We began our tour from Wareham with Martin, Judy, Steve, Colin, Anne and Roger in a Homeward Bound Travel Mini Bus with driver Keith at 0900 hours. Stopping at Salisbury, we were joined by Viv, Rod, Nick, Simon and Ian. Continuing our onward journey we stopped for a comfort break and refreshments at Fleet Services. From there we arrived at Heathrow, Terminal 5 where Tom and Sandra completed our battlefield tour group. Passing through baggage, passport and security controls we entered into the vast shopping malls of the airport. Having made good progress to Heathrow we had time to enjoy a light meal and drinks before boarding a British Airways Air Bus A319 for our flight to Basel. Although take off was slightly delayed we had a pleasant flight and landed at Basel-Mulhouse-Freiburg Euro Airport at 1740 hours (local time). We emerged from the aircraft into warm sunshine and a cloudless blue sky and after efficiently completing entry controls we collected our baggage and were greeted by Anna in the atrium. She drove us to our hotel in Mulhouse, where we arrived at 1915 hours. After being assigned to our hotel rooms we all went out to a local restaurant for a very pleasant evening meal before retiring to bed.

Mulhouse, pronounced ‘Myluz’ is a large city in the Haut-Rhin department of Alsace in eastern France, near to the borders of Switzerland and Germany. It is also known as ‘the industrial capital of Alsace’. Two tributaries of the Rhine run through the city, the rivers Doller and Ill. There are also many fine historical and modern buildings including the largest automobile and railway museums in the world. The city also has a very good urban transport system with buses and a tram network. Opened in 2006, the latter comprises three tram lines and one tram-train line.

At the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 Alsace and Lorraine was annexed by Imperial Germany and Mulhouse was absorbed into its empire. On the 8th August 1914, shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, the French occupied the city for two days but were forced to withdraw after the Battle of Mulhouse. Some of the French citizens welcomed the arrival of the French Army. Many of those who did were subjected to severe treatment or executed by the Germans. When the war ended in 1918, the French army returned to Alsace and under the terms of Treaty of Versailles, Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France. With the collapse of
France in 1940 the region again was controlled by the Germans until May 1945 when it was again restored to France.

We awoke the following day to a lovely sunny morning and looking forward to the first day of our itinerary. After breakfast we left the hotel in a spacious coach and drove out of the city along the D432 into the Alsatian countryside. We passed through well cared for and architecturally picturesque villages of Flaxlanden, Zillisheim, Walheim, and Hirtzbach. At Zillisheim we observed a large shell erected on a traffic island surrounded by plants and flowers. The significance of this memorial is that it brings to the attention of villagers and visitors that during the First World War a large naval German gun emplacement was located in the nearby forest, (see page 7). In the village of Hirtzbach, situated on the D17 the main thoroughfare separated the opposing frontline forces during the First World War.

Continuing via the D7 and D10 we arrived at our destination, the village of Pfetterhouse and parked on its outskirts beside a man-made lake. Created in a swampy area of the valley it was to be part of a leisure complex but the scheme was not completed. Pfetterhouse – ‘the rocky one’ – is situated in the Jura Alsatian foothills close to the border of Switzerland. Prior to the Great War there was a large clock factory in the village but for reasons of economy it closed down at the end of the Second World War. The former railway station in the village was converted into housing in the 1960s. At the lakeside we met Jonathan, Nick’s brother and Andre Dubail, the President of the ‘Les amis du Kilomètre Zero’ (Friends of Km Ø). Monsieur Dubail, with Jonathan translating led us on a guided tour from the village to Km Ø. During the First World War the battle line of the Western Front ran from Nieuport on the coast of Belgium approximately 750-kilometres to the border of Switzerland at Kilometre Zero (Km Ø).

Monsieur Dubail gave us a detailed account of what occurred in the area during the First World War and was also able to inform us about some fascinating aspects of local history. Opposite to where we were standing by the lakeside there once stood a mill situated in the valley and close to the nearby river Largue. Prior to the actual declaration of war Pfetterhouse was occupied by the French and facing them across the valley were the Germans. Each side had dug trenches and fortified their positions. Any activity at the mill was observed by the French. On what was to be a fateful day they saw people coming out of the mill house and opened fire, believing that they were German soldiers. Inside the house the mill owner’s wife, who no doubt was frightened took refuge behind a door leading into the kitchen. Unfortunately a bullet passed through the door and killed her. A few minutes later her son was also killed. The French realising their observational error ordered the mill owner and the remainder of his family to leave and go into
the village. They then set fire to the mill and ordered any reference to the incident to be expunged from their records.

We then began our walk crossing over the Largue river in glorious sunshine and into forested woodland. When occupied in 1914 by the Germans the landscape was cultivated farmland and not covered with trees and undergrowth. As we walked along Monsieur Dubail stopped at significant points related to the First World War. These included a machine-gun post at the Largue river bridge, German concrete blockhouses, command posts and trenches. He also showed us where another mill had stood on the once cultivated land and was also burnt down by the French. One of the mill owner’s sons was among the first to be vaccinated by Louis Pasteur against rabies. There were also a number of land demarcation stones almost hidden in the undergrowth which Monsieur Dubail brought to our attention. Our woodland walk led us to a wooden footbridge over the Largue river. The footbridge was constructed and installed by Swiss Army Engineers in August 2012. Before 1918 the Largue River, which forms the frontier which passed behind marker No. 110 – a marker stone erected in 1743. The course of the river was shortened after the First World War and the frontier was adjusted in 1950. Interestingly marker No. 110 does not appear on many German military maps of the First World War. On the left across the fields is Largin Farm, a former inn and grocery store, famed as a rallying point for Alsatian refugees in 1943 and 1944. The Saillant du Largin or Largin Bulge of Bec de Canard – The Duck’s Beak, is a point of Swiss territory which penetrates deep into Alsatian territory. In the autumn of 1914, it was chosen by the military governor of Belfort, General Frédéric Thévenet to become the anchor point of the Western Front at the Swiss border.
We walked about 100 metres across the lush Swiss grassland of the Duck’s Beak and past a former Swiss outpost known as Point 510 and stopped at the Borne des Trois Puissance – Three Power Boundary Stone – Km Ø. This stone ‘Marker of the Three States’ was the point at which the French, German and Swiss borders met. Originally there were three markers stones, one dating from the medieval period the others from the 19th century. The border today is now further to the east than it was up to 1919. The position of Km Ø originated after the German annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. Dithering over where the borders of France, Germany and Switzerland should be established, they commissioned a cartographic survey. From a new and adjusted border the French then decreed that their trench line would begin at Km Ø.

