy, from Middlesbrough, were close friends from an early age. Once in Spain they were posted to the prestigious XV Brigade Anti-Tank Battery, this specialist unit formed in May 1937 from forty British volunteers training at Madrigueras. The battery was issued with three Soviet 45mm guns, capable of firing both armour-piercing and high explosive shells which, at that time represented state-of-the-art military technology. As recruits were specially chosen for their '*superior intellect*' the men were seen as an elite unit. Later Otto would command the Anti-tank battery, he is shown in a number of photographs, most memorably, in the iconic

photograph, seated before No. 3 gun playing his mandolin, accompanied by Miles Tomalin, who is playing his recorder.

The Battle of Brunete



Bert Overton

Almost as soon as the XV Brigade withdrew from the trenches of Jarama they faced what Alex Clifford in his book *The People's Army of the Spanish Civil War* has labelled '*The Spanish Somme*' – The Battle of Brunete. In an attempt to relieve pressure in the North, the government forces attacked West of Madrid, again coming against Franco's African troops, but this time these shock troops were supported by the Nazi's Condor legion and masses of artillery. The trench warfare of Jarama had decimated the XV Brigade, Brunete would have a similar effect; three of the remaining Teesside brigadiers fell at Brunete. Cyril Sexton a Brigadier from Croydon writes in his memoirs that **Overton** was in a '*Genie battalion*' (a labour Battalion) on the third day of Brunete.

This confirms accounts which state that Overton was killed at Mosquito Hill, on 8th July, whilst taking ammunition to the front lines.

Bill Meredith (real name Ronald Dennison) was killed during the capture of Villanueva de la Canada. Fred Copeman gives the widely reported story:

A bloke was lying on the road calling. And by now the only light was the flames from the village. Bill Meredith went over to help him and it was one of these fascists, as old Bill bent over to help him the fascist shot him. (Reason in Revolt p 97)

Fred Copeman admits to executing a Fascist officers minutes later and a number of brigadiers report that prisoners were not taken for some days. Two days after the death of **Bill Meredith**, **Bob Elliott** was killed, Fred Copeman wrote of **Bob Elliott**: *his undying faith in the working class was an inspiration to the whole Battalion. he dies [as] he lived – in the struggle.* The Bob Elliott Nursing Home in Blyth was named after him in 1986. Brunete effectively wiped out the British battalion, of the 330 men who started the battle only 42 remained a fortnight later, henceforth there would be no huge numbers of British reinforcements, large scale recruitment ceased, the Battalion would hereafter consist mostly of Spanish troops built around a core of battle hardened British runners, officers and commissars.



Bill Meredith and Bob Elliott

Martin Durkin joined the British Battalion in November 1937, he fought through the terrible Battle of Teruel, it was fought between December 1937 and February 1938; during the worst Spanish winter in thirty years. During the Aragon Offensive in March 1938 he was reported missing, most likely wounded and shot by the fascists. His death certificate was issued on 30th August 1938. **Myles Harding**, initially repatriated wounded in August 1937 had returned to Spain on 17th October 1937 when he was promoted to lieutenant in the Transmissions Company.

The largest and longest battle of the war was the Battle of the Ebro, the assault begun in July 1938 when the Republican army crossed the River Ebro, tragically it was a disaster for the Republican Army. One consequence of the fascist control of the air was that large numbers of Republican troops became trapped on the Fascist side of the river when the German planes destroyed the bridges. Many men had to swim the Ebro to escape capture.

On 21st September, Juan Negrin, head of the Republican government, announced at the League of Nations in Geneva that the International Brigades would be unilaterally withdrawn from Spain. Two days later the XV Brigade, including the British Battalion moved back across the River Ebro and began their journey out of the country. **Myles Harding** did not return, he was killed in the last action of the British Battalion on 23rd September 1938 at the Ebro River.

XV Brigade Battle Honours

Cordova – The Battle of Lopera (27th to 29th December 1936)

Jarama – The Battle of Jarama (6th to 27th February 1937)

Brunete – The Battle of Brunete (6th to 25th July 1937)

Belchite – The Battle of Belchite (24th August to 7th September 1937)

Saragossa – The Saragossa offensive (24th August to 7th September 1937)

Teruel – The Battle of Teruel (15th December 1937 to 22nd February 1938)

Aragon – The Aragon Offensive (7th March to 19th April 1938)

Gandesa – The Battle of Gandesa (1st to 3rd April 1938)

Ebro – The Battle of the Ebro (25th July to 16th November 1938)

Huesca – The Huesca Offensive (12th to 19th June 1937)

After the Second World War the Teesside International Brigades memorial was on display in the Middlesbrough YCL Marton Road office, it was presented to George Short in 1956 and hung in his office for many years, until its transfer to the Communist Party office on Grange Road, Middlesbrough. In 1967 the Communist Party sold their Grange Road premises and the building was cleared. YCL members Stuart Hill and David Wedlake went down to the offices to help with the clearance, David rescued the damaged memorial from a skip, he took it home as it had a crack in it, telling Stuart that he knew someone who could repair it. David went to Exeter University shortly after this and the two boys lost touch.

