

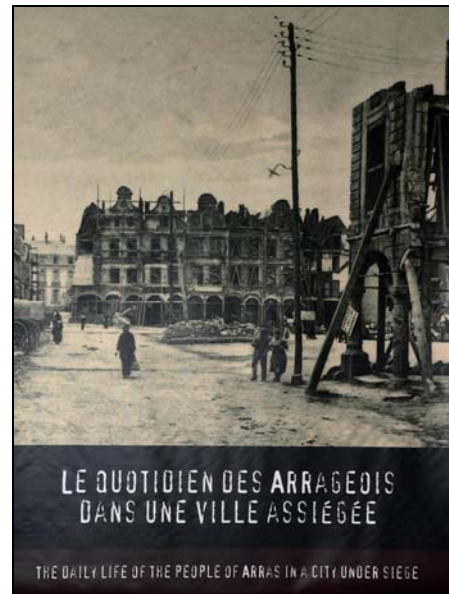


# THE WAR GRAVES PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

## ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH

### The War Graves Photographic Project Tour 15th-18th May 2009 - ARRAS

The beginning of April arrives and so too do Pauline's Emails with a list of those going on the trip. Nice to see many familiar names and, even better, some new ones. A second Email includes some guidance from Steve along with our itinerary - 60 cemeteries and 96187 graves over 3 days - not bad. That is just over 2500 for each person to do.



#### Friday 15 May



A rare picture of John  
Smiling

The day arrives – well, nearly daytime for those at Henley. Will everyone turn up on the correct day? Has Pauline arranged the rendezvous too early? [References to previous boops!]. We set off on time with John our faithful driver once again. Pickups are made at Toddington Services, with a breakfast stop. We leave the services at 07.26 and the sun comes out - 07.27 it goes back in again.

The final pickup is made near the Eurotunnel terminus and then, due to John's good driving, it is off on an earlier train than planned to France. Sadly there had been a few late drop-outs due to illness and Pauline is classed as “walking wounded” with a bad toe. She said it was not through kicking Jim!

We arrive in France to sunshine and head along the coast to Wimereux, our first cemetery of the day. Apart from photographing all of the graves we did stop to look at the grave of Lieutenant John Macrae who penned the famous Poem ‘In Flanders Fields’. It is then on to cemetery number two, Terlincthun British Cemetery, Wimille. All is going well and we are almost finished when the heavens open and everyone has to rush for shelter.

Virtually to a man (and woman) everyone says ‘Tyne Cot again’. We are saturated. Steve decides to leave this one unfinished (a first for a tour) as we are getting behind time and we continue to our third and largest cemetery of the weekend at Etaples, with the 10892 graves being completed in showery conditions. As we leave and head for Arras, our base for the weekend, the sun comes out again. This is the quietest time of the day with nearly everyone catching up on lost sleep.

The next scheduled cemetery at Aubigny is abandoned as the coach cannot get up the narrow lane through the village and John takes us into Arras giving us a quick, unintentional tour of the centre and once more shows us his driving prowess by taking the coach down some very narrow side streets. He did mention that Arras is not one of his ‘favourite’ destinations for taking a 35 seater coach.



John Macrae's grave

We check into the Mercure Hotel and everyone goes off to freshen up before the now regular First Evening Team Dinner. We are joined for the meal by some volunteers who are now resident on the Continent and will be with us for most of the weekend. After a very enjoyable buffet, where the food just seemed to keep on coming, Steve welcomed the newcomers, Duncan and Elaine Andrews from the South of France, David and Kay Lovell from Paris and Martin Shilton from Germany. He then advised that there would be some changes to the itinerary - we would have a satellite tour with Peter Gillings and Martin Shilton going off to do some of the smaller cemeteries in Martin's van during the daytime and joining up again in the evening. (Both were "virgins" to the tour and to the area and had an enjoyable couple of days and even managed to visit some of the sights.) After his welcome speech Steve opened his market stall and began distributing team shirts to everyone.



Dinner over some retired to the bar, some retired to their room for the night as it had been a very long day (02.00 starts) but one intrepid team of explorers, led by Martin Harvey, decided to set off on a recce from the hotel. He led us to the other side of the tracks en route to a bar he could remember having visited. This was eventually aborted when it proved to be further away than at first envisaged. We found a bar quite near to our hotel where the gang decided to encamp. Debs had her first, by now obligatory, Irish Coffee and we toasted absent friends.

