

Wessex Branch WFA

Commemorative Tour 12th-15th August 2014 ~ Arrival Of The BEF In France August 1914

Our tour party left from Pimperne on a Mainline coach with a full moon setting and the sun rising as we made our way to Salisbury. There and at Fleet Services further members joined us as did Wayne our coach driver for the tour. We continued on to the Dover Ferry Terminal and sailed at 1115 on the P & O Ferry 'Pride of Canterbury' across the channel to Calais. Rejoining our coach at 1345 (French time) we enjoyed a very pleasant journey through the French countryside in warm sunshine towards our first stop at Ploegsteert. Our route took us through the Armentières-Bailleul area of France past Mont Rouge, Mont Noir and the Mont de Cats. Crossing the River Lys at Nieppe which was within the Allied sector during the FWW from October 1914 until April 1918 when the Germans overran the area. The 29th Division re-took the town at the beginning of September 1918.

We arrived at the Ploegsteert 14-18 Experience Interpretation Centre, which is a modern, spacious building with good lighting for the display of the FWW artefacts and information. The visual experience is augmented by using the medium of film, photographs and graphics which help to give a clear understanding of the fighting in and around Ploegsteert during the war. In the atrium is a fine bronze memorial to the Australian Mining Corps 1916-1919 by Michael Meszaros. Time also allowed for members to visit the Ploegsteert Memorial, Berks Cemetery Extension and Hyde Park Corner (Royal Berks) Cemetery. Leaving Ploegsteert at 1630 we arrived at the Ibis Hotel, our tour base at Arras at 1745. After checking in members were free to enjoy French hospitality to be found around the Grand Place and Place des Héros.

Wednesday, 13th August, was an early start leaving Arras at 0815 for the Aérodrome d'Amiens-Glisy for the first part of the day's commemoration on the 100th Anniversary of the RFC's arrival in France. On the 13th August, 1914 twelve BE2 aircraft of No.2 Squadron flew from Swingate Down near Dover to join the BEF in France, the first time an air force was deployed in war. Mr and Mrs J. Willoughby had joined us at Arras with their two children, Sam and Zac, who were to participate in the Service of Remembrance at the Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery, Memorial to the Missing and Flying Services Memorial. On arrival at Glisy airfield we were guided to our reserved front row seating by WFA volunteers.

As the VIP's, guests, WFA members from other branches and local members of public assembled we were entertained by the Côr Meibion de Cymru – South Wales Male Choir –

who performed a programme of FWW period songs prior to the commencement of a Drumhead Service. It was unfortunate that adverse weather conditions prevented a replica BE2 flying from the UK to Glisy airfield. Within the public enclosure were a number of 1914-18 vehicles, members of the Digger Cote 160 dressed in period costumes, including nurses, 30 members of the Surrey Chapter of the Harley-Davidson UK Motorcycle Riders and other contemporary period displays.

Before the service began the Somme Battlefield Pipe Band headed a parade of the Royal British Legion and French Standards, members of the Dover and Deal Sea Cadets, Middlesex and North West London Army Cadet Force, and the 282 (East Ham) Squadron Air Force Cadets who marched on and assembled around the Drumhead altar. A light aircraft was substituted for the BE2 which taxied close up to the safety barriers erected around the public arena and parked so as to be directly in the line of sight of the altar.

The Drumhead service began at 1100, conducted by the chaplain who welcomed all those present. He reminded everyone that, 100 years ago to the day Lieutenant (later Major) H.D. Harvey-Kelly DSO of No.2 Squadron was the first BEF British pilot to land in France at Glisy. He was shot down and killed on the 29th April, 1917 by Kurt Wolff of the Red Baron's 'flying circus' and was buried in Brown Copse Cemetery, Roeux. Family descendants were later to attend a private service of remembrance at his grave side.

The South Wales Male Choir sang hymns and songs during the service and wreaths were laid at the altar by VIP's and the Mayor of Amiens who was presented with a commemorative plaque to be erected in the town hall. After prayers the commemoration service was concluded by the chaplain and the pipe band and cadets marched off. The first part of the day of commemoration and remembrance was climaxed by the arrival and flypast of six Tiger Moths from the de Havilland Moth Club followed by a landing of the aircraft which parked close to the barrier railings. As the pilots and co-pilots emerged from their cockpits they were enthusiastically cheered and applauded.

