The Dugout

The Newsletter of the Dorset and South Wiltshire Branch of the Western Front Association

January 2009

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Diary Dates 2009

Meetings:
Saturday, 14 February
David Fletcher: Tanks & Trenches
Saturday, 14 March
John Chester: Poor Little Belgium
Saturday, 18 April
Geoff Bridger: The Reality of War
Saturday, 16 May
Ian Cull: The Last Cruise of the Emden
Saturday, 20 June
Bill Fulron: Albert Ball VC
Saturday, 15 August
Peter Starling: Mistaken Gallantry
Saturday, 19 September
The Eastern Front
Saturday, 17 October
Edith Cavell
Saturday, 14 November
The Royal Flying Corps
Saturday, 5 December (AGM)
The East Africa Campaign

At Pimperne Village Hall, Blandford - 2pm for 2.30pm start.

Further details on WFA website www.westernfrontassociation.com

Field Trips
Spring day trip - TBA
Friday, 4 - Monday, 7 September - **The 1915 Battles**

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Chairman's Chat

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this first edition of ***"The Dugout".***

As with all things concerning the branch the appearance of this occasional newsletter is solely down to the efforts of Helen Kerridge our editor. Helen has worked hard at producing an interesting and readable newsletter. As well as the usual notices concerning the branch and its activities past, present and future it will be an accessible medium for those bits of research that are lurking in the darkest recesses of the filing cabinet! The newsletter will be an important enhancement to the wide range of communication channels that are open to us today and will be available as widely as possible. It is the intent to publish on a regular basis but the frequency will depend upon the amount of material available for publication. I commend this newsletter to you and ask that in the best tradition of the branch you give it your full support.

Welcome to *'The Dugout'*

I suspect that all of us who have served in the forces and probably those that have not know the adage, 'never volunteer' - so how is it I now hold the grand title of *Newsletter Editor?* Our Chairman must have seen a chink in my armour. But here we are, Issue 1 of ***"The Dugout".***

I am looking forward to the challenge but state right here, I am no expert; I look to you, the Branch members to feed me with articles, funnies, book reviews and especially those odd facts which we all love to remember. I aim to publish three or four times a year, dependent on material available, so, if you visit the battlefields let me have a brief report; have any interesting family members, let me have an article; read any good books, and they do not have to be newly published, let me have a review. Maps, drawings and photographs will all be welcome.

In this issue:
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RND Gallipoli Tour, May 2008

We met up with the organizer of the tour Len Sellers at Luton airport and flew to Istanbul where our party of thirteen (five from our own WFA Branch) transferred from the airport in an air conditioned coach to our hotel, The Pensiyon Helles Panorama at Sedd ul Bahir.

This was my first visit to Gallipoli and I was not to be disappointed in any aspects of the tour. I have enjoyed reading about the campaign and have found it difficult to visualize the topography of the area from words and maps. Each day had an objective and the week was divided between Helles, Anzac, Suvla, the French sector and Morto Bay. We set out by bus after breakfast to these areas where we undertook walks across fields, up and down gullies, deres and nullahs to experience the land over which the battles were fought. This combined with visits to cemeteries and memorials engendered thoughtful reflection of what had taken place there 93 years ago.

Around Helles the landscape is relatively flat whereas at Anzac, a journey by coach of about thirty minutes, the ground suddenly rises up almost vertically in places from the seashore. At Suvla the landscape at first appears to be similar to that at Helles but first impressions are misleading as the ground disguises the fact that it is covered with depressions and hidden ravines before rising up to the high ground which dominates all below it. When standing on the high ground and looking down towards the seashore the task and distance which an attacking force has to advance over to capture the heights seems to be almost insurmountable task.

From Shrapnel Valley Cemetery we walked up to Plugges Plateau, a very sharp ascent, and looking down upon the magnificent panorama it was not difficult to imagine the troops in 1915 endeavouring to fight their way upwards towards their objective. It became apparent how easy it would have been for inexperienced troops to lose direction especially in the dark let alone during daylight hours against an inspired and determined defender above them. The ground seems so inviting but it is equally misleading and treacherous to the unwary even today.

After a very full day the group assembled before dinner with a cool drink to listen to fascinating talks given by individual members about different aspects of the Gallipoli campaign; within the group there was a wealth of knowledge and they were most generous in imparting their expertise on the subject to the group. One evening after dinner we undertook to walk about of about a mile in the dark, which in January 1916 the RND had traversed on the last evening of the evacuation at Helles from Skew Bridge Cemetery to V Beach.