Close to the border in 1914, Swiss Army Engineers erected a wooden blockhouse which was designated as Observation Post No.2. It was rebuilt between 2012 and 2013. During the First World War the Swiss Army occupied Largin point. They maintained the neutrality of their country through careful surveillance of the border observing the actions and posture of the two belligerents Swiss Marker Stone KmØ – the French to the left, and the Germans to the right. The Swiss military installations were only constructed of soil and wood. They did not have a defensive function, being merely intended to protect the soldiers of the Swiss Confederation from stray bullets and the occasional intentional shot from one of the belligerents. Monsieur Dubail completed his fascinating guided tour by the weathered marker stone inscribed with a bear – the coat of arms of Berne. He was applauded and thanked for the guided tour of Km Ø and imparting to us its history and other factual information. Martin then presented him with a Wessex Branch Western Front Association Plaque, which he gratefully accepted on behalf of his Association. We then held a short service of remembrance at the marker stone where Nick placed a Wessex Branch Wreath and Rod gave the oration, followed by two minutes silence. Nick and Jonathan had been instrumental in arranging this guided tour to Km Ø – another first for the Wessex Branch – and grateful thanks were extended to them. We then had a leisurely walk back through the forested woodland resplendent in early autumn colours to our coach. There, we said goodbye to both Monsieur Dubail and Jonathan wishing them a safe onward journey by car to their homes. As our guided walking tour to Km Ø lasted over three
hours it was decided it was appropriate to have a break and enjoy our picnic lunch by the lakeside.

We left Pfetterhouse at 1330 hours and via the D20/D463, briefly stopped to view a Second World War Tank Memorial to French Colonial Forces. At the village of Joncherey we parked close to the large and impressive memorial to Jules-André Peugeot. It was in this village on the 2nd August 1914, a day before the declaration of war that the first French and German fatalities between the two countries occurred. Corporal Peugeot of the 44th Regiment, 14th Infantry Division was stationed with his section in the village. Shortly after dawn on the 2nd August, Lieutenant Albert Mayer of Jäger Regiment-zu-Pferd Nr. 5, 29th Cavalry Brigade crossed over the French border. They did not encounter any French forces as the latter had withdrawn their forces back from the border, so as not to cause any unintentional confrontations with the Germans. On two occasions shots were exchanged as the German probed further into French territory. At around 1000 hours the Germans approached Joncherey and Lieutenant Mayer used his sabre to slash at, but not injuring a French soldier on outpost duty. Meanwhile, Corporal Peugeot and four other soldiers were eating their breakfast in the house they were billeted in. The house owner’s daughter burst into the room where the five French soldiers were and was alleged to have shouted ‘The Prussians! The Prussians are Coming!’ Peugeot and his four men went outside with the intention of arresting the Germans. However, Lieutenant Mayer fired three shots at Corporal Peugeot, one bullet hit his shoulder and as he fell returned fire at Mayer. The other French soldiers fired their handguns at the Germans and Lieutenant Mayer was shot in the body and then in the head and killed. Corporal Peugeot managed to get back to his billet but died shortly after. Three Germans were wounded, one ran off and was captured a few days later in a nearby wood, two returned to Germany and one was never accounted for.

Jules-André Peugeot was born on the 11th June 1893 at Etupes, France. Prior to being called up for military service in 1913 he had been a teacher. Corporal Peugeot who died on the 2nd August, 1914 lies buried in his home town of Etupes. Albert Otto Walter Mayer was born on the 24th April 1892 at Magdeburg in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. Later his family moved to Mulhouse.
joined the Imperial German Army in 1912 and two years later became a Lieutenant in a cavalry unit, the Jäger Regiment-zu-Pferd Nr. 5, part of the 29th Cavalry Brigade of the 29th Infantry Division, garrisoned in Mulhouse.

Lieutenant Mayer was the first German soldier killed in the First World War. Initially he was buried in Joncherey the day after his death. Later his remains were transferred to the German Military Cemetery at Illfurth. His cavalry helmet was found by the French and is on display in the Musée de l’Armée in Paris. Beside the memorial to Corporal Peugeot, Simon gave a brief talk from a German account of what had happened at Joncherey in contrast to that of the French version – to the victor the spoils and their perspective on writing the history! A bus stop nearby the magnificent memorial is also named in memory of Corporal Peugeot.

We left Joncherey and travelled via the D3, D103, D419 and D432 to Illfurth for a visit to the 1914-1918 German Military Cemetery. The cemetery was begun in 1914 when the Germans still considered that the area was part of the German Empire. It is laid out on a steep hillside and contains 1,426 casualties buried in individual graves, seven of them unknown and a “Kameraden Gräben” common grave of 539 of whom 510 are unknown. Inscribed bronze plaques commemorate the 510 unknown soldiers and the 29 who are known to be buried in the mass grave.

The communal mass grave is overlooked by an Imperial Eagle on a tall column with a plaque inscribed to aviators. Originally it was located at Habshaim to the south-east of Mulhouse. The inscription reads: “Illfurth Flugerdenknal” ‘Here rest on 18 March 1916 fallen crew of an airplane of the Flieger abteilung 48, Walter Kurt Reserve 2nd Leutnant, Fritz Hopfgarten Deputy Officer, Max Wallat Staff Sergeant. Died at this location (Remember Habsheim) after heroic air combat against a French Squadron together with their opponents. Erected by their comrades April 1916’. At the grave of Lieutenant Albert Mayer a Wessex Branch WFA cross was placed beside his grave.
stone. At the foot of the hillside there are a number of original inscribed German stone grave crosses and regimental memorials.

