

Great Pilgrimage 90 (GP90) - the largest membership event The Royal British Legion has undertaken in recent history.

Back in 1928, 10 years after the end of the momentous and bloody 4 years of the First World War, a Battlefield Pilgrimage was organised for over 11,000 veterans and war widows. The aim of GP90, was to invite as many RBL branches to send 2 representatives to retrace their steps, connect to their journey and share the experience of Remembrance and reflection. The event would culminate on the 8th of August when the RBL members parade through Ypres and attend a ceremony to mark the centenary of the launch of the "Hundred Days Offensive" that led to the end of the First World War.

On Sunday 5th August, 60 coaches from all over the UK made their way to Belgium, conveying British Legion Members to the Great Pilgrimage 90 event. Our hotel was in Mons, which is particularly famous, thanks to the "Legend of the Angels of Mons", which tells the tale of angel archers descending from the heavens to protect the British forces on 23rd August 1914. (Find out more at our Festival of Angels in Loppington Church in November).

Mons attained the dubious honour of being known as "The First and the Last"- the town on the frontline where the first battle was fought by the British Army in WW1, and the last major engagements of the war took place. It was also where the first and last soldiers were killed, their remains buried next to each other on the outskirts of the town. The first 2 VCs of the war were won here too.

The 60 coaches were split in to 2 groups and on Monday 6th, leaving at 8 am, our group set off to tour The Somme area. It was here on the first day of The Battle of the Somme that 57,000 men were killed or reported missing.

We passed the town of Bapoune, which changed hands many times during the 1st World War leaving the town destroyed and the soil contaminated for many years by poison gas. We also passed the site of The Battle of Cambrai, where the first tanks were employed in battle.

During our travels, we passed many of the cemeteries which are cared for by The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, (GWGC). The Commission was established in 1917, and its duty was to ensure that all those who had died would be honoured equally, regardless of their rank, religion or background, and it aimed to bury the dead as near to where they fell as possible. The Commission promised to maintain these sites of remembrance for evermore, which they certainly do, they are immaculately kept.

At Longueval Cemetery, (Caterpillar Valley) there are 5,500 graves, 70% of which bear the inscription "A Soldier of the Great War, known unto God". Many died in 1916, but were not buried until 1918, by which time it was impossible to identify them. Here there is a memorial to 12,000 New Zealand men, one of whom played for The All Blacks.

Our next stop was at Delville Wood (Devils Wood). Here, 3,155 South African soldiers were tasked with taking the wood "at all costs". When they were relieved 6 days later, there had been 2,536 casualties. The South Africans were outnumbered by 7,000 Germans. It was reported that 400 German shells landed in Delville Wood every minute. This shelling uprooted the trees which made it difficult to dig trenches of any depth. At the end of this offensive, only one tree remained which still stands today. Although the area has been replanted with new trees, it is possible to see all the hollows and craters left by the shells. The inscription on the monument here reads "Their ideal is our legacy. Their sacrifice our inspiration". With 30 coaches over the 2 days visiting all these sites, there was obviously a lot of people there at any one time,

but it seemed to be so quiet, as we tried to imagine the horrors that took place and many stood, lost in thought and young and old were wiping away tears, with the emotions that these sights evoked.

At a museum near here, is a tribute to Jackie the Baboon. He was a mascot, who in 1915 became a Private, was given a uniform and taught how to salute. He lost a leg, was invalided out and presented with a medal!

Thiepval was our next stop. The objective to capture Thiepval was on the 1st July, but it wasn't achieved until September. By this time, much of the professional army had been wiped out, and 3 Pals Battalions were used in this offensive.

The Thiepval Memorial is the biggest Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial, commemorating 72,194 men who have no known grave. Over 90% of those commemorated died in the 1916 Battles of the Somme, between July and November.

At Thiepval Wood, we were met by volunteers from the Somme Association Charity who are still excavating this battlefield site. We had to stay on designated paths as there are so many unexploded shells still uncovered and out of respect for bodies still buried. The volunteers are working to uncover bodies, many of which can be identified by personal items found near the remains. For example, one Irish soldier was identified by his number on his spoon, which he would have kept down his trouser leg. It was known that the soldier had been shot in the leg and the bullet had gone through the bowl of his spoon before entering his leg. This was one of the areas where poison gas was used, but it was a disaster for the British forces as their trenches were at a lower level than the Germans and as the gas was heavier than air, it sank and drifted back in to their own trenches.

