

WESSEX BRANCH WFA

Battlefield Tour ~ 6th-9th September 2013

Ypres Salient & Tanks On The Menin Road

In the darkness of an early and wet autumnal morning our coach left Pimperne on time. Stopping briefly at Salisbury to pick up another group, a longer break was taken at Fleet Services on the M3 where the last of our party, now totalling forty-four joined the tour. During the onward journey to Folkestone and Calais via the Channel Tunnel, the programme of events was outlined by our chairman.

Our first stop in France was made at Longuenesse (St. Omer) Souvenir Cemetery. St. Omer was the GHQ of the BEF from 1914-16 and a large number of Hospitals and Casualty Clearing Stations were established there during the war. In 1917 and 1918 the Germans bombed the town inflicting injury and death on the local population and that of medical personnel working in the hospitals. Over 2,000 casualties of the Allied nations are interred in the cemetery, among them the nurses killed in the air raids and members of the Chinese and French Indo-China Labour Corps. Crosses were laid at the grave of a Bournemouth man, Lance Corporal Cecil Noble, 2/Rifle Brigade who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous gallantry at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915. A tribute paid by a relative of Sergeant A.E. Barnard, 2/Rifle Brigade who died in May 1915. Quietly walking around the cemetery, the human cost of war was made visible.

Leaving St. Omer we crossed into Belgium and made our first stop at Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery where over ten thousand casualties of the First World War are buried. The French had established a Casualty Clearing Station at Remi Farm in 1914 and adjacent to it a burial plot which is now the second largest CWGC cemetery in Belgium. A talk about Lijssenthoek and its location relative to the Ypres battlefields was given on the coach. Before entering the cemetery, time was spent in the new visitors centre to view the photographic displays and listen to material held in a sound archive. A CWGC data



base can be searched for information on casualties buried in the cemetery. One of those is Major Frederick Tubb, 7/AIF who was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery at

Lone Pine, Gallipoli in August 1915. He was killed at Polygon Wood in September 1917. After leaving Lijssenthoek there was time for a visit to Tyne Cot Cemetery.

Of the 11,956 Commonwealth casualties buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery over two-thirds of them are unidentified. Three recipients of the Victoria Cross, Captain C.S. Jeffries 34/AIF killed in action, October 1917, Sergeant L. McGee 40/AIF killed in action, October 1917 and Private J.P. Robertson 27/CEF killed in action, November 1917 are buried there. The Tyne Cot Memorial has inscribed on panels the names of 35,000 casualties from the United Kingdom and New Zealand who died in the Ypres Salient after the 16th August, 1917 and who have no known grave. These include Lieutenant Colonel P.E. Bent V.C., D.S.O., 9/Leicester Regiment, killed in October 1917, Corporal W. Clamp V.C., 6/Yorkshire Regiment, killed in October 1917 and Lance Corporal E. Seaman V.C., 2/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, killed in September 1918. Our first day of the tour almost complete we left Tyne Cot in a thoughtful mood and were driven to our hotel the Best Western Flanders Lodge at Ieper.



Saturday the 7th dawned bright and sunny for a splendid day in Ieper and the surrounding battlefields. The morning was spent at the refurbished 'In Flanders Fields Museum' at Ieper. Hundreds of artefacts, film displays and use of modern technology brought into sharp focus the horrors that soldiers endured during the First World War. There is within the Museum space a reverential atmosphere as though a pilgrim is cathedral helping the visitor to assimilate the realities of the destructive and consuming effects of war. For those with an interest in the FWW the 'In Flanders Fields Museum' is a very good place to begin their battlefield tour.

Our afternoon tour began at Hill 60 with a comprehensive and informative talk about the Gas Attack of the 1st May, 1915, standing amongst the trees at the foot of the cratered hillside. The hill, in reality is a spoil heap created from the excavation of the digging of the nearby railway cutting. The ground had been bitterly fought over and sites of particular significance were pointed out including where Captain G.H. Woolley, later The Reverend, had won his Victoria Cross in April 1915. A demonstration was given to members, some of whom put on gas masks to participate in a re-enactment – which was admirably carried out with enthusiasm!

This was followed by a walk up the battle scarred hill to the summit where we assembled in front of a bunker. After a short homily wreaths and crosses were placed in and on the bunker in remembrance of those who had fought and died at Hill 60. A great-niece of Private A. Sanders, 1/Dorsets who died from gas poisoning on the 2nd May 1915 laid a wreath in his memory. After looking around Hill 60 to view its landscape and regimental memorials we moved on to The Bluff.

An interesting and helpful talk about The Bluff gave an insight into the fighting by the British to hold this vital position in February and March 1916. The Germans after capturing this feature held it for seventeen days until the British who sustained significant casualties, regained possession of it. We were then free to enjoy a pleasant afternoon walk in the sunshine following the pathways criss-crossing The Bluff – now a parkland – looking at mine craters and trenches lines which are still visible after nearly 100 years. Returning to the coach everyone received an infusion of delicious cake before proceeding on to our next stop at Ploegsteert.