The cemetery also contains 21 German soldiers who were entombed in a large tunnel used as living quarters, and known as the Kilian Tunnel near to the villages of Anspach and Carspach. The tunnel was struck by shellfire in March 1918 and a section of the tunnel collapsed. Some of the bodies were recovered at the time but 21 remained unaccounted for. They remained perfectly ‘preserved’ for over forty years until the French began planning to build a by-pass around the town of Altkirch. The area was surveyed in 2007 and former trench lines were identified. Construction began in 2008 and two years later the tunnel was discovered at Carspach. The bodies were found with numerous artefacts in very good condition. The soldiers became known as ‘Die Toten des Kilianstollen’ or ‘The Dead of Kilian Tunnel’. On the 19th July 2013, the recovered bodies were buried in individual graves with full military honours in Illfurth German Military Cemetery attended by representatives of the German and French governments. Overlooking the 21 graves is an inscribed memorial commemorating the dead of the Kilian Tunnel.

On leaving the cemetery we re-joined the D432 and drove on a short distance to the town of Zillisheim. Situated in the Haut-Rhin department of Alsace it forms a part of the Mulhouse conurbation. We stopped on the outskirts of the town in the Bois de L’Atenberg, a very extensive forested area. The purpose of our visit was to walk to where a former German artillery position was established for a gun known as the ‘Great Cannon of Zillisheim – a 38cm (15-inch) SK L/45 ‘Max’ naval gun. These guns were also called ‘Lange Max’ – Long Max – a long-range, heavy siege and coastal defensive gun used during the First World War. They had originally been designed as the main armament of the Bayern-class battleships but were also used in fixed and semi-portable concrete emplacements. A significant alteration to the gun for land based artillery positions was of a large folding counter-weight slightly forward of the trunnion to counter-act the preponderance of weight towards the breech. Designed and manufactured by Krupp between 1914 and 1918 eight of these guns which weighed 267.9-tonnes were used in land emplacements having a maximum firing range of 47,500-metres or (51,900 yards). The length of the barrel was 16.13-metres (52ft-11-inches).
Construction of the ‘Le Grand Cannon de Zillisheim’ – “1915 Langer Max 1916” – began in September 1915 and was completed five months later. The gun was operational between February and October 1916. The first shell was fired in the presence of Crown Prince William of Prussia in the direction of Belfort, 34-kilometres distant and later towards Wesserling 33-kilometres distant. From information displayed at the site, 41 shells were fired at Belfort resulting in 4 deaths and 3 shells fired at Wesserling causing 10 deaths. To service this very large gun an underground tunnel network was constructed to give access to the gun and house a 74-man naval detachment. These tunnels are accessible and some of our tour members entered and walked through them. Above in the forest are several large square concrete structures with steel bars. Positioned at intervals above the tunnel network these structures were part of the ventilation system. At the location where the 38cm gun had been situated there is now a vast and deep concrete pit in the centre of which still remain the steel saddle and protruding threaded steel studs which secured the gun carriage. During October 1916 the gun was dismantled and transferred to another location at Koekelare in Belgium. In 1920 the former Langer Max site was declared an historic monument. All that is still visible above and below ground is in remarkable condition. The steel gratings and access gates are modern replacements, which has helped to maintain the site and allow visitors to access the tunnel network.

We spent over an hour at this remarkable location steeped in First World War history. Our last visit on this day was to Cernay German Military Cemetery. As we drove through the town we passed the French Military Cemetery which contains 2,304 French casualties and 65 of other nationalities of the First World War. One of the latter is Driver G.F. Bond of the 94th Battery, Royal Field Artillery who died in December 1918. He was transferred to the French cemetery from Modehheim German Military Cemetery, Illzach.

Cernay is a town in the Haut-Rhin department, now part of the Grand-Est region of France and situated on the River Thur, 17-kilometres from Mulhouse. Cernay German Military Cemetery was established by the French in 1920 for the burial of German soldiers who had been buried in the area from Rouffach in the north to the Swiss border in the south and from the Rhine in the east to the Vosges in the west. Many of those who lost their lives fought in the battles between August 1914 and the beginning of 1916 for the Vosges ridges and Hartmannswillerkopf (HWK). Dominating the Rhine Valley, HWK changed hands eight times between 1914 and 1916. At the request of the French government, the remains of prisoners of war who died in captivity in the southern region of France between 1914 and 1920 were transferred to Cernay in the 1960s and 1970s, as their graves in 76 municipal cemeteries in the Loire, Brittany and other administrative
area in the south were at risk. The cemetery contains 7,085 Germans, 15 Austro-Hungarians and 2 Bulgarians from the First World War. 5,663 are buried in individual graves and 1,442 in two Kameraden Gräbern – Mass Graves. At the far side of the cemetery are graves of 1,479 German casualties of the Second World War. Buried in individual graves, 386 of whom are unidentified, they died in the battle of the Vosges Ridge and the Belfort Gap. Following the conclusion of the Franco-German War Graves agreement of the 19th July 1966, the German War Graves Commission undertook refurbishment of Cernay German Military Cemetery.

During the refurbishment which took four years to complete the wooden grave markers were replaced with steel. A specially designed visitor’s centre and a maintenance building were also erected. Inaugurated in June 1984, the dead in the cemetery are an exhortation to peace. Along the side of one of the cemetery plots are several original German grave stone crosses, some weathered and difficult to read. We departed from Cernay at 1800 hours and thirty minutes later arrived at our hotel after a memorable and splendid full day’s battlefield tour.

We left our hotel on the second day of our tour at 0830 hours with Steve our coach driver, who drove through the city suburbs of Mulhouse to access the E512/N66. During the journey Simon gave us a detailed account about the first few weeks of the war in Alsace. He stressed the importance of the topography and geographical features of the region and its strategic importance to both the French and German armies. The flat plain beneath the Vosges, the Belfort Gap and the location of Abri de Guerre 1914-18 Museum Uffholtz Mulhouse made the decisions of the commanders of both armies of critical importance in the opening movements of their campaign. Both commanders were aware that the dominance and control of the high ground was vital and would be a significant advantage to its occupier. At the conclusion of Simon’s talk, we all expressed our thanks.

