

Battlefield Tour 2008

THE LAST HUNDRED DAYS 1918

The third Branch Battlefield Tour began on Friday 5th September with our earliest departure yet from Pimperne...06:00 hours! Those of us who hadn't dropped back into slumber welcomed additional members of our party boarding in Salisbury and at Fleet Services (M3). A final pick-up was made at Cheriton on the outskirts of Folkestone before we arrived at the Channel Tunnel Terminal.

Our base for this tour was to be Arras but we had two stops to make before arriving at our hotel. The first was at Maroeuil, northwest of Arras. Here we visited the site of a railway spur used by the 14" naval gun "Boche Buster" to bombard Douai railway station some 19 miles away. Will Townend described how, on 8th August 1918, a shell weighing three-quarters of a ton hit a German troop train causing over 400 casualties. King George V was present at Maroeuil at the time and in his honour the round became known as the King's Shot.

Next we visited La Carriere Wellington in Arras itself. During the Middle Ages chalk quarries were dug some 20 metres below the streets of the town. From 1914 Arras was under German artillery fire and the caves were used as shelter by both military personnel and civilians. In preparation for the British Arras Offensive in April 1917, the network of caves and tunnels was extended to accommodate 24,000 troops and their command and support facilities ready for the assault. The name Wellington Quarries commemorates the New Zealand sappers who carried out the work in this sector.

We were able to progress along passages and through chambers in the footsteps of the men of 1917, but we had the benefit of electric lighting and recently installed walkways. Modern audio-visual displays contrasted with what remained from 1917 - graffiti, chalk carvings and painted signs on the walls pointing to numbered exits or the latrines!

A new memorial wall and garden have been completed outside the entrance to commemorate the British and Commonwealth units engaged in the Battle of Arras.

We drove to the Mercure Atria Hotel situated within easy walking distance of the two main squares - the Grand Place and the Place des Heros with their large choice of bars and restaurants. A number of our party found their way to the restaurant "Au Bureau" which gave a new meaning to staying late at the office!

We left Arras on a warm and sunny Saturday morning heading for Amiens. En-route we passed through Doullens, the site of British Third Army HQ and the venue for the

Doullens Conference in 1918 that led to the unified command of the Allied armies under General Foch.

Given free time in Amiens, some headed for the Cathedral of Notre-Dame d'Amiens whilst others sought out a local café. There has been a cathedral on the site since the Eleventh Century but the present structure dates from two hundred years later. The cathedral contains a number of Great War memorials including one of the CWGC memorial plaques placed in twenty-eight cathedrals or important churches in France and Belgium. The plaque commemorates the 600,000 soldiers from Great Britain and Ireland who died on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. There are also memorials to French Colonial, Australian, Newfoundland, Canadian and United States troops who fought in the area. Raymond Asquith, the son of the British Prime Minister, is also commemorated here; he died at Guinchy on 15th September 1916.

As we left the city we called at the Amiens St. Acheul Necropole Nationale. This French military cemetery contains 2,739 French, 12 British, 10 Belgian and 1 Russian soldiers of the First World War. The British plot includes the graves of 2nd Lt. Evelyn Copland Perry and Air Mechanic H.E. Parfitt from 3 Squadron RFC. Their BE8 aircraft crashed on 16th August 1914 and they became the first British aircrew to die in France, albeit due to an accident rather than enemy action.

Our next halt was just outside Amiens at Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery and Australian National Memorial. It was nearby that the German Offensive of March 1918 was finally brought to a halt - a most appropriate place for us to receive a briefing on the Allied riposte which began in this area in August 1918.

The memorial commemorates 10,797 Australians who died on the Western Front and have no known grave. The central tower was closed for repairs but there were still superb views back towards Amiens - a reminder how close the Germans got to seizing this crucial objective.

With 2,142 British and Commonwealth burials, the cemetery is the largest on the 1918 battlefield. Some of the service buildings still show damage caused by fighting in the Second World War.

On leaving the site we found ourselves passing through the photo-shoot of a local wedding. The cemetery entrance pavilions are obviously considered an ideal background!

We moved on through Fouilly and Hamelet; both were tank assembly areas for the large scale Australian "raid" at Hamel on 4th July 1918. Our objective was the Australian Corps Memorial Park at Hamel but unfortunately this was closed for refurbishment.