In 1983 the memorial was found by a teacher in a scrap Yard in Acton, West London. Stuart relates that **John Longstaff**; an International brigader originally from Stockton who was living in London was absolutely furious when he spoke about its rediscovery. *“How could anyone treat such an important memorial with such casual neglect?”* he said, we now believe **John Longstaff** brought the plaque back to Teesside. It seems likely that it was in 1983 that the memorial plaque was presented to Sir Maurice Sutherland, who was the Chairman of Cleveland County Council at the time; it was certainly on display in the Council offices from his time. Sir Maurice had a personal connection to the XV Brigade, his brother in Law, **Otto Estensen**, had commanded the XV Brigade Anti-Tank battery.

Thanks to Mike Wild, the son of the last Commander of the British Battalion **Sam Wild**, we now know that on Friday 27th April 1984 *‘The Memorial to the Brigaders of Teesside’* was unveiled in *‘Cleveland County Council premises’*. Mike has uncovered a letter the Chairman of the International Brigade Association (IBA), **Bill Alexander**, wrote to **Sam Wild** he is informing him of IBA events such as meetings and books being released, he ends by mentioning the unveiling:

The memorial plaque to the volunteers from Teesside will be unveiled by our comrade Jack Jones on Friday 27th April in Middlesbrough in the Cleveland County Council premises . . . pride of place will go to the local brigaders – John Longstaff (who has taken the initiative in this project), Tommy Chilvers (of the Anti Tanks), Morry Levitas (prisoner at San Pedro), David Marshall (one of the earliest in Spain), and David Goodman (prisoner in San Pedro) who originally came from Teesside. The local media is taking a lively sympathetic interest in the event. Salud. Bill Alexander. Chairman. (supplied by Mike Wild, Wild Family Archive)



Tommy Chilvers mentions that he attended this service in his IWM interview, he recalls it was at this service that he met Fermin Magdalena again, she had been one of the Basque refugee children he had played the guitar for, and cared for at Hutton Hall, Guisborough, fifty years earlier.

The memorial plaque was moved and re-dedicated at a ceremony in the Council Chamber where International Brigaders **David Marshall, John Longstaff** and **Frank Graham** were the guests of Honour. The ceremony was held on 14th February 1992, the 55th anniversary of the Battle of Jarama. When the Spanish government granted veterans of

the International Brigades Spanish Citizenship in 1996 Cleveland County Council granted the brigaders a reunion, again in the Council Chamber, this was reported upon by the local BBC, once again **David Marshall, John Longstaff** and **Frank Graham** were guests of honour.



IBMT

In 2002 The International Brigade Memorial Trust was formed from the veterans and Friends of the International Brigade Association, representatives of the Marx Memorial Library and historians specialising in the Spanish Civil War. **David Marshall, John Longstaff** and **Frank Graham** were some of the founding members, they all served on the executive committee at various points. The International Brigade Memorial Trust aims are:

To educate the public in the history of the men and women who fought in the International Brigades and in the medical and other support services in the Spanish Civil War. In particular, by preserving and cataloguing valuable historical material relating hereto and by making such material available to the public." "To foster good citizenship by remembering those who have fallen in the Spanish Civil War by preserving, maintaining and assisting in the construction of war memorials.



The IBMT held their 2009 AGM in the North East of England, the President, Marlene Sidaway had been **David Marshall's** partner until his death in 2005; she originates from Thornaby. During the AGM, in Middlesbrough's Council Chamber, a ceremony of rededication took place, led by Mayor Ray Mallon, Marlene Sidaway and Duncan Longstaff (**John Longstaff's** son).

On 8th February 2019 Duncan Longstaff showed the memorial to the folk trio The Young'uns on the day they performed **The Ballad of Johnny Longstaff** in Middlesbrough Town Hall. Further details about the IBMT can be found at: <http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/>

On 17th October 2020, a socially distanced ceremony took place in which the names of the seven Teesside men listed on the plaque was read out. The Volunteers for Liberty event was organised by the Communist Parties of Britain and Spain and the IBMT. As part of the Centenary celebrations for the founding of the Communist Party, on the anniversary of the last International Brigades parade in Spain, we commemorated the men and women who gave their lives for the Spanish Republic. Events were held in Cardiff, Glasgow, London, Manchester, Sheffield, Oxford, Cambridge, Crewe, Newcastle, Taunton and Southampton.



In Middlesbrough Martin Levy spoke for the Communist Party of Britain, Julio Romero spoke for the Communist Party of Spain, Tony Fox spoke for the International Brigade Memorial Trust and Bob Beagrie, a senior lecturer at Teesside University, read **David Marshall's** *I sing of my comrades* and his own composition *Vagabonds*. After the reading of the names a minute's silence was held, the wreath was later cast into the River Tees as a symbolic link between Teesside and Spain.



John Christie is looking to raise £6,500 to fund an International Brigades memorial to the eight men from Stockton-on-Tees who volunteered to Fight in Spain in the XV Brigade.

For more details see <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/stocktonbrigaders>