The area in which the campaign was fought over has now been declared a Turkish National Park, which one assumes has the intention to maintain and preserve the landscape and memorials within it. Regretfully is has to be said that on our fields trips we witnessed, in some areas, the surviving trench lines and dugouts have now literally become a fly tip full of Turkish rubbish and debris. Sadly in the French sector there are memorials, which most probably marked some heroic last stand, have been allowed to crumble and now lie neglected.

My visit was enhanced by a wonderfully knowledgeable group who gelled together to share and impart their experiences of the Gallipoli campaign making the tour most enjoyable. The views across the Dardanelles from The Pensiyon Helles Panorama and the superb food and hospitality will linger long in my memory

All the members of the group had their reasons for visiting Gallipoli; for some it was to visit the graves of their forbears who now lie in the beautifully kept CWGC (Commonwealth War Grave Commission) cemeteries, for others to see a family name of one who has no known grave inscribed on a memorial. Others came to research specific aspects, or just to enjoy the Gallipoli experience. Joe Murray who fought throughout the campaign with the RND, was one the last men to be evacuated from Helles in January 1916. He remembered many years later that he felt that they were leaving behind so many of their friends and comrades. That may be so, but those who undertake a tour to Gallipo1i ensure that they continue to be remembered.

R G Coleman

Friends Ambulance Unit - Death of Norman Gripper in 1918

The following account is based upon family history research and concerns two brothers, Laurence and Norman Gripper, who served together in the Friends' Ambulance Unit attached to the French Army during the First World War. They came from an old Quaker family near Colchester.

Both planned to become electrical engineers, although Norman, the younger brother, was still at Bootham School when war broke out. In February 1915 Laurence decided to join the Friends' Ambulance Unit in France. He initially served as a medical orderly but later qualified as an ambulance driver. Norman was determined to follow his example and family tradition is that he falsified his age in order to be eligible. His mother was very much against his going but at last consented on condition Laurence looked after him.

Norman enlisted on 23rd November 1915 and after training at Jordan's Camp eventually joined Laurence's ambulance convoy, SSA 14, on 7th August 1916. As Quakers they had both registered as conscientious objectors and been granted absolute exemption from military service. Thus although they served as ambulance men it was recognised that they would not bear arms and fight in any situation.

There had been great controversy amongst Quakers over the formation of the Friends' Ambulance Unit. Many saw it as encouraging the war; they particularly objected to members wearing uniform and being attached to the military. This was, of course, necessary so they could work effectively with the Army Medical Services in the war zone and be protected by the Geneva Convention should they fall into enemy hands. The volunteers accepted it despite their pacifist principles; it was the only way they could go and do something to help the wounded.

The Friends' Ambulance Unit started with about 45 members in 1914 and grew to 600 by the end of the war. Twenty six members were killed during this period and ninety six were awarded the Croix de Guerre. It was laid down at the outset that they were not to become involved in combat situations, so they were not allowed to run Casualty Clearing Stations right in the front line. Their role soon became established as taking the wounded back from the trenches to transit hospitals in the rear for "triage"; a procedure introduced by the French. Doctors separated casualties into three categories: those who were going to die and so would only get morphine, those who might be saved by immediate surgery and those who could probably survive the journey to a base hospital after just dressings, splints and drugs.

The Friends' ambulance convoys, known as Sections Sanitaires Anglaises, worked with the French Army throughout most of the war. It seems that the British military authorities would not accept them. They were modelled on the French Army Sections Sanitaires, with which they were virtually interchangeable. SSA 14 had twenty two Buick ambulance cars plus a kitchen and a workshop truck. These vehicles would be regarded as primitive by modern standards - slow, noisy, and hard-sprung and they had to be hand swung to get them started. A driver was permanently assigned to each, with an orderly or "sous-conducteur" to help with the total strength of a convoy being 56 men under a "Chef-adjoint" and a "Sous-adjoint".

Administratively they were regarded as units of the French Army and received the same rations, fuel supplies and pay; a French warrant officer was attached for liaison purposes. Their non-combatant status was honourably respected, except for one recorded occasion when soldiers in a desperate situation commandeered an ambulance. The French government apologised for this later.