Enough time was allowed for our members to walk around the public arena to view the displays before boarding our coach and taken to the Centre Commercial Géant Amiens for lunch. Although there was a certain amount of 'flustering' at Flunch's Restaurant, a good meal was had and enjoyed.

Leaving Glisy at 1345 we journeyed back to Arras for the Service of Remembrance at the Faubourg d'Amiens, arriving there at 1525. Our party was seated beneath the cloistered

archway and despite a heavy shower of rain on arrival, throughout the whole service, the sun shone brightly. On the arrival of the WFA President, and VIP's a parade headed by the Somme Battlefield Pipe Band led the Royal British Legion and French Standards, cadets and Harley-Davidson Motor Cycle Riders from the citadel into the Faubourg d'Amiens where they took up their respective positions within the memorial space. A few minutes before the service began at 1700 the six Tiger Moth aircraft flew over the cemetery and memorial.

A speech of welcome by the chaplain began the service of remembrance and then the assembled congregation listened to an address given by the WFA President, Professor Peter Simkins MBE and M Yves Delrue, Adjoint en charge des Affaires Patriotiques et des Commémorations, Vill'd Arras. The French National Anthem was sung by the South Wales Male Choir, followed by a prayer and readings by young members of the WFA. The first of which was an extract from the diary of Captain James Lochhead, 1st Battalion, The Cameronians, spoken with measured composure by 8-year-old Wessex Branch member Sam Willoughby.

The congregation was asked to stand while the Last Post was sounded by the Last Post Association (Ypres). Remaining silent for two minutes until Reveille echoed throughout the Faubourg d'Amiens, the exhortation was recited. Wreaths were laid at the War Stone and at the Arras Flying Services Memorial. Zac Willoughby, our youngest branch member laid a wreath on behalf of the Wessex WFA Branch. Thomas ### another of our young members also assisted during the laying of the wreaths. Artefacts of Major Harvey-Kelly had been placed on the steps of Flying Services Memorial at the beginning of the service. A broken tipped propeller was initially laid on the War Stone and later it was carried across to the Flying Services Memorial by an RAF and German Air Force Officer. The service continued with a mouth organ solo of Keep The Home Fires Burning, singing by the choir, prayers, benediction, the National Anthem and a blessing by the chaplain. A lone piper slow marched through the cemetery and entered the Memorial to the Missing playing the lament Flowers of the Forest which concluded the remembrance service. After forming up the Somme Battlefield Pipe Band led the parade from the memorial. As a final mark of homage and respect an RAF Tornado flew over the Faubourg d'Amiens amid spontaneous applause. The Remembrance Service was especially emotive and enhanced by the architecture of Faubourg d'Amiens, which surrounded the congregation. Careful consideration had been given to the placing of the choir so that their voices gave a tremendous resonance within the beautiful acoustic space. We were witnesses to a meaningful tribute to all those who had sacrificed their lives in the First World War.

Before leaving a presentation was made by our chairman to the young members from our Wessex Branch, Sam, Zac and Thomas who took an active part in the service. Participation by young members at such an historic event will hopefully in later years inspire them to ensure that those who lost their in the FWW are not forgotten by future generations. At the end of a rewarding and splendid day of commemoration and remembrance we returned to our hotel in a reflective mood and not without a tinge of emotion.

The third day of our commemorative tour began with the announcement that branch members had attended a wreath laying service at Netheravon airfield near to the crash site of Lieutenant R.R. Skene and Air Mechanic R.K. Barlow, who were both killed on the 11th August, 1914. Afterwards they moved on to Bulford Church Cemetery where after a short service wreaths were laid on the grave of Air Mechanic Barlow. A similar act of remembrance was conducted and the graveside of Lieutenant Skene at Send by WFA Surrey Branch members.

