

'All quiet on the Western Front' **11th-15th of July 2009**

The five day guided tour was undertaken by 12 members and 10 guests who, with the exception of one guest from Rochester, came from the Colchester area and was based on a standard Leger Holidays Battlefield Tour. It was put together by Angus Newbould the dedicated group tour planner to exactly meet our needs. We were lucky enough to obtain the services of Bill Mc Quade, who took us around Northern Europe so



expertly in 2007, as our guide and manager.

Day One. The tour started and finished at the Colchester Garrison Officers Club. The 'Eddie Brown' luxury Silver Service coach with its crew of two departed as planned at 0800hrs to pick up Jean Callebaut at 'Medway Services' and Bill Mc Quade at Dover ferry terminal.

We sailed at 1215hrs and after a good lunch in the 'Langham Brasserie' and a smooth crossing we were on our way to our first stop Poperinge in Flanders on the N38 just 9 km over the Belgian border.

'Pop' was the rest and recuperation centre for troops serving in the area of the 'Ypres Salient'. It has to be remembered that it was not an entirely safe town as it was regularly shelled and bombed by the Hun. The aim was to identify and visit those establishments which provided spiritual and creature 'comforts' to those troops.

The first stop was Talbot House, set up by two Army Chaplains 'Tubby' Clayton and Neville Talbot as 'Every man's club' shortly before the Christmas of 1915.

Formerly the home of the Coevoet hop broking family the house was named after Neville's brother Gilbert who was killed in July 1915. It was a 'place of wholesome recreation' for all ranks in an

otherwise thoroughly decadent town. This 'home from home' provided accommodation, a lending library, reading room, chapel and a beautiful garden.



After the war it became the cradle for the TOCH H movement with the Lamp of Maintenance as its symbol. TOCH H was derived from the phonetic alphabet in use at that time.

Talbot House is manned by volunteers who run the hostel frequently used by parties of soldiers revisiting the sites at which their Regiments earned their battle honours. After our tour of the house they served us cups of tea as we sat outside in the tranquil garden.

The colloquialism 'as dim as a Toch H lamp' meaning unintelligent is derived from the distinctive dim yellow light produced by the lamp's wick.

To see the seamier side of 'Pop' as a soldier's haven we walked along Gasthuisstraat first to view Café de Ranke frequented by officers. It was run by Madame Cossey and her three red haired daughters. Elaine at 16 was the youngest and was known as 'Ginger'. This seductive hostelry was known as 'Gingers'. Next door is Café de l'Esperance, known to soldiers as 'What Opes'

At No 12 stood Café a la Bourse du Houblon (now a pharmacy) run by Madame Bentine and her three daughters. Its officer patrons found the name too difficult to pronounce and nicknamed it 'Skindles' after the hotel at Maidenhead. A Sapper Officer James Halley recorded the delights he encountered on his first visit.

At No 26 was Hotel Cyrille run by Monsieur Cyrille Vermeulen and his wife. It was an officers only establishment and known as 'Cyril's'.

'Pop' had a darker side as it was here that Courts Martial were convened and the execution of deserters by firing squad was undertaken. The plan was to visit the Town Hall to see the execution post erected in the small courtyard and the two restored' death cells' in the basement.

Perhaps fortunately for us we were spared those poignant reminders of the inhumanity of war as the Town Hall was shut. It was after 1730hrs. Back on the coach, and after a short ride to Ypres, Ieper or 'Wipers' arrived at our hotel Novotel just behind the Eastern ramparts very close to the Menin Gate in good time to unpack and prepare for dinner after a long day.



Day Two. Devoted to an exploration of the battlefields around Ypres our first stop was Sanctuary Wood. James Halley, a Sapper Officer, wrote in his diary in October 1917 'Of the terrible and horrible scenes I have seen in the war, Sanctuary Wood is the worst. In 1914 it was a sanctuary, but today

Dante in his wildest imaginings never conceived a like'.

The preserved trench system and the adjacent museum packed with the debris of war belong to the Schier family who owned the wood and had

the foresight to see that one day it would become of interest to pilgrims and tourists. All the artefacts were hidden from the Germans during World War II and the present owner Jacques Schier has maintained the trenches and enlarged the museum. His superb collection of 3D pictures gives a very graphic and horrifying view of the war.