Shortly after the war two members, M. Miles and J.E.Tatham, wrote a history of the FAU from 1914 to 1919. As well as giving a straightforward account of the Unit's operations, the authors describe some of the good memories, such as the bivouacs and camp cooking, the sing-songs, the many comrades they knew amongst the French and so on. But they also speak of the dark side, such as having to crawl slowly over rough ground in bottom gear, under fire, with men in agony in the back and sometimes having to stop, get their tow rope and drag away dead horses.

In the Spring of 1918 the Germans launched a series of massive attacks on the northern sectors of the Western Front in France, in what was to be a final attempt to win the war before the new American armies were deployed against them. They drove the British and French back many miles until both sides were exhausted and stalemate returned.

At the beginning of May, the Allied Supreme Commander Marshal Foch called upon Field Marshal Haig to send some battle-worn British divisions south to a quiet sector of the line, so that some fresh French troops could be released to guard a more dangerous sector. Accordingly, three British Divisions took over the right hand end of the narrow ridge north west of Amiens along which runs the Chemin des Dames. They had suffered very heavy casualties in the battles of March and April and had just been made up to strength with very young conscripts, older men of poor physique and wounded returned from hospital; by 1918 both sides, with the exception of the Americans, were "scraping the bottom of the barrel" for manpower

Contrary to Allied belief, the Germans were in fact planning a massive attack, which they code-named Blucher and which the French later named the Second Battle of the Aisne. Thick woods behind the German lines helped to hide some of their extensive preparations but it was obvious something was going on. Foch and Haig decided however that it was just a feint to draw their forces south from the real danger area around Arras and Albert and so did nothing about it.

Learning from the mistakes of the Somme and Verdun, where frontal attacks with masses of men only gained a few hundred yards of ground at the expense of enormous casualties, General von Hutier, who commanded the German army in this sector, intended to use new tactics which had proved successful on the Eastern Front in the Battle of Riga. Specially trained and equipped "storm troops", armed with the new sub-machine guns and grenades, would concentrate on weak spots in the defences and "flow" round strong points, aiming to get behind the Allied lines and cause confusion and panic in the rear. Meanwhile slower more heavily armed units would "mop up" these now isolated pockets of resistance.

The only counter to these tactics was defence in depth. Unfortunately General Duchene who commanded the Chemin des Dames Sector was of the old school and insisted on the front line being the main defence, against current General Staff policy.

German plans for their bombardment, prepared by their artillery expert Colonel Brueckmueller, were also new. He had 850 batteries of guns along the 24-mile attack frontage. Unlike earlier battles, no ranging shots were to be fired, which would destroy surprise nor was the barrage to be concentrated on the front-line trenches. Instead, by compass, map and theodolite, the guns were laid so as to drench a twelve-mile depth behind the lines with a mixture of explosive and poison gas (both sides by 1918 were using large amounts of chemical weapons). Although the radius affected by a single gas shell was comparatively limited, their use in large numbers meant that soldiers would be constantly putting on and removing their masks, which in any case became contaminated and of less use as time went on. The wearer of the standard British gas mask had to put a clip on his nose and breathe through a tube held in his mouth, which was both unpleasant and tiring; civilians, farm stock and wildlife had, of course, no protection at all.

Crucial points such as cross-roads and centres of communication were targeted and Brueckmueller included in the timetable a number of random cease-fires just long enough for the defenders to think it safe to emerge from their shelters and begin to repair telephone wires, load casualties on to stretchers and so forth, only to be caught in the open by renewed salvoes.

On Sunday May 26, SSA 14 was stationed at Lime about 12 miles behind the front line where they were attached to the nearby military hospital in the grounds of the chateau at Mont Notre Dame. That evening the drivers were having supper when a call came to be ready to move in an hour and a half. Nothing happened and most went to sleep in their ambulances. Then at 1 a.m. on Monday morning, May 27 the German bombardment began. The ambulance crews put on their gas masks and tried to continue sleeping. At first light, 3.40 a.m., the storm troops began their assault and in the early morning mist they

carved right through the British front line at the eastern end of the Chemin des Dames. The situation was soon serious.

A number of French soldiers suffering from influenza had been taken to various villages a few days earlier and FAU ambulances were sent out to fetch them back to the hospital; this involved passing through the little town of Braine. Here a shell hit the ambulance driven by Norman Gripper. He was killed outright and his companion Hugo Jackson was mortally wounded, dying later without regaining consciousness. When they failed to report to the hospital a search party, which included his elder brother, went out and found them.