Our first stop of the day was at Uffholtz, a town in the Grand-Est region of north-eastern France. Located at the foot of Hartmannswillerkopf (HWK), the town can trace its history back to c.823 and has withstood uprisings and revolution. It is also noted for its cultural traditions.
We had pre-arranged a guided tour of the Abri de Guerre 1914-18 Museum – the Memory Shelter of Uffholtz, which was opened to the public in 2010. The building is one of the oldest in Uffholtz. Built in 1581 it was occupied from the mid-17th century by the Ficht family and then at the beginning of the 20th century by the Burger family. During the First World War the building was approximately 400 yards from the German front line and 800 yards from the French front line. Fortunately it was not totally destroyed but other areas of Uffholtz, were severely damaged and the townspeople evacuated and sent to other parts of France. In November 1921 Uffholtz was awarded the French 1914-1918 War Cross (Croix de Guerre).

After extensive renovation the Abri Mémoire was opened as a cultural and heritage centre and is part of a global programme to promote the heritage and remnants of the Great War in connection with the HWK site. As a resource centre and venue for artistic and cultural practice the Abri Mémoire offers spaces for meetings and education focusing on History, Memory and Peace.

Our visit was arranged for us by Nick and Jonathan who had liaised with the curator. We were met in the forecourt by Fabian and a colleague, an English translator who both welcomed us to the museum. They then led us into the ground floor of the museum which had concrete reinforced rooms used by the Germans as a hospital during the First World War. In the first room at the time of our visit there was a temporary art exhibition of paintings by Jérôme Marche and Brigitte Lion. Their artwork concentrated on the severe facial injuries which caused disfigurement to soldiers during the war. Brigitte’s portraits demonstrated that facial disfigurement altered the casualty’s personality and life prospects. Her paintings were about the split personality of the casualty and the after effects caused by the injury. Jérôme had graphically Painted by Jérôme Marche concentrated on the terrible facial wounds sustained by the casualty. We then moved on into the next room with an original medical dispensary and where surgical operations were carried out during the war.

Moving up to the first floor Fabien informed us about the very cold and bitter winter weather the troops had to endure and that horses and mules were unable to work in such conditions. In June 1915 Captain Louis Moufflet of the 62e Battalion de Chasseur Alpin and Infantry Lieutenant
René Haas went to the Headquarters of the Vosges Army Group with a proposal to import husky dogs from Alaska. Approval was subsequently given by the French Minister of War for 400 Alaskan sled dogs and 40 draught dogs.

Allan Alexander “Scotty” Allan was an American dog musher, businessman and politician. Of Scottish birth, before the outbreak of the First World War he was based in Nome, Alaska where he promoted the breeding of husky dog teams. He obtained the 440 dogs on behalf of the French, volunteered to serve with the Chasseurs Alpins and accompanied the dogs to France. The 440 dogs were transported across Canada, and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. Five dogs were lost overboard in stormy weather. The captain of the ship was concerned that the noise created by the barking of the dogs would attract the attention of German U-boats. ‘Scotty’ Allan used his knowledge and expertise to keep the dogs quiet during the sea voyage. The dogs were used during the winter months to evacuate wounded, help with communication and transport light stores on sledges.

Stored in the archive centre on the second floor are documents of First World War and a library of over 2,000 books. There were also two splendid topographical diorama models. One displayed the general features of a battlefield and the other a more detailed layout of HWK, the foothills and the plain below it. At the conclusion of this extremely interesting and informative guided tour, both Fabien and his colleague were both warmly thanked. Martin then presented Fabien with a Wessex Branch Western Front Association Plaque. On leaving the archive centre individual donations were made by members to the museum.

We left Uffholtz at 1100 hours in bright and warm sunshine and via the D431 began our gradual ascent to the highest mountain in the Vosges, the Grand Ballon. Also known as the ‘Großer Belchen’ it is located 25-kilometres from Mulhouse. Grand Ballon means ‘great round topped mountain’ because a ballon in French is a geographical term for a mountain with a rounded summit. During our journey up the mountain road we passed the HWK Heritage Centre and then stopped briefly on the D431 just below the summit of HWK to photograph a memorial to the crew of a Halifax Bomber MZ 807 of 433 Squadron RACF which crashed on the mountain in
December 1944. Continuing we were able to admire the spectacular views of the mountains and valleys. We reached the summit at 1,425-metres (4,872-ft) of the Grand Ballon at 1145 hours. With free time some members took the opportunity to walk the Monument of the Blue Devils – Monument Diables Bleu. The monument takes the form of a large granite pyramid with a bronze statue of an Alpine Hunter – Chasseur Alpin. Chasseur is a French term for ‘hunter’ a designation given to certain regiments of the French Light Infantry or Light Cavalry, denoting troops trained for rapid action. The bronze statue was created by sculptors Paul Moreau-Vauthier 1871-1936 and André-César Vermare 1869-1949.

In September 1919 the French Alpine Club proposed the erection of a monument to perpetuate the heroism of the Chasseur Alpin battalions that fought in the Vosges with a high cost in lives during the First World War. When the ‘Alpin Battalion of Hunters on Foot’ were established they wore a plain practical uniform suitable for service in the mountains. This took the form of a loose fitting dark blue jacket and blue-grey breeches, together with a large beret bearing a yellow (daffodil) hunting horn insignia of the chasseur branch. Their nickname the ‘Blue Devils’ probably originated from the First World War when the Germans acknowledged the fighting spirit of their opponents in the blue uniforms. The statue represents an Alpine Chasseur leaning on his weapon, placed against a granite pyramid with the inscription ‘Aux Diables Bleus’ – ‘The Blue Devils’. It was inaugurated in September 1927 by Raymond Poincaré, in the presence of the Alpine Chasseur battalions, generals, government officials and thousands of French citizens. In 1940 the Germans destroyed the statue and took most of the bronze back to Germany. Some pieces were rescued by Alsatians, including the famous beret. After the end of the war a new statue was commissioned to be identical to the original and was created by Pierre Bouret and cast at the Rudier Art Foundry. The restored pyramid and new statue was unveiled in 1960.