Moving on to Tyne Cot, the largest cemetery in the world designed by Sir Herbert Baker, to visit the new museum and then outside where within the walls of this sad but beautiful place 11,871 soldiers are buried of which 70% are unidentified. One can look SW back to Ypres 7 miles away across featureless flat countryside or NE to Passchendaele up on the ridge 2 miles away. The battle for Passchendaele was launched on the 31 July 1917 and 300,000 Tommies lost their lives to German fire, Mustard Gas and the foul morass of mud. On 4 October 1917 the Australians took over and it was not until 6 November 1917 three months later that the Canadians finally took Passchendaele village.

After a brief stop in Ypres for lunch off South now to visit the Arc of Craters in the Messines Ridge area.

Here so many Sappers in Tunnelling Coys toiled and fought deep underground. 8 British, 4 Canadian and 2 Australian Coys were involved in the preparation of 21 mines of which 19 were blown. The mine at St Eloi was tamped with 50 tons of ammonal. These mines were exploded on 1 July 1916 between 0720hrs and 0728hrs immediately before British troops attacked along a 14 mile front at 0730hrs. This was preceded by a barrage of nearly a quarter of a million shells delivered at a rate of 3,500 shells a minute.

As spectacular as the barrage and mine blowing was the operation was not a success. The Tommies carried equipment weighing 66 lbs, some as much as 76lbs. These burdens made it difficult to climb out of trenches and slowed progress across no man's land. The ability of the Germans to



survive in underground bunkers was underestimated. As the barrage lifted they emerged to come forward to set up machine guns on the rims of the craters we had just blown to pour devastating fire on their attackers still many yards away. The Battle of the Somme had started. 19,240

Tommies were killed and more than 36,000 were wounded on the first day. By the time that the battle ended on 19 November 1916 more than 300,000 participating troops had been killed and twice that number wounded.

We visited one of the craters at Spanbroekmolen full of water and surrounded with trees and shrubs. A pleasant place with an interesting history.

In 1929 Lord Wakefield bought the site from eight different owners for 53,436 Belgian Francs and sold it to Toc H for 1 Belgian Franc. It was renamed as 'The Pool of Peace' and left as a monument. In 1992 it was listed as 'a site of outstanding Beauty'

The locations of the two remaining mines were unknown until one exploded on 17 June 1955 near Le Pelerin when a power cable pylon unwittingly erected over it was struck by lightning. A large crater resulted but fortunately the only casualty was one cow! It is thought that the last mine is some 150 yds away across the road!

Back onto the N365 just South of Mesen our next stop was the Island of Ireland Peace Tower which was built with stone reclaimed from an Irish famine almshouse demolished in Mullingar the home of the first VC of the War Lt Maurice Dease.

This traditional Irish round tower stands in a park which includes four gardens. A beautiful and tranquil spot.

Continuing South on the N365 to Ploegstreert, 'Plugstreet' to Tommies,

to visit the impressive gleaming white memorial, a rotunda guarded by two lions, which was designed by Sir Gilbert Ledward. It was to be erected in France at Lille but the French opposed the Commission's plan to build twelve memorials and only four were built (Soissons, La Ferte, Neuve-Chapelle and the Somme) It bears the names of 11,447 missing officers and men. This includes three VCs of which Sapper William Hackett VC was of special interest to us. A miner from

Nottingham he served in 254 Tunnelling Coy RE and was awarded the VC at the age of 43 for helping to rescue four men entombed with him in a gallery after an enemy explosion on 23 June 1916 at Givenchy. He remained with the last man who was wounded and the gallery collapsed. A rescue party worked for four days but failed to reach the two of them alive.

Here Bill related the story of 'the Christmas Truce' of 24/25 December 1914

when both sides met in 'no mans land' to fraternise, sing and play football in the area around Ploegstreert Wood.

