

Battlefield Tour 2012

TANKS ON THE SOMME 1916

Our largest group to date took advantage of the Branch's annual battle field tour that left Pimperne just before 0600 hours on Friday 14th September. After the usual pick-ups in Salisbury and at Fleet Services we sped off for the Channel Tunnel. The monotony of our accustomed route was relieved by an on board commentary on several classic cars heading for an event at Goodwood that we passed on the M25, and by being overflown at low level by a Spitfire as we neared the exit for the Channel Tunnel. This was presumably part of a Battle of Britain Day commemoration.

The first venue on our itinerary "over there" was Wimereux Communal Cemetery. Here we visited the grave of Lt.-Col. John McCrae, author of the poem 'In Flanders Fields'. Many hospitals were situated in the area during the Great War, and the cemetery was in use from 1914 to 1918. There are 2847 Commonwealth burials of the First World War here, and 14 from the Second World War. There are also French and German war graves. The headstones are laid flat because of the sandy nature of the soil.

Continuing along the coast road we passed through Boulogne towards Etaples. The area around Etaples was the scene of immense concentrations of British reinforcement camps and hospitals during the Great War, including the notorious "Bull Ring". We halted at Etaples Military Cemetery. With 10,771 Commonwealth Great War burials and also 662 non-Commonwealth burials - mainly German - this is the largest CWGC cemetery in France.

We pressed on to Arras where the city's traffic management system successfully prevented our coach from parking outside the hotel. After a couple of circuits of the ring road we had to disembark in the Grand Place and take a short walk to check in.

Saturday morning was warm and sunny. The group gathered outside the hotel to walk through the market in the Place des Heros to the Hotel de Ville for a guided tour of "Les Boves" - a network of caves and passageways used for hundreds of years by citizens and armies to provide storage and shelter. For those immune to vertigo there was also an opportunity to ascend the belfry and view the surrounding countryside.

We now boarded our coach and headed for the Somme battlefield on the 96th anniversary of the battle of Flers-Courcelette which saw the first use of tanks.

Passing through Bapaume we moved on through Longueval towards Ginchy to stop at the eastern perimeter of Delville Wood. Here, overlooking the site in 1916 of the

“Brewery Salient”, we heard about the very first tank action. At 0515 hours on 15th September 1916 tank D1 ((Capt. H. Mortimore), crossed the Longueval–Ginchy road through the waiting infantry to attack the salient. D1 cleared out the German positions using its 6pdrs, with the infantry in support. This was a preliminary operation to prevent enfilade fire from the Brewery disrupting the main attack towards Flers due at 0600 hours.

Our next stand took place on the Longueval to Flers road, north of Delville Wood and about halfway between the two villages. Here we heard described the exploits of the three tanks earmarked to support the 14th Division’s attack from Delville Wood towards Gueudecourt.

We now moved on to the New Zealand Division (NZD) Memorial on the site of Crest Farm, Longueval, at a feature known as the Fork. It was from this area that the NZD advanced as flank guard for XV Corps on 15th September. The four tanks allocated to support the NZD were late getting into action but achieved some good results when they did so.

The 47th (London) Division attack at High Wood was our next focus. Halted on the Longueval–Martinpuich road just west of High Wood we learned how the assault barrage was reduced because the opposing front lines were too close together to avoid British casualties. Advice by tank commanders that the ground conditions were totally unsuitable for tanks was ignored. The result was that only one of the Division’s four supporting tanks got anywhere near the German line. One got lost and opened fire on British troops waiting to advance. High Wood was eventually captured but at heavy cost.

One of the most quoted happenings of 15th September 1916 is of “a tank walking up the High Street of Flers with the British Army cheering behind it.” It was to this event that we now turned our attention. Gathered around the 41st Division Memorial in the centre of Flers, we heard about the Division’s attack on the considerable German defences in the area. No less than ten tanks were allocated to the attack although only half that number made it into action. Nevertheless Flers was captured, the surviving tanks making a significant contribution to the success.

Whilst in Flers we paid a visit to Bulls Road Cemetery. This has 474 identified and 296 unidentified casualties. There are 15 special memorials to men known or believed to be buried there. The cemetery was begun shortly after the 15th September and contains several casualties from that date including Gunner C.W. William Coles from Dorsetshire, a member of the crew of tank D15.

Our next stand found us on the Albert–Bapaume road just north of Pozieres at the Tank Corps Memorial. Tanks mustered at this point to support the Canadian Corps attack on

Courcelette. Due to mechanical breakdown and enemy shell fire only two of the allocated six tanks were able to support the attack. The two survivors did good work and after furious fighting the Canadian Corps captured the village.

We headed back in the direction of Flers for a visit to AIF Burial Ground at Grass Lane. The cemetery was begun in November 1916 but was later used to concentrate graves from the surrounding area. Of the 3,475 Commonwealth servicemen buried here, 2,263 are unidentified. The cemetery has a number of casualties from 15th September 1916 and also contains 170 French and 3 German war graves. This halt was to facilitate a visit to the grave of Second Lt. Ernest A. Shephard and his colleagues of 5th Dorsetshire Regiment killed in action near Beaucourt-sur-l'Ancre in January 1917. The Branch and the Keep Museum are joint publishers of a book about Shephard.

The final stop on our odyssey before heading back to Arras was at Guards' Cemetery, Lesboeuufs. Some 3,136 Great War casualties are buried here. No less than 1,643 are unidentified but there are 83 Special Memorials to men believed to be amongst them. There was a talk about Capt. Home Peel, Brigade Major of 142 Bde when he was killed in action near Flers on 24th March 1918. Peel is buried here.

