

Battlefield Tour 2006

THE DORSETS ON THE SOMME & THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI

After a year of planning and organizing, the Branch's first Western Front tour got underway when we left Pimperne at 07:00 hours on Friday 22nd September. Our progress to the Channel Tunnel was punctuated by a pick-up in Salisbury, a stop at a service station to buy milk for on-board brew-ups, full breakfasts (for some!) at Clackets Lane (M25) and a final pick-up at Cheriton Park near Folkestone.

By 13:45 hours (local time) we were on the French motorways and heading for our base at Arras via to Vimy Ridge.

The Canadian Vimy Memorial was under shrouding whilst restoration takes place, but David Fletcher, historian at the Tank Museum, and Will Townend, our resident artillery expert, treated us to very interesting talks on events here.

After checking-in at the Mercure Atria, party members had the choice of eating in the hotel or visiting one of the many restaurants within easy walking distance around the Place du Marshal Foch or the two main squares, the Grand Place and the Place des Heros.

Saturday morning saw us head off in the direction of Bapaume for a tour of sites on the Somme paying particular attention to places where Dorsetshire Regiment fought in 1916. Our guide for the day was Mike Adams.

We first halted at the Lochnagar Crater near La Boisselle. The crater was created by the explosion of a mine packed with two charges of 24,000lb and 36,000lb of ammonal on 1st July 1916. After crossing to the north of Albert to Bapaume road, which formed the main axis of the Somme attacks in 1916, we headed for Authuille Military Cemetery.

The cemetery is near the point where the 1st Dorsets (part of 32nd Division) formed up before advancing through Authuille Wood to attack the Leipzig Salient on 1st July 1916. The battalion had been active in this area prior to this date, and amongst the 450+ burials here are men from the unit killed in a German trench raid on 7th/8th May 1916. A wreath was laid at their graves.

Screw pickets and narrow gauge rails salvaged from the battlefield are in widespread use as fencing materials by local farmers.

We moved on to Lonsdale Cemetery at Aveluy. The cemetery is sited near the point where 1st Dorsets emerged from Authuille Wood to make their attack. Some managed to reach the German trenches but were forced to withdraw by enfilade fire.

The cemetery is named after the 11th (Lonsdale) Battalion of the Border Regiment who attacked with the Dorsets. It holds 1,542 burials. Special memorials commemorate 22 casualties who are believed to be amongst the 816 unidentified.

From the cemetery we were able to walk across the fields to the Thiepval Memorial and Anglo-French Cemetery. The memorial lists the names of 72,116 men from the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20th March 1918. The Anglo-French Cemetery holds 600 graves, 300 Commonwealth and 300 French to reflect the joint campaign on the Somme in 1916. Only 108 of the 600 are identified. There was an opportunity to visit the recently opened visitor centre, sited so as not to obstruct views to the memorial before we moved on to the Ulster Tower for a toilet stop.

The tower commemorates the sacrifice of the 36th (Ulster) Division on 1st July 1916. It was built in 1912 and is a replica of a building at Clondeboyne in County Down where the division trained before going to France. A brief look around the site was possible before we headed for Albert and lunch.

En route Will Townend pointed out artillery positions around Aveluy and the location of 12" railway guns on sidings near Albert railway station. Lunch in Albert was "by own arrangements" and there was time for some of us to visit the Basilique de Notre-Dame des Berbieres (Our Lady of the Ewes) and admire the recently regilded "Golden Virgin."

The afternoon began with visits to Mouquet Farm (generally known as Moo Cow or Mucky Farm), where we heard about the part played by 5th Dorsets in the final capture of the farm in September 1916, and to Fricourt, where 6th Dorsets were in a supporting role during the assault on the first day of the Somme. The 7th East Yorkshire Regiment – the Green Howards – who led the attack on 1st July are heavily represented amongst the 133 burials in Fricourt British Cemetery where a memorial cross commemorates the battalion.

The 6th Dorsets also featured in our next stand at Contalmaison Communal Cemetery. This overlooks Mametz Wood, the Quadrangle and Acid Drop Copse. The Dorsets took part in the attack on Mametz Wood on 8th July 1916. A fine modern memorial to 12th Manchester Regiment stands in the communal cemetery. A wreath at the base indicated a recent visit from another WFA branch.

A stop at Longueval provided an opportunity for some refreshments as well as time for personal visits to Delville Wood, the South African Memorial and Delville Wood Cemetery. The South African Memorial was originally intended as a tribute to South African servicemen who served and died in all theatres during the First World War. This was later extended to include the Second World War and the Korean War. Delville Wood Cemetery contains 5,523 burials; 3,593 are unidentified.

Our return route took us through Flers, associated with of the first use of tanks on 15th September 1916, and around Bapaume. It is strange how things fall into place. On the outskirts of the town we passed a memorial to the Battle of Bapaume in the Franco-Prussian War. I realized this must be “the Monument near Bapaume” mentioned as the location of 1st Essex Regiment in their war diary – my grandfather must have been on or near this spot on 25th August 1918! On to Arras for another enjoyable al fresco evening!