On the way back to we paused at 'Hell Fire Corner' by the demarcation stone on the Menin Road a mile outside Ypres. It which marks the limits of the German advance towards the town. I can remember Jean Callebaut's father who served in the ASC as a young driver telling me how the drivers of supply and ammunition wagons dreaded the place where the only protection from German artillery ranged on the crossroads were



hessian screens and how during the day the wagons tried to cross at full gallop hopefully to reduce their chances of being hit.



We attended the evening Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate in the evening before dinner. A large gathering and a moving moment made even more memorable by a group of Welsh schoolchildren who sang in Welsh and laid flowers in honour of Welshmen who fell in the war.

Day Three. We started the day with a long drive down to Arras on the E15 skirting around Lille.

The first stop was at the impressive Arras Memorial on the ring road near to the Citadel designed by Vauban. Here on its walls are recorded the names of 36,000 missing in the battles around Arras. In the adjoining cemetery there are 2,700 burials. Our group photograph was taken here. Here too is the striking Royal Flying Corps memorial in the form of a tall slim tower surmounted by a globe encircled by aircraft. It bears the names of all RNAS, RFC and RAF lost on the Western Front. This includes two VCs Major Lanoe Hawker VC DSO and Major Edward Mannock VC DSO MC. They were both commissioned into the Royal Engineers and subsequently transferred to the RFC in July 1914 and April 1917 respectively.

Hawker was the first flying ace and in July 1915 flying a Bristol Scout he was the first pilot to be awarded the VC. He met his death at the age of 25 in November 1916 flying a Airco DH-2 as the leader of 24 Squadron. After a 30 minute dogfight with the 'Red Baron' flying an Albatross D II he was shot in the head and crashed. He was the Barons 11th victim.



Mannock was the most successful RAF pilot accounting for 73 victories. He met his death at the age of 31 flying an S.E.5A in July 1918 whilst commanding 85 Sqn RAF. He was shot down by ground fire.

The next stop was at 'Wellington Quarries' so named by the New Zealand tunnellers who toiled there in 1916. Here they joined up several existing underground Medieval limestone quarries with short tunnels to form a very large network of tunnels, caves and shafts 20 meters underground.

This underground complex provided shelter for 24,000 soldiers assembled for the Chemin des Dames diversionary attack. From the safety of this haven troops were able to gain access to communication trenches and then on to forward trenches for the assault.

There was time for a look around Arras as well as have lunch before moving on to The Canadian National Vimy Memorial.

On the way we paused to see the plaque recording Lt Col Mike Watkins death on 11 August 1998 when, after a collapse, he was buried in a deep exploratory excavation of a 20 mile long tunnel system close to where he had discovered and disarmed a 6,500lbs Durand mine some 22 meters below the surface.

Set on Hill 145 this is for me the most impressive of all the Somme



monuments. Together with the preserved trenches and tunnels and a new Visitors Centre it is a fitting reminder of the achievements of the Canadian Corps in capturing Vimy Ridge. This was a landmark for Allied fortunes and back in Canada it brought pride and honour to a young nation.

Returning to Ypres to view the almost intact Vauban fortifications around the Menin Gate some of us continued around the ramparts to the Lille Gate and then down onto the peaceful and pretty waterside CWGC cemetery where many Sappers are buried.

Day Four. To day we concentrate on the Somme Battlefield.

Our first mission was to find and visit the grave of one of my distant relatives Private Harry Freer KOYLI who died on 27 November 1917. He is remembered in the Cambrai Memorial in the little village of Louverval on the N20



between Bapaume and Cambrai. A pleasant well landscaped site memorable for its mature Indian Bean trees.

On to find the grave of Aileen Leighton's uncle Captain A Leighton ASC attached to London Regt (Artists Rifles) who died on the 2 September 1918 and is buried in Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension. Bill found the site which was tucked away in the suburbs and Aileen found her uncle at VL 26.

Our next stop was at the largest mine crater on the Western front at La Boisselle. It was the work of the 185th Tunnelling Coy who packed it with 60,000lbs of ammonol. When fired it produced a crater 300ft wide and 90ft deep and threw debris 4,000ft in the air. The area was called 'Sausage Valley' and the mine 'Lochnagar'. It was blown in chalk and the bolder of the 75,000 visitors who come every year can scabble down to its dry bottom to scatter poppies.