All of this in one morning! In the afternoon we visited Arras and Vimy. In April 1917, 4 Canadian divisions were tasked with capturing Vimy Ridge. These elite corps were well trained and the success of this attack was due to careful planning by their commanders. It is apt that The Vimy Memorial, a very impressive monument adorned by 20 sculptures, stands at this place. It is Canada's largest overseas National Memorial, and it commemorates more than 11,000 Canadian men killed during WW1 in France who have no known grave, many at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

From here we moved on to the Vimy Ridge Visitor Centre, where we saw reconstructed trenches, tunnels and dugouts. In some places, the opposing trenches were only 25 metres apart. For much of WW1, the Western Front was a stalemate of trench fighting. A narrow strip of "No Man's Land", of mud, barbed wire and shell craters that was swept by deadly rifle, machine gun and artillery fire, was what the soldiers faced when they went "over the top". Sadly, the dead and wounded who fell in No Man's Land could not be recovered as it was too dangerous.

Our next stop was at The Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery, where 38,400 servicemen are commemorated at this CWGC site in Arras. The Flying Services Memorial bears the names of 1000 airmen, while the cloister which borders the cemetery commemorates over 34,700 British, South African and New Zealand servicemen who died at Arras, but have no known grave. There are 10 Second WW graves here and also the graves of some who were "shot at dawn". Also remembered is Sandy Turnbull, the first player to score for Manchester United at Old Trafford.

We ended this busy day with an hour's free time in Arras, where we could relax in the market square with a much needed cool drink! And then made our way back to our hotel, arriving at 7.15 pm, just in time for dinner.

On Tuesday 7th, leaving at 7.45 am, we set off for the Ypres-Salient, (Salient -meaning bulge in the front line which meant that the allied forces were being attacked on 3 sides). In 1914, Ypres stood in the way of the

German advance to the channel ports and it was vital that they did not gain this advantage. 250,000 British and Empire soldiers, 1 in 4 of those who died in the Great War had died in the defence of Ypres. Many battalions crossed through Ypres to go up to the trenches via the Menin road. It therefore seemed the most appropriate place to locate the proposed memorial to the missing of the Ypres salient, when the CWGC began to consider sites in the 1920s.

The Menin Gate is 1 of 7 CWGC memorials to the missing in Belgium. It bears the names of more than 54,000 commonwealth service men killed in the Ypres Salient during WW1, who have no known grave, (the capacity of Anfield Football Stadium). The magnificent gate was unveiled in a ceremony on 24th July 1927, attended by veterans and grieving relatives of the missing, who were addressed by Lord Plumer. In his speech, he reflected on those who had lost loved ones, but who had no burial place at which to mourn: He ended by saying, "Now it can be said of each one in whose honour we are assembled here today;"He is not missing, He is here". His words struck a chord with those present as they realised that although they had no grave at which to show their respect, they had this memorial to their loved ones.

At the end of the ceremony, the Last Post was sounded and this simple, solemn act became a daily ritual with the Last Post being led by the local fire brigade every evening. The ceremony continues today and is often attended by hundreds of those who have come to pay their respects, keeping up the long tradition of pilgrims stretching back to the 1920s.

You cannot fail to be moved when visiting this memorial to so many.

We also had time to visit the Cloth Hall which was completely destroyed, as was most of Ypres, but which now houses the excellent In Flanders Fields Museum.

Our next stop was Hill 60, about 3 miles from Ypres. Though known as Hill 60, it was in fact man-made in the 1860s when a railway line was being laid. However, with a height of 150 feet, any elevation was an advantage and so Hill 60 became a prime target for both sides.

