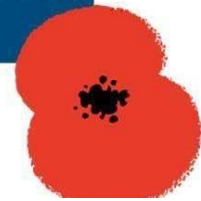


City of Ely Branch Royal British Legion Great Pilgrimage 90



The Great Pilgrimage 90 (GP90) took place from Monday 5th August to Thursday 8th August 2018 and culminated in the parade of 1113 Royal British Legion standards and the same number of wreath bearers to the Menin Gate at Ypres.

The City of Ely Branch sent two representatives, Brian Crabtree as the Standard Bearer and Committee member Verity Baker as the Wreath layer. Our Branch member Tom Brown also attended in the capacity of County Standard Bearer, accompanied by our Branch Chairman, Dave Martin as the County Wreath layer; as a branch we were particularly well represented.



The trip, jointly organised with Leger Holidays departed from Trumpington on Sunday 4th August, collecting yet more Pilgrims along the way, plus our Tour Guide Mike Collins; a school History Teacher and veteran of 35 battlefield trips. His wealth of knowledge of the WW1 battlefields and the background to many of the events which took place there, along with the reasons for many of those events was fascinating, respectful, moving and with a bit of humour thrown in too; it really made the tour something quite special for all of us 'Pilgrims' on Coach No 913!

The journey continued to our accommodation at Lille via Dover



ferry and consisted of 2 days of battlefield and Cemetery visits, prior to the main event; the parade and wreath laying service of remembrance at the Menin Gate in Ypres.

Day 1. - The Somme, The Ypres Salient and Vimy Ridge

After an early rise, we departed for the first visit of the day; the **Thiepval Memorial** which commemorates the missing of the Somme. It bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918, and who have no known grave.



It was then but a short ride to the **Connaught Cemetery** and the nearby **Ulster Tower** overlooking the Somme Valley. From here it was very easy to get a sense of what the British and allied forces were up against throughout the Somme offensive; a heavily dug in German army occupying the high ground.

There were still remnants of the reinforced concrete German defences and a machine gun post, and in the now quiet fields, there was the odd random, lone poppy stubbornly pushing through - a poignant reminder of what went before.



The Connaught Cemetery is the final resting place of over 1,280 soldiers, 640 of whom are unidentified. In the Thiepval wood immediately behind the Cemetery, original preserved trenches give a sense of the conditions that soldiers were up against - albeit with no mud!

The Ulster Tower is an impressive memorial which is Northern Ireland's National war memorial commemorating the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division and all those from Ulster who served in WW1.

From here we went on to **Caterpillar Valley Cemetery** in Longueval. Caterpillar Valley was the name given by the British army to the long valley which rises eastwards, past "Caterpillar Wood", to the high ground at Guillemont. As with much of the ground in this region, it saw fierce fighting, falling in and out of British hands at a huge cost in terms of the fallen.



Once it was finally captured in March 1918 by 38th (Welsh) Division, a small cemetery of 25 graves was established. After the Armistice, bodies were brought in from the vast number of small cemeteries, some of which still can be

seen dotted around the Somme. It is now the resting place of 5,569 Commonwealth servicemen, 3,796 of which are unidentified.



In 2004, one of these unidentified New Zealand soldiers was disinterred and his body repatriated, where it was laid to rest in the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Wellington.

We then moved on to **Delville Wood**, the scene of a series of desperate engagements between 15 July to 3 Sept 2016 involving the 1st South African Infantry Brigade. The village and wood when captured by the South African



forces, formed a salient which meant that the German artillery could fire on it from 3 sides, which explains why the fighting

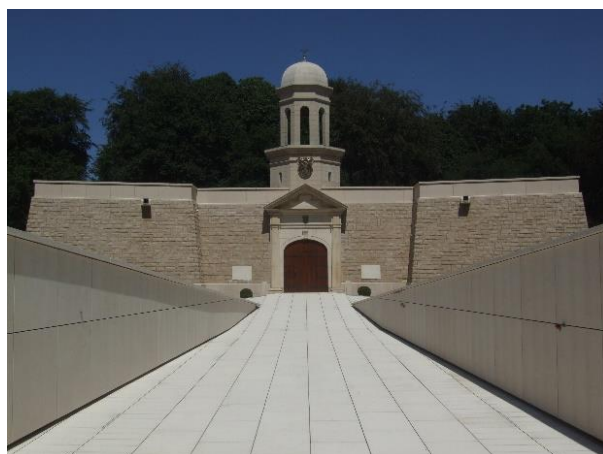
was so fierce in the area with such a high casualty toll - **The Delville Wood Cemetery** contains 5,523 graves, 3,593 of which are unidentified.