From Arras we were driven to the Vimy Ridge National Historic Site of Canada, which stands on Hill 145, the highest point of the 14-kilometre long Vimy Ridge. This superb observation point was part of the German defensive line. The French had sustained heavy casualties in 1914 and 1915 in forcing the enemy line eastward, but were unable to capture the Ridge. On the 9th April, 1917 the Canadian Corps, supported by the British 5th Division assaulted the enemy held position and gained all their objectives except Hill 145 which was captured the next day. Our morning there was spent walking around the memorial grounds before having a conducted tour of the underground tunnels and trench network.

After a visit to the information centre we left Vimy heading south towards the Somme, via Bapaume, Maricourt, Suzanne following the River Somme to the Froissy Dompierre Light Railway – (P'tit Train de la Haute Somme) – and Museum. The railway is a 600mm narrow gauge railway running from Froissy to Dompierre-Becquincourt, through Cappy. In 1915 the French Army constructed a railway along the Somme Canal between Péronne and Froissy. Between, 1916-1918 the railway was operating at the Allied front line, transporting daily 1,500-tons of supplies. From Froissy the railway line follows the towpath along the Somme canal to the station at Cappy, then passes through a 200-metre long tunnel and crosses over a road bridge. After the FWW a zig-zag line was built to enable the trains to climb the steep slope towards the Santerre Plateau. The 7-kilometre long light railway system is the last surviving narrow gauge railway which operated on the FWW battlefields. Our party enjoyed the hour long experience of the train journey and afterwards at the museum, which opened in 1996. Refreshments were provided by the friendly museum staff.

Leaving Froissy at 1630 we passed through Fricourt, Contalmaison, Pozières and La Sars travelling along the Albert/Bapaume main road. Time allowed for a stop at the recently refurbished Butte de Warlincourt. Our previous visit in 2012 left members dismayed at the neglected condition of the Butte. However, the improvements have transformed the whole position. There is a clearly marked pathway from the roadside and the ascent of the Butte is easier and safer. It was pleasing to be able to view the landscape from WFA memorial on the summit. The whole site has been brought up to a standard expected of the WFA. From the Butte we returned to our hotel at Arras.

We had a leisurely start to our last day leaving Arras at 1040 for the V-1 Launch Site at Huit Rues situated between Morbecque and Wallon-Cappel. Between June 1944 and March 1945 approximately 10,000 V-1's (Vergeltungswaffe ~ vengeance weapon) were fired towards England inflicting death and destruction on its population. The early morning showers turned into more persistent rain as we walked along a concrete pathway into the forest to see the bunkers, storage facilities, workshops and the launch ramp, pointing towards London, 210-kilometres distant. The Huit Rues V-1 base is now some 70 years old and slowly decaying. Bombed by the RAF in July 1944 its historic legacy is a reminder of the horror and devastation of a world war.

Returning to the coach we settled down for the drive towards Calais and into bright sunshine as we approached the coast. A brief stop was made to purchase 'rations' before continuing on to the Calais ferry terminal and boarding the P & O Ferry 'Spirit of France' for a calm crossing to Dover. By 1600 (UK time) we were on our way to Fleet services for a comfort stop. There, two of our party left us and Wayne our driver was relieved by another for the onward journey. At Salisbury other members alighted and we travelled on to Pimperne, reaching there at 2040, where after fond farewells we dispersed our homes.

The commemorative tour as opposed to our 'normal' battlefield tours was a very rewarding and refreshing experience for all concerned. It cannot be repeated and each of us will have their own memories to reflect upon. Our young members were also an invaluable asset, not only for their participation in the commemoratives events but for bringing a sense of fun and enjoyment.

The WFA nationally should be commended for organising The Commemoration Of The Deployment of the BEF in August 1914. Above all a special thank you must be extended Lt-Col. (rtd) Graham Parker OBE and Joanna Legg for all their hard work, time and energy in bringing together organisations to make the commemorative events so successful for all who

attended. Thanks also to Wayne our Mainline driver who kept us ahead of our timing schedules and enjoyed the whole experience. Finally, our splendid itinerary would not have been possible without the dedication and enthusiasm of Martin Willoughby, our chairman and his wife Judy, our secretary to ensure we had an accomplished and first class tour.

Roger G. Coleman

Wessex WFA