A warm and sunny Sunday morning saw us off towards Bapaume again. Our first stop was on the Le Sars-Gueudecourt road about half-a-mile beyond Eaucourt L'Abbaye Farm, just south of a position known as 'The Circus' in 1916. Here we heard about the capture of the farm by 47th Division Action on 1st October 1916. Two tanks (D8 - Brown and D16 - Wakley) helped the infantry to capture the farm, but unfortunately the buildings were not cleared properly and a German counterattack came in after both tanks had ditched. Nevertheless the tanks had proved themselves. On 7th October D2 (Bell) was knocked out supporting a successful attack on "The Tangle" east of Le Sars.

We continued towards Gueudecourt stopping near "Factory Corner" at the site of Bayonet Trench to hear about an action here by 21st Brigade on 18th October 1916. Three tanks were earmarked to support this attack, but only one got into action. The tanks were from D Company but they are not identified in any records. Conditions were very bad - heavy rain and mud.

Our next visit was on our own ground so to speak - the Butte de Warlencourt which was purchased by the WFA in 1990. This artificial mound was honeycombed with tunnels and strongly fortified by the Germans. An assault on the Butte was planned for 50th Division on 28th October 1916 which was to be supported by two tanks. Atrocious weather conditions led to the attack being cancelled. When it did take place one week later no tanks were used. Although the Butte was overrun on several occasions in October-November 1916, counter attacks drove the British back. The ground was

eventually occupied by the British in 1917 after the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line.

Although a WFA Memorial now stands on the summit of the Butte the site seems generally neglected and in need of a planned maintenance programme and proper visitor information.

The attacks in the Thiepval area by the Canadian Corps and the British 11th and 18th Divisions on 26th September 1916 were described at two separate stands. By the Australian Memorial at Mouquet Farm, we heard about the negligible impact made by the four tanks supporting the Canadians and 11th Division. The fate of the four tanks allocated to 18th Division was recounted outside the Thiepval Visitor Centre. One arrived too late to assist and two were knocked out early in the action, but the surviving tank – C5 ‘Crème de Menthe’ (Capt. Inglis) – reached the ruins of Thiepval Chateau destroying a number of enemy strong points.

As we were near to Authuille, the opportunity was taken to visit the new Dorsetshire Regiment Memorial near Lonsdale Cemetery. Our Branch helped to raise funds for the memorial but this was the first time a number of our party had been able view it.

Our next venue was probably the highlight of the whole tour. Arrangements had been made for our party to receive a guided tour of the Glory Hole site at La Boisselle. After very welcome refreshments at Old Blighty Tearooms in the village, we began our tour.

The Glory Hole was the scene of extensive French, German and British mining activities in 1915 / 1916. Our tour of the site was led by Jeremy Banning of the La Boisselle Study Group. They are undertaking a long-term archaeological, historical, technological and genealogical study of the site. After the laying of a poppy wreath and an act of remembrance, a cheque for £200 was presented to the La Boisselle Study Group on behalf of the Branch.

After more refreshments at the tea rooms we set off towards Mametz for a specially requested visit to Devonshire Cemetery.

Outside the cemetery we heard about the attack made here on 1st July 1916 by 8th and 9th Bns. Devonshire Regiment. Visible was the shrine which has replaced the crucifix standing on the site in 1916. A machine gun sited near this decimated the Devonshires as they tried to advance. Many of the casualties were collected and buried in their starting trench. All but two of the 253 identified burials in the cemetery are Devonshires. They include Capt. D.L. Martin, who made a model of the area identifying the threat posed by the machine gun, and Lt. W.N. Hodgson the poet who wrote ‘Before Action’. The epitaph “The Devonshires held this trench, the Devonshires hold it still”

appears on a stone memorial erected in 1986 to replace the original wooden sign left at the site by the surviving Devonshires. Some of our party explored the British trench line beyond the cemetery and discovered that several features of the system were still recognisable.

At the end of another excellent day we headed back to Arras.

An overcast and cooler Monday morning saw us begin our journey back to the UK. We have always spurned the straight back home option to get the maximum value from our time on the Western Front. This has produced some very interesting stop-offs in the past and this year's tour was no exception.

We made our way to Mont St. Eloi outside Arras. From the ruins of the Augustinian abbey we looked down on the site of a RFC aerodrome from the Great War. Richard Robson spoke about the early days of the RFC and invited us to imagine ourselves as a newly promoted squadron commander tasked with bringing a squadron from England and making it operational. The communal cemetery here has French and British graves from the 1940 campaign.

There was also time for us to make a brief stop at the French National Memorial and Cemetery at Notre Dame de Lorette near Souchez. Individuals visited the basilica and lantern tower. The cemetery contains 39,958 burials, 19,998 of them unknown. There are 32 caskets representing Unknown Soldiers, 29 from the Great War and one each from 1939–45, Indochina, and Algeria and also the ashes of a Deportee from the Second World War. Volunteers from the Association de Notre Dame de Lorette now keep vigil at the site.

En-route to the traditional re-supply halt at Calais, a request stop was made at Cinq Rues British Cemetery at Hazebrouck. The cemetery was used chiefly by field ambulances and units of 29th Division from April to August 1918 for casualties sustained during the German offensive. There are 226 Great War burials – two are unidentified.

A faulty ramp briefly delayed disembarkation from the shuttle train, but we were soon retracing our outward journey to arrive back in Pimperne before 1900 hours.

Our thanks to Martin and Judy for organising another splendid tour and for keeping us all in order over the weekend – no mean achievement! We are also grateful to Mike Adams, Nigel Plumb, Colin Parr and Richard Robson for their contributions and to the “Cake Queen” for sustenance provided en route!

Rod Arnold