Across from the cemetery is the **Delville Wood South African National Memorial**.

Within the wood is evidence of the various



trench networks and shell craters. After the devastation of the shelling during the battles, most of the natural vegetation had been destroyed, apart from a lone tree, which



still stands with a small memorial - the last tree.

The rest of the wood was replanted by the South African government after the Armistice - this lone tree remains as a poignant reminder of the devastation wreaked across the whole region.

From here, we went on to the **Canadian National Vimy Memorial**.

This site consists of a Museum and a section of the original trench system - it is quite incredible how close the two opposing lines of trenches are at some points

After a short walk through what is now woods, but still shows evidence of the massive shelling wrought on the area, where



troops would have fought through the mud from crater to crater, we arrive at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial.



This incredibly imposing limestone monument overlooks the Douai Plain from the highest point of the Vimy Ridge. It was built as a symbol of national mourning and remembrance by the Canadian people of the 66,000 Canadian citizens who made the ultimate sacrifice and the 172,000 who were wounded, not only in the battles on the Vimy Ridge, but across all 4 years of the War.



It consists of two towering pylons with twenty intricate and symbolic sculptured figures, the most poignant of which is a large mourning figure known as '**Canada Bereft**'. It is a female figure standing facing the Douai plain above a symbolic tomb of a Canadian Soldier, the head is bowed in sorrow. It represents the young nation of Canada grieving for her loss - incredibly moving.

The day concluded with a visit to the **Arras memorial**, which stands at the entrance to the **Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery**; also home to the **Arras Flying Services Memorial**.

The Cemetery contains 2,670 graves of Commonwealth soldiers, only 10 of which are unidentified.



This remarkably low number is because Arras



was a headquarters town along with a field hospital; many of those in the Cemetery would have been injured yet evacuated to and processed by the Field Hospitals.

The Arras Flying Services Memorial commemorates more than 1,000 airmen of the Royal Naval Air Service, the Royal Flying Corps, and the Royal Air Force, who were killed on the whole Western Front and who have no known grave.

Day 2. Tyne Cot, Passchendaele, Hill 60 and Ypres

Another early rise for the trip to the **Tyne Cot Cemetery**. If day 1 was moving enough, Tyne Cot was stunningly so!

This area on the Western Front was the scene of the **Third Battle of Ypres**, better known as the Battle of Passchendaele; one of the major battles of the War. The Cemetery itself is the final resting place of 11,900 servicemen of the British Empire - 8,295 of which



have not been identified, indeed it contains headstones where up to 8 unidentified bodies are in the same grave.

The Tyne Cot Memorial stands at the entrance of the Cemetery bearing the names of some 34,996 men of the British and New Zealand forces who have no known grave, nearly all of whom died between August 1917 and November 1918.



It is beyond the use of words to describe the enormity of what had happened in these rolling pastures and sunlit woodlands over a century ago. So peaceful now, and yet less than three or four generations ago had seen such carnage and destruction as had never seen before. It is a stark reminder of the place remembrance has in ensuring that these events remain in the public consciousness, such that we can hopefully never return to this level of destruction again - Lest we forget.



We moved onto the **Crest Farm Memorial** on the Passchendaele Ridge. This site marks the place where the men of the Canadian Corps finally took possession of the high ground at Crest Farm, after ferocious fighting in the Second Battle of Passchendaele, between 26th October and 10th November 1917.

By the end of the battle, the final victory had cost 4,000 men, with 7,700 wounded, and over 1,000 suffering from gassing injuries. The site was on the

highest ground in the region; as such it had immense tactical advantage, which goes to explain why it was felt to be worth that cost.

From here we went to the **Zonnebeke Museum** of the Passchendaele Offensive. This contained an impressive collection of Militaria and personal effects from those involved in the offensive along with reconstructions of the trench and tunnel systems. It was a stark reminder of how ill equipped the British Army was to wage this type of war at the time. As with any conflict, it was plain to see how equipment and techniques developed quickly to adapt to the new emerging forms of waging war!



Next stop, **Hill 60** and the **Caterpillar Crater**. There several similar hills in the region which look at odds with the low-lying land that is typical of the area. This is because they are man-made, spoil heaps from various land works. They are named in relation to their height; Hill 60 being 60 metres was therefore of strategic importance and was fiercely fought over; it changed ownership between the allies and the Germans several times throughout the war.