Gathering in Prowse Point Cemetery details about the intense fighting for the possession of Ploegsteert Wood in October and November 1914, coinciding with the First Battle of Ypres, were given to an attentive audience. The cemetery is uniquely named after Brigadier General C.B. Prowse who as a major in October 1914 displayed outstanding bravery and leadership in attacking a German position with the 1/Hampshire Regiment and 1/Somerset L.I. Buried in the cemetery are Private H. Wilkinson 2/Lancs, Private R. Lancaster 2/Lancs and Private A.J. Mather 33/AIF whose remains were discovered in the wood in 2001, 2007 and 2010 respectively.

From Prowse Point we walked down to Mud Corner Cemetery bordering the northern side of Ploegsteert Wood. All the casualties buried here, except one, are New Zealanders and Australians who died at Messines in 1917. We continued on to Toronto Avenue Cemetery, where 78 Australian casualties lie who also died at Messines in June 1917.



Ploegsteert Wood Cemetery was the next to be visited where 164 casualties lie together in their separate regimental plots. Interred here are five soldiers from the 11/Royal West Kent Regiment, who were the first casualties, sustained by the battalion in June 1916. The walk into the wood ended at Rifle House Cemetery,

considered by many to be one the most beautiful in Belgium. Here lies Rifleman R. Barnett 1/Rifle Brigade aged 15 and Rifleman T. Stapleton 2/Rifle Brigade aged 45 both of whom died on the 19th December 1914 in an attack on ‘The Birdcage’ a German strongpoint on the Eastern edge of Ploegsteert Wood. Significantly their deaths occurred six days before the Christmas truce of 1914. Captain E.G. Dashwood, 1st/4th Ox & Bucks L.I. one of three brothers killed in the FWW is also buried in this cemetery. The walk into the now peaceful wood and back to the coach was a very evocative experience and those who are buried there truly rest in peace. We had walked the paths along which many of those who went before us walked and many were never to do so again.

From Prowse Point Cemetery we were driven to the Ploegsteert Memorial which stands in the Berks Cemetery Extension. The opportunity for refreshments was enjoyed at L’Auberge.

Afterwards we meandered around the Memorial, cemetery extension and Hyde Park Corner (Royal Berks) Cemetery before returning to the Flanders Lodge after a memorable day. All were ready and eager to indulge themselves in delightful and delicious Belgian food and drink.



After breakfast on Sunday we gathered in the Hotel conference room, where a fascinating and detailed talk by Johan van Besalaere about tanks on the Menin Road captivated his audience. He began with the story of how he had built a French Morane monoplane which a number of those present had seen on a previous tour. The aircraft is similar to that in which Flight Sub-Lieutenant Reginald Warneford had destroyed a German airship over Ghent in June 1915 and was awarded the Victoria Cross. Sadly a few days later he was killed in a flying accident and lies buried in Brompton Cemetery, London. He is also commemorated in the Warneford Chapel in Highworth church. Johan has liaised with fellow enthusiasts in Highworth with the intention if financially viable to take the monoplane there for the 2015 FWW centenary.

Johan then updated members on the progress of his current project – the building of a First World War tank. The hull of the tank has been welded together and has been taken through the streets of Poelcappelle on a fork lift truck to show to his many contributors that the project is on schedule for completion in 2017. With the use of photographs he was able to show the intrigued listeners how the germ of his idea began some 7 years ago has blossomed from the drawing board to a full scale tank. We also were shown photographs of the damage to the

Tank Memorial at Poelcappelle caused by a car careering into it. The memorial had to be dismantled and in due course will be rebuilt.

Our attention remained focused as Johan moved on to the subject of tanks which had been either wrecked or abandoned close to the Menin Road. Using contemporary aerial photographs, postcards and photographs taken by tourist in the 1920's he has built up a unique data base about these abandoned tanks and their precise locations. At the conclusion of his excellent talk our chairman presented him an accurate scale model of a Mark IV tank 'H41' – Hilda – accompanied by a thoroughly deserved round of applause.

Departing from the hotel we made a rendezvous with Johan at Birr Crossroads where he boarded the coach, for the drive down the Menin Road. Alighting from the coach he showed us where six tanks had been abandoned in "A Deadly Swamp" during the war. By comparing contemporary photographs held up against the landscape the precise location of the abandoned tanks could clearly be identified. A walk from the Menin Road into Gasthuibossen Wood followed where once proud chateau's had stood before being totally destroyed by shellfire during the war and never rebuilt. Johan's expert contribution fulfilled our Sunday morning expectations and he once more was heartily thanked.

Before finally waving him goodbye he guided us in his car from the Menin Road to Pond Farm, to view the superb private museum collection of FWW artefacts assembled by the owner's son. The artefacts had been found lying on the ground or uncovered on land surrounding farm. In the farm yard for example was a rusted trench mortar and a conical concrete base on to which would have been mounted a machine gun for aerial defence. In the museum room filled with hundreds of items there was an amazing relic which at first glance was just a rusted shell case. However, within it was an unbroken glass bottle that once had contained mustard gas. There is also a section of metal plating from the fore-end of a FWW tank – verified by Johan – which had been blown up after the war and buried. A wreath was placed with due reverence by the side of this artefact in remembrance of those who had fought and died in these weapons of war.