Hill 60 changed hands on many occasions during WW1. The British dug many tunnels underneath the German positions and each tunnel was packed with high explosives. One crater we saw (Caterpillar Crater), was enormous and was created by a 7000lb. mine. The British last captured Hill 60 on Sept. 28th 1918, 6 weeks before Armistice Day. By the very nature of the fighting that took place at Hill 60, many bodies are still known to lie there.

We ate our packed lunches in the town of Messines where there is a statue commemorating the Christmas Football truce.

We then moved on to Passchendaele. Officially known as the Third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele became infamous not only for the scale of the casualties, but also for the mud. Constant shelling had churned the clay and smashed the drainage systems. The heaviest rain in 30 years turned the soil in to a quagmire, producing thick mud that clogged up rifles and immobilised tanks. It eventually became so deep that men and horses drowned in it.

The Museum and exhibitions here were excellent, with recreated dug-outs and trenches, which were very much brought to mind when we watched a DVD of "Journeys End" on our return home.

At 4 pm, we arrived at Tyne Cot, the largest CWGC cemetery, where there are 11,908 graves. The sheer number of graves makes it difficult to take in. Of this total 70% are unknown. On the wall at the back of the cemetery are the names of 34,927 soldiers who have no known grave and died from August 1917 to the end of the war-a continuation of the names inscribed on the Menin Gate.

Our last visit of the day was to the Crest Farm Memorial, which commemorates the officers and men of the Canadian Corps, which suffered heavy losses during the Battle of Passendaele. Crest Farm is situated on high ground, which offered excellent views over the battlefield. Passendaele Church was only 700 metres away, but it took the Canadians 10 days to fight to capture it. The road between the monument and the church is now called Canadalaan. Every year on the night of the 10th November, a torch light procession is held to the church.

It had been a very hot, humid and tiring day, we were exhausted, but you felt that you could not complain when you remembered what horrors and hardships our forces had suffered. We had to admire the stamina of the elderly folk who joined us on this event. We had 3 octogenarians on our coach, two of whom went on to carry their Standards at the parade the next day. It was also encouraging to see how many young people took part too.

The travel company Leger had organised all our travel, accommodation and tours of the sites. Battlefield tours normally take place over 4 days, we did it in 2! We sometimes felt that it would have been nice to have a bit more time at some of the sites, but with so many people to visit so many sites, we had to keep to a very strict schedule. We couldn't imagine what it must have been like with 11,000 pilgrims making this tour in 1928.

We had a young history student as our tour guide, his first time in this role! But, Shaun was a first class guide who kept us in order and impressed on us the importance of keeping to our timetable. This was fine until Wednesday morning, the day of the big Parade, when we were all sitting on the coach waiting for Shaun, who had had one too many Belgian lagers the night before and had overslept. Our coach drivers made him do a walk of shame up and down the coach, while we all cheered and clapped him. We didn't let him live this down!

After a group photograph of all those on our coach, (minus Shaun!), with our Standards and wreaths, we set off again at 8 am for the "Big Day" in Ypres. Security was very strict and Ypres was closed off to all traffic. Our coaches had a police escort in and out. On arrival at the meeting point we were marshalled in to a large marquee from where we lined up in a long side street, 1100 Standard Bearers and 1100 Wreath layers, in ranks of 4. At 12 noon we set off to march through the Market Square and on to the Menin Gate where the One hundred Days Ceremony took place. The sight of this parade was something to behold.

The ceremony took place under the Menin Gate during which poems and recollections of WW1 were read. After The Exhortation and The Last Post, poppy petals floated down from the top of the Memorial and in the breeze they floated down over the Standard Bearers, and many a tear was shed. As we write this we are crying again! I then had the privilege of laying my wreath on behalf of Wem. We then paraded back to the Market Square from where we were ordered to "fall out". We then had the afternoon free to wander back to the Menin Gate to pick up some of the poppy petals, and to sit in the sunshine to enjoy entertainment in the Square by military bands and choirs.

It was then back to our coaches and the return to our hotel, from where we departed for home the next day.

Thank you for allowing us the honour and privilege to be a part of this memorable event and to represent our British Legion Branch and the community of Wem and its surrounding areas. It was a thought provoking, very emotional and humbling experience which we will never forget.

Ruth and Neil Comerford.