The site hosts a number of memorials to the various regiments that were involved in the numerous Battles to take control of it.



Nearby is the Caterpillar Crater - a 260ft wide and 60ft deep reminder of one



of the great tunnel mines which the allies used to undermine the German positions. The Mine was blown on 7 June 1917, claiming the lives of 687 men. It is classed as a war grave, as not all of those remains were recovered. As an indication of the ferocity of the attempts to take Hill 60, there were a total of five similar mines blown in the vicinity of the site.

Finally, we were taken to the town of **Leper** - formerly known as **Ypres** - for a visit to the '**In Flanders Fields Museum**' and **Menin Gate**. The town of Ypres was almost razed to ground during WW1 and has since been rebuilt in the same style that it was prior to the conflict.

The '**In Flanders Fields Museum**' located within the rebuilt Corn Hall in the centre of Ypres, houses a collection which presents the story of the war in the Flanders region through artefacts recovered from the area and a series of interactive exhibits which really do bring to life what actually happened and the reasons for it.



There is quite a poignant section which deals with animals at war. It has a couple of recovered War Horse skeletons which all serve to illustrate the totality of the war - it was not just a human cost.

The **Menin Gate** stands in commemoration of the hundreds of thousands of servicemen of the British Empire who marched through the town of Ypres, on their way to the Flanders battlefields between October 1914 and September 1918.



The memorial now stands as a reminder of those who died and have no known grave. It contains 54,609 names and is the venue of a daily homage to the fallen. It was time to reflect all that we had seen on the trip, and also to absorb the enormity of the loss.

The picture on the right serves to illustrate the total devastation wreaked on Ypres and indeed the whole area. It was taken in 1917 and shows a column of Allied troops marching towards what is now the Menin gate and on to battle with the remains of the Corn Hall in the background



Day 3. The day of the Parade

The culmination of our pilgrimage was a parade of 1113 standards of the Royal British Legion Branches along with the same number of wreath bearers through Ypres town centre, onto a service at the Menin Gate.

It was an immensely proud moment to see the vast array of blue and gold standards flying in the brilliant sunshine, parading through the narrow-cobbled streets of Ypres and the red poppies shining brightly on the wreaths, as we made our way to the Menin Gate. It didn't feel sad or emotional; everyone was full of pride at being part of such a commemoration and we were welcomed with open arms by all the local people we encountered.



Post Script.....

And that was the end of the official tour - or so we thought! Once the days events at Ypres had concluded, on the way back to Lille we stopped by the **Langemark German Military Cemetery**. This was actually one of the most memorable and moving visits and certainly left a lasting impression on us all. The contrast between this site and the *CWGC* sites is quite remarkable.

There is a definite Teutonic and industrial feel about the site; the memorials are made of grey granite and the grave markers are flat on the ground, each one with up to eight names on it; mass graves much in evidence.

The Cemetery was established in 1915 and was initially quite small. That changed in 1954, when the decision was made to exhume the bodies in 18 smaller German Cemeteries scattered around the Flanders region and reinter them at Langemark, now designated a collection Cemetery.

There is now a total of 44,298 of the fallen on



the region.

This is quite a sobering sight to see; it is bordered by 26 granite blocks detailing the names of the 24,916 fallen within the single grave.

It is also estimated that in the region there are a further 83,000 German fallen not accounted for.



the site; 19,378 in identified graves, with a further 24,916 unidentified warriors in a single mass grave - the "Kameraden Grab" or the "Comrades Grave". These are thought to be all the German unidentified fallen from





What was quite striking was that the site is planted with a number of Oak trees - the German national tree. They are now quite imposing and lend a sombre air to the site, indeed many of the graves we saw were littered with acorns - a poignant symbol of new life.

This visit served to illustrate that there was indeed a massive loss on both sides; each one of those losses, a personal loss for those involved - on whichever side, and also the differences in how we deal with that loss.



One thing I found quite interesting is that Germany adopted the Oakleaf as a symbol of remembrance, yet at the entrance to the site there was a relatively modern memorial which incorporated a mound of poppies and also a wreath, albeit in dark bronze in a typical Teutonic style. Maybe after all this time and the past is put to one side, these differences are becoming less obvious.



The whole Pilgrimage left a lasting impression on all of us from the Ely Branch. It was certainly an honour to have been selected to represent the Branch and indeed the County of Cambridgeshire.

