

The Vets Belgian Tour 2019

29 May – 1 June 2019

To coincide with the 75th anniversary of D-Day, Chris Somes-Charlton, otherwise known as the Supreme Allied Tour Commander (SATC) and several Bars returned to Belgium with a brigade of merry men armed only with hockey-cum-walking sticks.



Out host Michel, with Martin Cramer

Most team members travelled ensemble in the same Eurostar carriage, but some departed for the buffet car at the earliest opportunity in order to get in some early training in Belgian 'courage'.



We arrived in Brussels on time and made swiftly for Bornem, the Supreme Commander having plotted the path ahead. Thanks to his expertise in Belgian railways, no men were lost in the push for Bornem. On arrival at a deserted station, our leader pointed to the nearby hotel. As luck and the Supreme Commander's oversight would have it, however, we were berthed in a sister hotel, a good training run away on an industrial estate. It was more a case Toys R Us meets Travelodge. Worse, the venue could only be reached by dicing with death as we traversed a busy dual carriageway, laden with kit.

Dropping bags in our not uncomfortable rooms, we returned to Bornem centre in search of opposition and a bar where we could watch Chelsea's pulverising of Arsenal in the Europa Cup Final.

No sooner had we located a suitable hostelry than out of it flounced the Brothers DoomBar, Donald and Dobbin. We quickly reinforced their position. A nearby restaurant was then occupied, at a table large enough to seat 14 people. Later, the team Sherpa, Richard James, arrived with wife Melinda, bringing up the rear. We ate, watched the match and imbibed copiously.



Bringing up the rear?

The next day, we headed to Antwerp, resplendent in our HWHC touring blazers, to watch the British elite regiment (including our very own Harry Martin, Will Calnan and Sarah Robertson) taking on the Belgians at hockey. Alas, the Red Lions demonstrated why they are currently World Champions, although GB men did raise their game in the second half. The less said about the GB women's game, the better!



Afterwards, in a Tom Cruise incarnation, James Jackson led the troops on a slow meandering crawl in search of a train from Antwerp Zuid back to base. In the process, a big Charlie nearly became the first casualty of the tour with a moped up his backside as he strutted along the pavement. Next we circumambulated Sint Niklaas in a fruitless search for a restaurant bar, only to decide in the end to repair back to Bornem, site of the H & W training camp.

The first game against the Belgian Over 60s (The Old Lions) on Friday morning began in surprisingly vigorous fashion. In a bid to avoid impending impeachment, H & W President "Syko" ran straight onto the pitch, having arrived that morning from Blighty already changed and with Mike Carnill in tow.



Mike Carnill and Anthony Swing

As late as the last quarter, the match was poised at 3-3. Tony the Team Scribe ascribed what happened next to “some interesting umpiring decisions”, as defeat reared its head. He could also have observed that the team talisman and Supreme Commander limped off injured when the tourers were still ahead. But he didn't.

In the dossier of dodgy umpiring decisions was the Battle of Henrik's Foot, which nearly created a diplomatic incident and led to a penalty flick. Another decision devolved upon John Imperial-Majesty and his flicking gaily over the bar of a ball bound for the top of his net.

A sightseeing womble round of Antwerp arranged by Michel, our Temse HC host, and led by Carl, an octogenarian Temse stalwart provided a temporary respite from the wall of in-flowing alcohol. Along the way, we passed the Cathedral, the Town Hall, the Jesuit church where Carl married over 50+ years ago, and some delightful old back streets and alleyways. Our walk even included a triangular square or a triangular space which masqueraded as a square, a virgin experience for the well-travelled Supreme Commander. At half time, Carl invited the team for a beer in one of Belgium's classic café bars. Hobbled, but not on a hockey field, Anthony did well to keep pace, encouraged by other slow-moving team members.

Dinner on the last night in Temse took place in a modern restaurant beside the mighty River Scheldt. The Supreme Commander was about to tuck in to his just desserts, when a kangaroo court was hastily inaugurated. In a fetching pink wig of which Rocketman would have been proud, His Imperial-Majesty presided and Stroller strolled, his tail in the air. Otherwise known as the Goa Constrictor (one of 3 Goans in the H&W touring team), Stroller never misses a chance to blow his own D'Sousaphone.



The Goa Constrictor

He endeavoured to smear the Supreme Commander's reputation with every wrong thing he could think of. Happily, the Supreme Commander was not deemed sufficiently guilty as to warrant the sentence handed to poor Admiral Byng RN in a previous century: he was executed 'pour encourager les autres'.



In the Courtroom



The Goan Brethren

Our Temse hockey friends even ferried us back to Bornem after dinner, where some extra late-night training was added to the schedule. After over-exertion by some late on, our second match against the Belgian Old Lions on Saturday morning was not our best and is best forgotten.



In our final match against the Dutch Over 60s, the by-now Superannuated Vets played their socks off, securing a very creditable 1-1 draw (which looked all the more remarkable when the Dutch beat the Old Lions in the last game). Anyone who could walk, spread-eagled themselves across the pitch and played out of their skins, some literally so.

With the number of walking wounded reaching almost a quarter of the team, the Supreme Commander now beat the retreat. Dobbin the DoomBar sported a shiner after facing off a shot which might otherwise have penetrated His Imperial-Majesty's walking sticks. Even young James was by now lame, but at least Sherpa James ran on regardless.





The "Shiner"

Our host Michel and his wife could not have been more helpful or made us feel more welcome. In a further demonstration of his willingness to go above and beyond, after the umpires' whistles had fallen silent until another tour, Michel loaded up his pick-up with all our kit and cases and drove it to Temse station, allowing the weary to walk unencumbered.

We arrived in Brussels in time to have some warm down exercises before boarding the Eurostar back to St Pancras where everyone gathered to say 'goodbye' before parting. All agreed that it had been yet another stonking Temse tour.

Dramatis personae: Mike Carnill, Martin Cramer, Richard D'Souza, Donald Dunbar, Dobbin Dunbar, Marc Fernandes, John Ingram-Marriott, James Jackson, Richard James, Henrik Kjellin, Charles Packe, Tony Pereira, Chris Somes-Charlton, Richard Sykes, Melinda James & Anthony Swing.