Later the very same day a Presbyterian Chaplain buried them with military honours in the chateau grounds. From French records of the battle, the funeral must have been a hurried affair in the evening with German storm troopers only a mile or so away. To be given military honours would be very controversial for Quakers but possibly it was a mass burial of many British casualties. Maybe it shows the respect which the Friends Ambulance Unit crews had earned, that they were included in the ceremony alongside the soldiers, despite being conscientious objectors.

SSA 14 was ordered to withdraw to Villeneuve sur Fere immediately after the funeral. Several hundred French and British wounded had to be left behind in the hospital, which was overrun by the Germans that same night. Many doctors and nurses volunteered to stay with them and were taken prisoner as well. It takes little to imagine the ordeal of the patients as they lay helplessly in pain, breathing air tainted with poison gas, hearing the noise of battle outside, and wondering what was going to happen.

By May 30th, the Germans had penetrated as far as the Marne, 56 miles from Paris, but they ran out of strength and their advance was stopped. The battle has been described as the most disastrous on the Western Front for the British troops engaged; Norman and Hugo were but two of the 28,703 British casualties.

After the war, the two Quakers were re-interred in the British military cemetery at Vailly sur Aisne. It contains the graves of 673 British soldiers, plus one Canadian, one Frenchman and a German; 306 of the bodies are unidentified. Surrounding it is a French cemetery with 1,542 graves. Norman Gripper is recorded as having the French Croix de Guerre - the family think posthumously. His age is given as 21 but he was actually younger. His companion Hugo was 28.

The distress of the Gripper family was worsened by the fact that the casualty telegram they received did not make clear which of their sons had been killed. It was only when Laurence came home on compassionate leave that they learnt that it was his younger brother.

Laurence Gripper continued to serve with the FAU until the end of the war; the French also awarded him the Croix de Guerre, in June 1918 (the family has found both these medals). He survived the war, returned to his electrical engineering career, raised a family and eventually died of old age some seventy years after burying his younger brother in the midst of battle.

Book review

Title **"Somme Mud - The Experiences of an Infantryman in France 1916 - 1919**
Author: E.P.F. Lynch (Edited by Will Davies)
Published by DoubleDay
ISBN No. 9780385612784

"The last time I went to Kettering Library, I was only going to return the books I had out on loan. I discovered it was the day the new computerised booking system was being introduced.

The Head Librarian was so keen to demonstrate the new system, she persuaded me to "take at least one book out". Anxious to please, I made for the 1st World War section in case there was anything new in stock. What a stroke of luck! A brand new book sat waiting on the shelf: **"Somme Mud - The Experiences of an Infantryman in France 1916 - 1919"** by E.P.F. Lynch. From that

point for three weeks, I have shared and somehow, almost experienced what it was really like on The Western Front between 1916 and 1919. It is an amazing read; it's probably the best book I have read about The Great War.

In his foreword, Professor Bill Gammage writes:

Somme Mud puts you in the trenches, enduring the mud and the cold, smelling the stink of whale oil, following the dogfight overhead, suffering death's randomness. You watch Snow snipe a German half a mile away, then the next day risk his life to save another German and be reprimanded for it. You are brought close up into that war's world, wondering how such men could ever be civilians again, if they got the chance.

The book tells graphically what it was like to do a "stunt" (go over the top) as an infantry man in the Australian Imperial Force. Enemy shell fire is described in the same way as we would talk about the weather. As you read, you experience the emotions of going over the top with your mates and watching them fall by your side. You become involved in every aspect of life in the trenches, the highs, the lows, the fear, the excitement, the appalling conditions, the mateship.

The story does not end in November 1918; it takes you right back to Australia as Lynch arrives back in Sydney in July 1919. The post Armistice experience provides a fascinating counterpoint to the two years spent in the trenches.

For anyone interested in The Great War, this book is a "MUST READ".
I can't recommend it highly enough."
John Stanyard

Forwarded by Sandra Twyford

Can you help?

Can you identify the uniform worn by the soldier in the photograph?

His name is Benjamin John Prior, born 13 February 1888 in Somersham, Huntingdonshire. He enlisted in 1914 into the 8th Bedfordshire Regiment and attained the rank of Corporal. He was killed on 15th September 1916 and is buried at Guillemont cemetery. Unfortunately his service records were destroyed so little more is know about him.

The photograph hangs in a church in Godmanchester near Huntingdon close to where he was born. The uniform baffles us; it has been suggested that this was taken soon after enlistment and is a 'Kitchener uniform' issued as a temporary measure until service dress could be provided. Is this right? Any suggestions / comments would be most welcome to the editor.