Other members of our group chose to obverse the panoramic views from the summit and have a coffee break in a café dedicated to the produce of bees – honey! There were on sale numerous blends of honey, cakes, biscuits, jams, sweets, honeycomb, various drinks and other associated products all made of or containing honey – it is a paradise for honey lovers. On each of the tables in the café was a jug of honey to be used as a sweetener. The coffee was very good as well! In addition of course the café had a normal French food menu.

At 1230 hours, we all assembled at the mountain top restaurant Les Vue Des Alpes for a pre-booked three course lunch. We were joined by Jonathan, our coach driver Steve and everyone had a fulfilling and delicious meal sitting at tables overlooking the valley below. At the
conclusion of our lunch thanks were extended to the restaurant staff and to Jonathan and Nick for their contribution to the luncheon arrangements concluded by Martin and Judy. We then boarded our coach and descended 471-metres down to HWK.

Hartmannswillerkopf is a pyramid shaped rocky spur in the Vosges mountain range in the Grand-Est region of France. The peak at 956-metres (3,136-ft) overlooks the Rhine valley. HWK witnessed ferocious and brutal fighting between the French and German forces for the occupation of the rocky peak. 30,000 troops died, the majority being French as each side fought to drive each other off the summit. After nearly a year of tenacious fighting, both opponents began to focus their attention northward. Sufficient troops remained at HWK to hold their trench lines which remained relatively stable throughout the remainder of the war. As a tribute to those who fought on HWK, it is now a national monument.

There is a Franco-German historical visitors centre and museum at HWK which pays homage to those who died in the area. Situated in a building of original design it merges with the woodland environment and is a symbol for peace and reconciliation. The museum concentrates on the daily lives of soldiers charting the horrific static battles and of civilians behind the front line whose lives were affected by the conflict. The close relationship between France and Germany which exists today is emphasised through education and their respective histories. There is also a café with exterior terracing overlooking the woodland valley.

The French National Cemetery – La Nécropole National du Silberloch Cemetery – lies on a downward sloping hill. From the bottom of this hill the ground then rises steeply up again towards the peak of HWK. The cemetery was established on the site of a former French military encampment. There are 1,630 soldiers buried in the cemetery including 384 unidentified buried in six ossuaries. Overlooking the cemetery is the Altar of La Patrie, bearing on the sides the names of the cities who donated money to build the monument. Beneath is an ossuary and crypt containing the remains of 20,000 unknown French and German soldiers. A long paved walk-way leading from the main road leads to the entrance of the magnificent crypt. The visitor walks down towards the
central space of the crypt around which are three chapels, dedicated to the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faiths. The silent and sombre underground environment creates a respectful and reverential atmosphere.

Our mid-afternoon arrival at HWK gave each member the opportunity to explore the area. Some chose to climb up the difficult pathways leading to the summit others took a more leisurely option to visit the heritage museum, crypt and or the French cemetery. We spent over two hours at HWK and then returned to our hotel in Mulhouse where before leaving the coach we thanked our driver Steve.

After breakfast on the third day of our tour, we left the hotel at 0830 hours, with coach driver Francis. He drove through Mulhouse in glorious sunshine along the A35/E25 passing by the flat and cultivated landscape below the Vosges. Exiting the auto route we joined the D500 and then the D1420 and arrived at the car park of Fort de Mutzig.

Fort de Mutzig, also known as Feste Kaiser Wilhelm II is located near the town of Mutzig in the Bas-Rhin department of France. It is one of the largest and strongest of all fortresses built in Europe. The decision to fortify the hill of Mutzig was taken in January 1893 by Kaiser Wilhelm II. It was part of a fortified network surrounding Strasbourg and Metz to prevent any French offensive in Alsace across the Rhineland plain. Building of the western part of the fortress began in 1895 using concrete. The eastern part of 1893 was built of masonry and later reinforced and covered with concrete. Armoured observation points and 15cm howitzer turrets were installed, and Mutzig was the first German fort with its own electric generating plant. In 1914, the 254-hectare (630-acre) fort comprised fifty buildings with an underground space of approximately 40,000 square metres (400,000 square feet). Twenty-two turrets were equipped with 10cm and 15cm howitzers and a wartime garrison of 6,500 to 7,000 soldiers. There were three concrete barracks for the garrison and eighteen concrete shelters for the infantry as well as four wells, bakeries, kitchens, hospital and many numerous other rooms and facilities. The underground tunnel network circuit is 2-kilometres in length with many staircases and narrow passages. The average temperature below ground is 14°C.

Fort Mutzig witnessed no significant fighting during the First World War and after the Armistice the French Army took control of the intact fort, with the exception that some of its guns had been taken to Germany in 1917. Although the Germans had built the fort the French began to carry out a building programme to structurally improve and reinforce some of the underground areas. The programme was abandoned when the French realised they were improving a German
fortress and redirected their resources into construction of the Maginot Line. During the Second World War the fortress was occupied by German artillery and infantry units, but in mid-June 1940 they were withdrawn and the guns decommissioned. It was later bombed by the Luftwaffe when it was suspected that French troops had re-occupied the fort. However, part of the Wehrmacht’s 215th Infantry Division was in the fortress at the time and over seventy Germans were killed. In November 1944 the American Third Infantry Division captured the fort and the small garrison of Germans surrendered. The fort was used by the French Army until the mid-1960s when it was abandoned but remained in the possession of the French Army. It is now one of the best preserved pre-First World War forts and retains most of its original equipment and has undergone a process of restoration by a joint Franco-German organisation since 1984. A museum, together with restored areas was opened to the public in 1995. Visitors are guided in small groups through the fortress and underground tunnel network, which takes approximately two-and-a-half hours to complete. Only about 10% of the Fort is open to visitors and since 2014 the fort has been known by its original name, the Kaiser Wilhelm II Fortress.