In 1978 an Englishman, Richard Dunning, purchased the land and set up 'Friends of Lochnagar' which is associated with the Sue Ryder Association. Around its rim are several small monuments and a 12ft high wooden cross.

Every year at 0730hrs on the 1 July a ceremony of remembrance is held to honour the 'Tynesiders' who perished in the attack on La Boisselle launched from Tara-Usna line. Bill took us to lunch at the nearby 'Old Blighty Café' run by Jon and Alison Haslock. A quaint place not too dissimilar to a National Trust shop and café.

Next to the largest British war memorial in the world, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and unveiled in 1932. Standing 150ft high on top of a warren of tunnels and dugouts which formed part of the German second line it dominates the surrounding area. It



commemorates the 1916 Somme offensive and bears the names of 73,000 missing British and South African men. The cost of building this monument, which for me, is the ugliest of them all, was the cause of much controversy. Ironically much more money had to be spent on major restoration in the mid-1980s when all the facing bricks had to be replaced.

The last visit of the day was to the Newfoundland Memorial Park at nearby Beaumont Hamel. This 84 acre park opened by Earl Haig on 7 June 1925 is a memorial to the soldiers and sailors of Newfoundland. The park contains well preserved trenches, cemeteries and memorials. The predominant memorial is The Caribou, the emblem of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, roaring from the top of a rocky crag. This one of five Caribou

Monuments erected in the Somme by Newfoundland. Newfoundland's contribution to the war must be judged by the fact that it was a self governing dominion from 1907 to 1949 and before that a British colony. The 1st Newfoundland Regt was almost wiped out on the first day of the Somme offensive. It was reinforced and fought well at several subsequent actions thus gaining the honour 'Royal'



The interesting and enjoyable day was rounded off by a very jolly gala dinner in the hotel. This FoREM tour tradition is appreciated by our members and hotel wine waiters!

Day Five. Having breakfasted and handed over our packed luggage

walls and the floor. Regimental crests and badges glow in the stained glass windows. Unusual tributes to the 'Old Boys' of many schools adorn the south wall of the nave. One of the latest plaques to be donated commemorates members of the Chinese Labour Corps who lost their lives. This Corps undertook much of the dirty work during the war and was employed after the war filling in trenches, dugouts and bunkers.

At 1000hrs on to 'In Flanders Fields Museum' in the Cloth Hall. Too complex and moving to describe. All that I can say is that if any reader has not yet made a visit it should be high on their 'must do list'.



On the coach again at 1230hrs and off to St Omer for lunch in the main square. On the way into town we saw from the coach a glimpse of the roof of 'La Coupole', Hitler's V1 and V2 rocket base, what remains of Vauban's fortifications around St Venant's bastion and 52 Rue Carnot the house in which Lord Roberts died on 14 November 1914. He had insisted on visiting The Western Front.



Our last visit of the tour was to 'Le Blockhaus d'Eperlecques' buried in the forest some 8 miles North of St Omer on the Dunkerque road. As a schoolboy I had been on the receiving end of both V1 and V2 rockets and was fascinated to see

this massive RC structure built to assemble and fire rockets. The site was identified by the RAF and critically damaged by 'Earthquake Tall Boy' bombs each delivering 6 tons of HE. Both sites were captured by the allies before they could be used.

The 1400 V2 rockets targeted at the UK were fired from mobile launch sites. It should not be forgotten that this 13 ton weapon carrying a 1 ton warhead was the first ballistic missile.

Fortunately Vengeance Weapon 3 capable of firing 300 rockets per hour was never used!

A busy tour packed with visits came to a successful end and the group comprising Pat Bracher, Jean Callebaut, Pam and Jim Foulkes, Doreen and Vic Freeman, Murdoch Matthew, Mary and Mike Nottingham, Bill Pears, Claire Potter, Aileen Leighton, Barbara Lankester, Steve Templecox, Faith and David Tippett, Charles Trollope, Dorothy Walker, Anne and Ray Watkins and Mike and Jane Watson had a uneventful ferry and coach trip home and dispersed from The Club at around 2030hrs.