From Pond Farm we returned up the Menin Road to Hooze. Our party assembling in the grounds of Hooze Chateau an explanation was given about the fighting and mining in this

part of the Ypres Salient during the Spring and Summer of 1915. A vivid description of the 'Liquid Fire Attack at Hooze' on the 30th-31st July 1915 was outlined as we stood on the war scarred woodland. The use by the Germans of the Flammenwerfer, a horrific weapon of war and in the ground upon on which we were standing lay hundreds of soldiers of both sides who fought there – perhaps it truly may be said we were among the souls of the departed.

The opportunity was taken to visit the Hooze Crater Museum and for refreshments at the café. Respects were paid in Hooze Crater Cemetery at several graves including that of Private Patrick Bugden V.C., 13/AIF killed in action in September 1917. From Hooze our next stop was made at Perth Cemetery (China Wall). We listened to an informative talk on the origins of the cemetery and biographical details about some of the soldiers buried there. Among the 2,791 casualties is Major William Johnston Royal Engineers, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery at Missy in September 1914 and later killed in June 1915. Another recipient of the Victoria Cross is Second Lieutenant F. Birks 6/AIF, killed in action in September 1917. Seven soldiers who were executed during the war in 1915 are also interred in the cemetery. At chosen graves we laid crosses of remembrance.

A short stop was made at Menin Road South Military Cemetery for respects to be paid at a grave by a member whose relation is buried there. Captain Thomas Colyer-Fergusson, 2/Northamptonshire Regiment, killed in July 1917 and who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross is also interred in the cemetery. His family owned Ightham Mote, now a National Trust property in Kent. On our way to the German Cemetery at Langemark a stop was made at the memorial on the banks of the Steenbeek to Lewis Gunner Harry Patch, 7/DCLI the last surviving veteran who served on the Western Front. He remembered that his battalion had launched an attack towards Langemark across the Steenbeek in August 1917, during the Third Battle of Ypres.

For those who had not been to Langemark German Cemetery before the experience was a moving one. The cemetery commemorates 44,324 German casualties of the First World War.

Passing through the entrance building one of the two memorial rooms has inscribed on oak panels with the names of the known war dead. In the large communal grave are interred over 25,000 dead of which



17,000 have been identified and have their names inscribed on bronze plaques mounted on stone pillars arranged around three sides of the grave. Two small plaques bear the names of two British soldiers known to be buried in the communal grave. The haunting figures of four bronze sculptures of mourning soldiers by Emil Krieger look out over the burial ground in constant silence. The northern boundary of the cemetery was part of the front line and is marked by bunkers and granite blocks on which are inscribed the names of the German regiments who fought in the Ypres sector during the FWW. Walking between the graves cast a sombre mood and the 'Wagnerian' setting was enhanced by thunder, lightning and the onset of heavy rain as we left the cemetery. Spirits were revived at the coach where large slices of cake were consumed before returning to the Flanders Lodge. A special dinner had been arranged for us there and was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

After breakfast on Monday morning we boarded the coach to begin our return journey to Pimperne. A stop was made at Poperinge where some walked to Talbot House and others to the memorial site where convicted soldiers had been confined before execution at the rear of the Town



Hall. Leaving Poperinge a most pleasant drive through the Belgian countryside led us to the French town of Wormhout where a massacre of British troops was carried out by a German SS unit at the end of April and early May 1940, during the withdrawal to Dunkirk. At Esquelbeck the scene of a war crime, soldiers from the Royal Warwickshire Regiment had been herded into a barn and systematically killed by hand grenades and machine gun fire.

A reconstructed barn, now a memorial has its structure covered with wreaths and tokens of



remembrance left by old comrades, relatives and visitors. Our walk around the memorial grounds was undertaken in a contemplative mood. To view some of the graves of soldiers murdered there a stop was made at Esquelbecq Military Cemetery which contains 589 FWW casualties and 47 from

WWII. This completed our Belgian battlefield tour itinerary and we headed towards Calais and a halt at 'Pidou' for embarking of essential rations for the homeward journey.

There was minimal delay at the Calais Eurotunnel Complex and at Folkestone our return was welcomed by rain. The latter was the cause of a one-an-a-half-hour delay on the M20 due to a multiple car accident. However, after a stop at Fleet and Salisbury the coach arrived safely at Pimperne. On the homeward journey an expression of thanks and gifts were given to our chairman, secretary and to those contributors who had made the tour a superlative and memorable one.

The places we visited and the events which had taken place there during in the First and Second World Wars ensured that those who gave their lives are remembered and not forgotten ~ may the light shine perpetual upon all of them.

Roger Coleman (Portland)