Martin & Judy had pre-arranged a guided tour and we were greeted by Naomi who was to be our excellent guide. She began by talking to us outside the fortress overlooking a deep ditch, outlining the history of Alsace and about its inhabitants who at different periods of their history were either under French or German control. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 Alsace was occupied by the Germans for forty-four years. On the outbreak of the First World War this division created problems for some of its citizens as to whom they owed their allegiance France or Germany. Many left Alsace and joined the French Army whilst others who had been brought up and educated by the Germans chose to fight for Imperial Germany.

After Naomi’s introduction, we entered the fort and began our tour of this impressive fort. As we walked along one of the passageways Naomi brought our attention to several galleries hewn out the rock. The Germans were aware that perhaps the French might tunnel beneath the fortress, place explosives and blow up part of the fort. Russian labour was used by the Germans to excavate these galleries which could be filled with explosive and when fired would collapse sections of the underground tunnelling onto the French below. Large numbers of Russian
prisoners of war from the eastern front were transported to Alsace and were used as forced labour. Many died from neglect. Naomi then led us

**Fort Mutzig – Restored Electrical Generating Room**
down to the lower levels and then up again via stairways and passageways to the upper floor of the fort. We saw an enormous bread oven in one of the bakeries, a fully equipped hospital room with medicines, sleeping quarters, barrack rooms, store rooms, workshops and other facilities. There is also a splendid restored generator room with four engines and a switchboard with its original clock in working order.

The interior of the fort has been restored to a high standard. Many rooms are still being restored to their original purpose and one room which we visited was opened for the first time on the day of our visit. The staff and volunteers where possible use original architectural drawings and documentation to aid the restoration so that the visitor has an authentic experience of the living and working conditions when it was garrisoned by troops. Areas of this enormous site are still used by the French military authorities and they occupy one of the two smaller forts within the fortress grounds. They impose strict rules concerning the 10% that is cared for by the voluntary working staff. A considerable part of the fortress structure is not accessible and is gradually falling into disrepair and probably will never be restored. We emerged from the interior of the fort after

**Fort Mutzig – Gun Battery No.1**
three-an-a-hours into bright sunshine and walked across the wide undulating grassy earthwork covering the fort to an observation post. Continuing we arrived at Battery No.1 with four 15cm guns and two observational cupolas. Two guns can be inspected by visitors from the rear of the turret.

At the conclusion of our guided tour Naomi spoke about the Franco-German relationship which led to the restoration project being undertaken. France and Germany have fought three wars against each other and have no desire to fight each other again. There is a continual cross fertilisation between both countries especially regarding children’s education and of the history of their countries to learn the lessons of the past and encourage peace. Naomi was extremely
knowledgeable about the history of Alsace, Lorraine and of Fort Mutzig. Her English was very good. Realising we were an enthusiastic and very interested tour group, she extended the length of the guided tour to show us more of the fort. We parted with grateful thanks of appreciation for her time and imparting to us so much interesting and absorbing facts about the fortress, the restoration project and about Alsace and its history.

It was appropriate after our extended and stimulating tour of Fort Mutzig to seek the shade of trees in a picnic area and enjoy lunch and refreshments. We left the fort at 1400 hours and drove back towards the city of Colmar along the A35/E25. Driving around the outskirts of the city we turned on to the 152nd Regiment (The Red Devils) Roadway and passed by their barracks. It was apparent that the region around Colmar was very fertile as there were acre upon acre of vineyards. We travelled along the D415 and D48 into the rich green countryside of the Kayersberg and Orbey valleys. Gradually ascending up the mountain road, the pasture land was dotted with beautiful houses and cattle enjoying the lush grass. We passed by the French Military ‘Cimetiere des Chasseurs’ or ‘Cimetiere du Col du Wettstein’ containing 2,201 individual graves and 1,334 in two ossuaries. In the early months of 1915 the front line ran to the north of Col du Wettstein.

The Linge Memorial is also situated in the cemetery and is dedicated to those who fought in the Battle of Linge. Inscribed on the granite base of a large cross are the words ‘AUX MORTS DU LINGE’ and attached to it is the original wooden cross. Lying across and in front of the cross is the sculpture of a dead Chasseur with a plaque inscribed ‘Les Diables Rouges des 152 aux Diables Bleus tombes en Alsace’ – a tribute from the “Red Devils” of the 152nd to the “Blue Devils.”

After turning onto the D11 we arrived at the Musée-Mémorial Du Linge 1915. The Linge Ridge is located in the Vosges at a height of 1,000-metres and separates the Orbey and Munster valleys. The Germans took up positions along the ridge in 1914 and being the aggressor were able to select on the high ground the most favourable positions for their troops and artillery. Their objective was to cut French access to Colmar. From the beginning of 1915 the position of the front line in the whole area was ill defined and the French aware that they needed to improve their position used the Chasseurs Alpins in an attack. The consequent battle lasted from the 20th
July to the 15th October. It was one of the bloodiest confrontations of Part Of The Linge Conserved Battlefield in which gas and flamethrowers were used. Approximately 10,000 Frenchmen and 7,000 Germans were killed. After the fighting the front line positions remained virtually static until the end of the war. The battleground is now classed as an historic monument and part of the battlefield has been conserved.

After paying a small entrance fee the visitor enters a very good modern museum. On display are French and German artefacts found on the battlefield site including weapons, munitions, personal objects and relics. There are also manikins of French and German troops in various uniforms, scale models of the battlefield, photographs, maps and some of the accompanying texts are in English. A twenty-minute introductory film outlines the geopolitical issues of the period and helps to put into context the consequences that brought about the First World War.