Sunday morning saw us move off to explore the Cambrai battlefield. A long full day of interest and what great “Tank Country”! The focus of the day was the left sector of the 1917 battle. David Fletcher was our guide and took us first to Fins. Here we saw the remains of a “railpoint” used to unload tanks from the trains that brought them from the “tankdromes” in the rear. Tanks made their way forward from the railpoints under their own power to prepared “hides”.

We passed alongside Havrincourt Wood, where D, G and E Battalions Tank Corps assembled prior to the start of the battle, and through Trescault to halt outside Ribecourt Road Cemetery. Re-turfing was underway in the cemetery itself, but there were excellent views across the battlefield to Flesquieres Ridge and Bournon Wood.

A brief halt was made Welsh Ridge, the axis of the advance by 6th and 20th Divisions, and the scene action resulting in the award of a Tank Corps VC. When his tank was knocked out, Captain Richard Wain seized a Lewis gun and charged the enemy, capturing a strong point and taking about half of the garrison prisoner. Wain was killed, but his action allowed the infantry to continue their advance on Marcoing.

We passed through Marcoing, the most forward point reached by a cavalry unit – the Fort Gary Horse – in 1917, to reach Masnieres and the St. Quentin Canal. A bridge over the canal here collapsed when the tank ‘*Flying Fox*’ attempted to cross during the battle leaving the tank in the canal. The route to our next stop took us along part of the “Grande Ravine” – another physical feature of the Cambrai battle.

It was near lunchtime when we arrived on Flesquieres Ridge and the site of a new Tank Memorial still under construction. The line of attack from Havrincourt Wood by 51st (Highland) Division was directly towards this point and it was the scene of a well handled defence by German field artillery that knocked out several tanks. Although incomplete, it was considered appropriate for us to lay a wreath here.

After a picnic-style lunch in the centre of Flesquieres, we had hoped to visit wreck of the tank ‘*Dora*’ recently recovered from the battlefield to a barn in the village. Unfortunately this had to be cancelled in the absence of the curator.

A short walk from the village crossroads brought us to Flesquieres Hill British Cemetery holding over 900 casualties, mostly from 1917 and 1918. Over one-third

are “Known unto God”, but identified burials include some of the crew from the tank ‘Dora’.

Back aboard the coach, a circuit around Bournon Wood took us through Fontaine-Notre-Dame, a fortified village that represented the British high-water mark in the 1917 battle and over the Canal du Nord to Louverval Military Cemetery and Cambrai Memorial at Doignies.

The latter commemorates more than 7,000 British and South African servicemen who died in the Battle of Cambrai in November and December 1917 whose graves are not known. Amongst those commemorated on the Memorial is Tank Corps VC Capt. R.W. Wain. The cemetery was begun in 1917, but burials originally made elsewhere were brought here in 1927. Only six of the 124 burials are unidentified.

After diversions to facilitate personal visits near the sites of Havrincourt Chateau and Trescault Trench, we headed back towards Arras. Some of the party elected to be dropped at our hotel, whilst others remained on board to visit Faubourg d’Amiens Cemetery and Memorials.

Entrance to the cemetery is through the Arras Memorial. This commemorates almost 35,000 UK, South African and New Zealand personnel who died in the Arras sector between spring 1916 and 7th August 1918 and have no known grave. Those commemorated include Second Lieutenant Walter Tull – one of Britain’s first black professional footballers and its first black Army Officer.

The cemetery was begun in 1916 and was in use through to November 1918. After the Armistice graves were brought in from two smaller cemeteries nearby. Over 2,650 Commonwealth servicemen from the First World War are interred here and only ten are unidentified. Other burials include 27 Germans and one unknown Russian. There are also eight Second World War casualties, seven from the UK and one completely unidentified. A special memorial commemorates an officer from the United States Army Air Force killed in 1944 who is “believed to be buried in this cemetery”.

The adjacent Arras Flying Services Memorial commemorates over 1,000 airmen of the Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Air Force missing on the whole Western Front including VCs Major Lanoe Hawker and Major ‘Mick’ Mannock.

The two memorials occupy ground originally used for a French military cemetery which was moved elsewhere after the First World War.

Our day was completed by a visit to the nearby ‘Mur des Fusilles’ – the site where over 200 Frenchmen were executed by the Germans between July 1941 and July

1944. A concrete marker stands on the spot occupied by the execution post and individual memorial plaques commemorate the victims. A poignant end to our day.

The journey home on Monday was uneventful but included a “tactical replen” to stock up for Christmas. Our guides were truly superb and really added value to the tour. Finally our thanks to our driver – Phil was patient, humorous and willing to help and showed great interest in the places and events we were covering. Truly a job well done.

[This report is based on an article by Peter Gascoyne-Lockwood that appeared in the Western Front Association's Bulletin in June/July 2007 with additional material from Rod Arnold]

Wessex WFA