After crossing the River Somme, the 3rd Australian Division Memorial at Sailly-le-Sec was our next call. From this vantage point we were able to see the Golden Virgin at Albert, glistening in the sun, and beyond, the Thiepval Memorial.

We moved on to Chipilly and the dramatic 58th (London) Division Memorial – an artilleryman saying goodbye to his dying horse. This reminded us how very dependent the armies of 1914–18 were on real horsepower! The memorial has a plaque commemorating Australian, Canadian and French troops who took part in the Battle of Amiens commencing on 8th August 1918 – the “Black Day of the German Army”. The 58th Division were tasked with taking the Chipilly Spur; unsuccessful on the 8th, they took the important feature the next day.

Returning to the south bank of the Somme at Cerisy, we paused at Harbonnières. The village was captured by Australian troops on 8th August 1918. One of the last major British cavalry charges took place at the eastern end of the village – the 5th Dragoons captured over 500 prisoners, guns and transport. The village is also the scene of the painting *Advance of the Field Artillery at Harbonnières*.

Despite our packed programme we were able to fit in a visit to the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Peronne. This superb museum is set at the rear of a restored medieval chateau and presents the Great War from all points of view regardless of nationality. A walk to the Hotel de Ville took us along the “Roo de Kanga” – one of the many manifestations of the legend of Australian prowess now prevalent in the area: ‘*We do not forget Australia*’ signs appear everywhere!

Our final call before heading back to Arras was at Mont St. Quentin and the 2nd Australian Division “Digger” Memorial just north of Peronne. The Division captured the heights, a major German defensive position on 30th August 1918 and held it against several counterattacks by the Prussian Guards. The original memorial, which showed an Australian soldier bayoneting the German eagle, was destroyed by the Germans in 1940. The post 1945 memorial features a less belligerent “Digger”.

We returned to Arras via Bapaume for another office meeting.

Sunday’s weather was a complete contrast to the previous day – cloudy with showers, some of them quite heavy – but our valiant band was not discouraged. The theme for the day was the attack on the Hindenburg Line in 1918. Our route took us across the 1917 Cambrai battlefield and after passing through Le Catelet, notorious as the site of the execution in 1916 of four British stragglers who had lived behind the lines since 1914, we arrived at our first stand of the day.

The Somme American Cemetery at Bony has some 1,844 burials including three US Medal of Honor winners (the equivalent of the VC). Some 333 missing in action are commemorated. Many of these casualties were from the US 27th and 30th Divisions who fought alongside British and Australian units in the assault on the Hindenburg

Line in September 1918. A carillon plays a 21-gun salute and the bugle call "Taps" (the US equivalent of the Last Post). Every two hours throughout the day marches, anthems and Doughboy songs are played.

Our next stop was at Bellicourt to view the American Memorial. This is one of a series of monuments erected to commemorate the 90,000 American troops who served with the British Armies during the war. This particularly impressive example pays tribute to the 27th, 30th, 33rd and 80th Divisions and the 6th and 11th Engineers. The memorial stands on a spoilbank produced by the excavation of a tunnel for the St. Quentin Canal between 1802 and 1810. The canal formed an important part of the Hindenburg Line and passes underground in this area. The memorial overlooks the ground where the 27th and 30th Divisions fought alongside the Australian II Corps on 29th September 1918. The map incorporated into the rear of the monument and the adjoining orientation table enabled us to follow the progress of the fighting.

National Guardsmen from the state of Tennessee who served with the US 30th Division are commemorated on a memorial at Riqueval where we next halted. We passed through a wooded area behind the memorial to arrive at the southern end of the 5,670 metres long canal tunnel.

We moved on to Riqueval Bridge which spans a gorge through which the canal runs. This was the dividing line between the US II Corps and the British IX Corps on 29th September 1918. This was the only intact bridge over the canal and was vital to the advance. The bridge was seized by men from the 1st/6th North Staffords (137 Bde / 46th Division) with the support of some Royal Engineers.

There is a well known photograph of Brigadier-General J.V. Campbell VC addressing troops of 137 Bde. at the bridge three days after their successful assault on the Hindenburg Line.