From the museum the visitor enters the conserved battlefield open air museum. The terrain of the Linge was not ideal for fighting with numerous trees, bushes and rocky escarpments. From late 1914 the Germans used their time to construct substantial defences including bunkers, block houses for their artillery, machine gun emplacements and barbed wire which was quite difficult for the French troops to see amongst the bushes and rocks. All of these features are remarkably preserved and coloured signage, direct the visitor to follow circuits through the trenches and fortifications. Around the conserved area are a number of tall crosses – white for the French and black for the Germans. These crosses mark places where the remains of soldiers were found and recovered. The dates for recovery of remains of French soldiers date from 1969 to 1999 and of Germans from 1969 to
2015. At some of these crosses two Wessex Branch WFA crosses were placed. There are French Soldiers Were Recovered areas of the conserved battlefield site that cannot be entered due to the debris of war and the sloping ground, which still contains unrecovered human remains. This was another very good visit to a fascinating French museum and battlefield site of the First World War.

We left at 1700 hours and drove by Hohrodberg Bärenstall German Military Cemetery which contains 2,460 German soldiers of the First World War who died during the fifteen-month-long 1915 battle for control of the Linge sector. 1,518 are buried in individual graves, 40 of whom are unknown. An ossuary contains the remains of 942, of which 516 are unidentified. In 1966 the German War Graves Commission began a series of improvements including Cross Marking Position Where A re-landscaping of the woodland and replacing the German Soldier Was Recovered wooden crosses with metal ones. There is a photograph of this cemetery in the 2020 Western Front Association calendar.

We arrived back at our hotel and thanked Francis for his patience and skilful driving. Later after a period of relaxation we all went out together for our last evening meal of the tour at a local restaurant. During the meal Martin informed us that after 15 years of organising battlefield tours this would be the last of our memorable Wessex Branch tours. Steve responded on behalf of all present, thanking both Martin and Judy which was then followed by a round of applause.

We left our hotel at 0830 hours on the final day of our battlefield tour, with coach driver Steve. Via the A35/E25, D4, D112, D111 and D468 we arrived eighty minutes later at the Casematé de Marckolsheim Sud. The casemate is a pre-Second World War fortified position near the Rhine river in eastern France and was part of an extension of the Maginot Line fortifications along France’s border with Germany. As a unit of the Fortified Sector of Colmar, the casemate was part of French defences during the German assault of the 15th to the 18th June 1940 – Operation Kleiner Bär – which resulted in 80% destruction of Marckolsheim. The casemate’s numerical designator was 35-3, referring to its place in the third line of fortifications, about two kilometres from the river bank. It was built during the mid-1930s by the Commission d’Organisation des Régions Fortifiées (CORF) which was responsible for the major fortifications of the Maginot Line.

Unlike other sections of the Maginot Line, the Rhine defences were not interconnected. They consist of individual casements or blockhouses a few hundred metres apart, arranged to fire
along the length of the defended frontier. The Marckolsheim Sud casemate is a double casemate, designed to fire laterally in either direction along the front, supporting its neighbours to the north and south. The position was armed with two twin heavy machine guns, type JM and two 47mm anti-tank guns, one of each firing laterally. The faces of these firing positions were defended by two automatic rifle embrasures. A further automatic rifle position defended the casemate’s entrance. On top of the fort, two cupolas were situated to fire in all directions with a JM cupola mounted centrally and a GFM automatic rifle cupola to one side. The Marckolsheim Sud casemate and its companion Marckolsheim Nord were not typical of the sector being somewhat larger than most with two cupolas rather than the usual single GFM cupola.

Marckolsheim Sud was commanded in 1940 by Lieutenant Marois of the French 42nd Fortress Infantry Regiment. Between the 15th and 17th June, 1940 the sector was attacked by German forces of the German 360th Infantry Regiment, 221st Infantry Division. Marckolsheim Sud and Nord steadfastly resisted the German attack. The latter brought up 8.8cm guns disabling one cupola and called in a Stuka attack, which buried the other in debris from the bomb blast. Without sufficient means to defend itself in all directions and with German assault teams throwing explosives into the casemate opening, the garrison was forced to surrender on the 17th. Marckolsheim Sud was restored in 1972 and houses the Musée Mémorial de la Ligne Maginot du Rhin.

When we arrived in the car park, the area was deserted and the museum closed. We were able freely to walk around the grounds surrounding the casemate, where several military vehicles are displayed. These include a Sherman tank, a half-track, an armoured car, a field kitchen, an anti-aircraft Bofors, part of a Bailey Bridge and a Russian 152mm field gun. On the exterior front wall of the casemate are two rusty shells which penetrated into the concrete. There is also free-standing cupola bearing the damage caused by machine-gun and small arms fire.

**Military Vehicles in the Grounds of Casemate 35-3**

We spent about three-quarters-of-an-hour walking the grounds in warm sunshine and then made our way back to the coach. As we were doing so, the curator of the museum arrived in his car and opened the museum.
After paying a small entry fee we entered into an Aladdin’s Cave of treasures which are magnificent. The interior of the casemate and internal rooms have been refurbished as they would have been in 1940, with firing chambers, generating unit, sleeping quarters, command post and a well for drinking water. The amount of material on display was surprising and included original weaponry, an anti-tank gun, machine guns, Bren guns, optical equipment, ammunition, photographs, maps, documents, a bust of Andre Maginot (1877-1932) and a memorial to Caporal-Chef Louis Gardet, who was killed in the casemate on the 16th June 1940. The curator was very friendly and helpful appreciating our interest and he stamped, dated and signed museum booklets for each of us as a souvenir of our visit. Before leaving we thanked and shook hands with the curator and then returned to our coach. Leaving the car park at 1130 hours our driver Steve drove along the D10, D20 and D52 following the course of the river Rhine. At Volgelsheim we crossed over the Grand Alsace Canal and then the river Rhine and stopped at Breisach-am-Rhine for ‘coffee and cake’ in Germany.

Situated along the Rhine in the Rhine valley the town of Breisach is in the district of Breisgau-Hochschwarzwald in the state of Baden-Württemberg, Germany. The name of the town has Celtic roots and means breakwater. The hill on which Breisach stands came into existence when there was a flood and it became surrounded the waters of the River Rhine, until the latter was straightened by a 19th century German engineer Johann Gottfried Tulla (1770-1828). He successfully accomplished straightening of the Rhine, improving navigation and alleviated the effects of flooding. During the Second World War Breisach was almost destroyed by Allied artillery as the Allies crossed the Rhine.