The Western Front Association has placed a memorial at the eastern end of the bridge to commemorate its capture. Here we laid a poppy wreath and held an Act of Remembrance.

Continuing south, we stopped at La Baraque British Cemetery just off the main road. There are 62 burials here including eight RAMC personnel and a military policeman killed by shellfire whilst escorting German prisoners. The British 46th (North Midland) Division memorial stands nearby.

Our route now took us through Bellenglise and across the canal to visit the Australian 4th Division Memorial. This occupies a commanding position with views over the ground captured by the division on 18th September 1918 as a preliminary to the main attack on the Hindenburg Line.

A break was planned in St. Quentin – “a large industrial town on the River Somme” said the guide book. Only the cinema appeared to be open. What does one do on a wet Sunday afternoon in St. Quentin? A couple of circuits of the town centre, including some expert coach manoeuvring to avoid a car parked on a T-junction, ended with a stop at the railway station to make use of the facilities. Perhaps we were looking in the wrong quarter of the town. At least those who had the forethought to bring a packed lunch were smiling.

We retraced our route north to Riqueval before heading northeast to Le Cateau, the scene of the action fought by the BEF's II Corps in 1914. From here took the road to Bazuel and Ors Communal Cemetery.

Here a CWGC plot of 60 graves is surrounded by civilian tombs. All but five of the graves hold men killed on 4th November 1918 when 32nd Division crossed the Sambre–Oise Canal. All 55 are from either the Manchester Regiment or the Lancashire Fusiliers. The most visited grave amongst the 55 is probably that of the poet Lt. Wilfred Owen MC. However four VCs were won on that day and two of the winners are also buried at Ors – Lt. James Kirk (like Owen from 2nd Manchesters) and Lt.Col. James Marshall, an Irish Guards officer who was commanding 16th Lancashire Fusiliers when killed.

Will Townend recited Owen's *Anthem for a Doomed Youth* at the graveside before we headed back towards Le Cateau and thence Cambrai. Our return to Arras was speeded by the use of the A26 motorway.

The sun was back for our departure on Monday morning. We made a brief stop at Beaurains on the outskirts of Arras to view the Royal Tank Regiment Memorial commemorating the 1940 Battle of Arras before heading for Duisans British Cemetery at Etrun, a request stop for one of our party.

Although Commonwealth forces were in the Etrun area from March 1916, it was not until 8th Casualty Clearing Station arrived at the site in 1917 that burials began. There are 3,293 burials here including 88 German war graves. Only 8 are unidentified.

The Canadian National Memorial at Vimy Ridge was in pristine condition following a recent refurbishment. Our stop here provided time to view the memorial and to visit the preserved trenches and visitor centre. A shepherd, sheepdog and flock crossing the shell craterfield on top of the ridge were a sight to remember.

Leaving Vimy Ridge behind, we headed for nearby Souchez and Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery. This cemetery was opened in March 1916 and was in use at intervals until September 1918. After the Armistice the site was used as a concentration cemetery and over 7,000 graves were brought in from the surrounding

battlefields. There are now 7,656 Commonwealth casualties buried here including one from World War Two. Only 3187 have been identified.

In 2000, the remains of one unidentified Canadian buried at Cabaret Rouge were exhumed. After a ceremony at the Vimy Memorial, they were taken to Canada and placed in the National War Memorial in Ottawa. A suitably inscribed CWGC headstone marks the site of the former grave in the cemetery.

The final stop on our tour before heading for Calais was Notre-Dame de Lorette and the French National Memorial and Cemetery. The cemetery covers 26 acres and contains over 19,000 identified burials and six mass graves holding a further 16,000 soldiers. All is arranged around a basilica and a lantern tower over 200 feet high. Unknown French soldiers from the Second World War, Indo-China and North Africa and the ashes of people deported to concentration camps are interred in the tower's crypt.

We made our now customary a stop at a Calais wine store before boarding the Shuttle. We disembarked in the UK around 15:25 hours and by 19:45 hours we were back at Pimperne.

Our thanks go to Martin and Judy Willoughby for organizing another excellent tour – certainly more absorbing (and cheaper!) than the typical commercial product. We are also grateful to Mike Adams, Nigel Pugh and Will Townend for their contributions.

Rod Arnold