We left Breisach and crossed back over the Rhine into Alsace and stopped at the fortified town of Neuf-Breisach – New Breisach. The fortified town was intended to guard the border between France and the Holy Roman Empire and subsequently German states. It was built after the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 that resulted in France losing the town of Breisach on the opposite bank of the Rhine. Louis XIV’s military engineer Sébastien le Prestre, Marquis de Vauban (1633-1707) drew up plans for the fortified town of Neuf-Brisach and construction began in 1698. Vauban died in 1707 and his final project was completed by another military engineer, Louis de Cormontaigne (1696-1752). Neuf-Breisach, is a product of Vauban’s third system in which civilian buildings formed part of the defensive system. The layout of the town which was popular in the late 17th and early 18th century has a regular square grid pattern inside an octagonal fortification. Access was provided by large gateways in the main four curtain walls. Although the city sustained damage during the Second World War it is still an outstanding
example of 18th fortifications. In 2008 Neuf-Breisach was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as part of the Fortifications of Vauban group.

We again had glorious warm sunshine and after parking the coach we had free time to spend as we chose and the opportunity to explore. There are two lines of defence, an inner bastion wall around the city and an outer system of concentric star-shaped earthworks. The curtain wall is largely octagonal with each flank separated into three and the outer bastion projecting slightly so as to flank the centre walls. Each corner had a raised outwardly projecting pentagonal bastion tower, the highest points of the fortification. The outer earthworks are deep and occupied a greater area that the city itself. The space below the high curtain walls are now used for public events, artistic displays and for walking. We took the opportunity to enjoy our picnic lunch in these quiet and peaceful surroundings.

Time also allowed for a walk into the centre of the city. There is a large central square with a large fountain. First built in 1726, the decorative fountain was also the town’s largest store of water for use to put out fires. On the central column is the sun and fleur-de-lis symbol of the Sun King, Louis XIV and the French king’s court. It was destroyed in 1870 and rebuilt in 1992 according to the original specifications. Overlooking the square is the Eglise Royale Saint-Louis – The King’s Church Of the Holy Louis – designed by the architect Francois Chevalier and built between 1731 and 1736. All the forts built by Vauban were provided with a Catholic church as it was compulsory for every soldier to attend a service on Sundays. A wooden building served as a church from 1699 until 1731, the year on which construction of the church began. The church tower was used for observation of the surrounding area and by means of optical signals it was possible to communicate with other nearby forts. During the Second World War the church was destroyed during Allied bombing raids in 1945. Reconstruction using Chevalier’s drawings was completed in 1975. A new set of bells were installed and harmonised with the bells of Breisach’s St Stefan’s Minster and are called the ‘Peace Chimes’.

In an adjacent square is the 18th century Town Hall. Originally there was a well in front of the Town Hall. It was destroyed in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War and was replaced by a
memorial to the dead. After the end of the Second World War a new war memorial was erected commemorating those of Neuf-Breisach who died during the war. On the front façade of the town hall there are memorial plaques, including one to the American 30th Division that liberated Neuf-Breisach in February 1945. The visit to Neuf-Breisach completed our excellent September 2019 battlefield tour.

There was enough time for Steve to drive us to the airport taking the D52 scenic route along the Rhine and through the villages and countryside of Alsace. At Chalampe we exited the D52 onto a minor road to Bantzenheim, then on to the D468. At Ottmarsheim Steve briefly stopped in the village for us to glimpse the 11th century Romanesque church of St Peter and St Paul. Located on the ‘Romanesque Road of Alsace’ it was built between 1020 and 1030 by Rudolf of Altenburg. The church was consecrated in 1049 by the Alsatian Pope Leo IX. Continuing via the D108, D55 and D39 we accessed the A35/E25 then, exited at the junction for the Basel-Mulhouse-Freiburg Euro Airport. We arrived at the airport at 1500 hours where we extended thanks to our driver Steve.

At the airport we were able to enjoy a comfort break and refreshments. We then completed all the necessary airport checks, proceeded to the appropriate departure gate and boarded a British Airways A319 Air Bus for our return flight to Heathrow. We took off at 1850 hours and landed at Heathrow at 1910 hours (UK time). With reasonable efficiency we passed through the airport arrival procedures and then retrieved our baggage. Steve, Sandra and Tom were the first to leave our tour group at the airport. We then rendezvoused with Neil our Homeward Bound Travel Mini Bus driver for the journey to Dorset. We stopped at Fleet services for refreshments and travelled on in darkness and rain. Stopping at Salisbury, we bade farewell to Viv, Rod, Simon, Nick, and Ian and then continued on to Wareham where our tour had begun. With a fond farewell and thanks to Martin and Judy, Mandy, Anne, Colin and Roger left by car for their onward journey to their homes.

Our September 2019 Wessex Branch Western Front Association Battlefield tour was another outstanding success. Warm thanks are extended to all the drivers who with care and skilful driving conveyed us safely to the airports and battlefield sites. Thanks also to Jonathan and Nick for liaising and their help in making arrangements for our group visits to specific locations in the Vosges. The Wessex Branch WFA over fifteen years, have visited the First World War battlefields of the Western Front from the Belgian coast to Km 0. Tours have also been made to Gallipoli and Italy. We have visited numerous museums, cemeteries, memorials, private
residencies and many other First and Second World War sites of interest. The members of our Branch can take pride in this significant achievement. None of our tours would have come about without the hard work and dedication of our Branch Chairman and Secretary, Martin and Judy. Their professionalism and energy has always resulted in successful tours and all members who have participated owe them a debt of gratitude and thanks.

Uppermost has always been the awareness of those who have gone before and made the ultimate sacrifice by giving their lives when plunged into the terrible and costly conflict of the First World War. We have garnered much knowledge during our tours which have helped us gain a better understanding of the First World War and its impact on society. The 2019 Wessex Branch WFA Battlefield Tour was a fitting culmination to all of our previous tours. Finally, may all those who died in world conflicts rest in eternal peace.

R.G. Coleman

Sources

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Display Information Boards, Leaflets & Booklets

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