## Saturday 16 May

This was to be our busiest day of the weekend with 12 cemeteries to be visited by the coach party so a hearty breakfast and a 09.00 departure, delayed somewhat by the other coach in the car park which again gave John a chance to show off his manoeuvring prowess. We headed south towards the Somme. The usual format was followed with much getting on and off the coach. In the larger cemeteries Steve organised a rolling barrage, usually starting at the farthest away point and returning to the entrance, so that all headstones were covered. As usual we were all impressed by the care and attention given by the gardeners to the plots and also with the variety and colours of the plants. We determined that May is the ideal time otherwise the foliage would be too high and in full bloom.



Nigel searches for 'Scan' mode

There were the usual various sub-projects being undertaken with Phil doing his VCs and any unusual headstones; Nigel Wade who was looking for headstones with the same family surname but this time more especially for 'Men of Worth' from the Worth Valley area of West Yorkshire. At times he had the whole gang 'Wadeing' through the cemeteries looking for certain headstones. Pauline was still in search of her Reverend Gentlemen, the padres who served with the forces. She was by now starting to come off the coach. Her foot had to be kept dry and we had by now lost the rain but had found the wind! She had contemplated the 'plastic bag on the foot' method but this proved to be unnecessary, much to her relief.

Liz had been reading one of her books on the First World War and was looking for the grave of one particular officer. We completed the

photography part of the cemetery and she then informed us that he was not mentioned in the register so must have been using a nom de plume. We then started scouring the headstones to find the elusive gentleman without success. Back on the coach she then discovered that it was the next cemetery he was buried in!

Lunch had been pre-booked at 'The Old Blighty' tea room near Lochnagar Crater, La Boisselle where we partook of baguettes, drinks and a comfort stop. A small number of our party, mainly from 'north of the border', decided to have a visit of their own to the crater and we had to take the coach on a small detour to pick them up to keep up with our schedule. The satellite team moved off to Grove Town cemetery at Meaulte and then on to Heilly Station whilst the main group proceeded to Danzig Alley Cemetery, Mametz where, as has become customary, we laid a wreath on behalf of the project. This was laid by another newcomer, Mark Walker, who also said the Exhortation. This was followed by Harry Paterson reading a very moving poem called *Farewell*, by Lieut. E A Mackintosh and there was hardly a dry eye in the house. We then had the customary Team Photograph in front of the Cross of Sacrifice.



## FAREWELL

**To Sgt H Fraser and L/Sgt G Mackay**

Well, you have gone now,  
 comrades,  
 And I shall see no more  
 The gallant friendly faces  
 Framed in my dug-out door.  
 I had no words to tell you  
 The things I longed to say,  
 But the company is empty  
 Since you have gone away.

The company is filled now  
 With faces strange to see,  
 And scarce a man of the old men  
 That lived and fought with me.  
 I know the drafts are good men,  
 I know they're doing very well,  
 But they're not the men I slept  
 with  
 Those nights at La Boisselle.

Oh the old days of friendship  
 We shall not see again.  
 The bitter winter trenches  
 And the marches in the rain.  
 Becourt, Authuille, Thiepval,  
 Henancourt, Aveyley  
 Their names are keys that open  
 Remembered days to me.

Doors that will open never  
 Upon this tortured land,  
 I shall not see you ever,  
 Or take you by the hand.  
 Only for ancient friendship  
 For all the times we knew,  
 Maybe you will remember  
 As I remember you.

**Lieut Ewart A Mackintosh**

Our furthest away cemetery was at Dernacourt, south west of Albert, and then it was home towards Arras. On the way back a small intrepid party of volunteers asked to be dropped off at the Arras Memorial; Pauline asked if they would place some crosses for her, including one to 2nd Lieut. Walter Tull. He was the first black army officer in the British Army. He was also a professional footballer having played with Tottenham Hotspur and Northampton Town before the First World War. After a look around the memorial and adjoining cemetery we decided to return to our hotel to refresh before dinner. Shock, horror - one of our party was missing. Nic was nowhere to be found. He had not said anything to anyone. We had another look around the site and then decided to start our journey back to the hotel as he was a big boy now and able to look after himself. We passed the local Arras F.C. ground where a match had just started but we decided food was more important. As we continued back towards the hotel in the, by now, sweltering heat we spotted the Celtic Bar ahead and as we had two Glaswegian Celtic supporters with us we decided to do the honorable thing and go in and have a drink. We could also wait to see if Nic would catch us up. We were just finishing our first drink when Nic was spotted going past the window as if on a route march. Harry rushed out and called him in. He was definitely in need of refreshment. Another round of drinks was ordered and we were very kindly given a large bowl of crisps and another one of peanuts, salted. These made us thirsty again so another round was ordered again accompanied by crisps and nuts. Drinks finished 'Au Revoirs' to the locals then back to the hotel for a quick turn around and then out for dinner.

## Sunday 17 May

09.00 departure time again and this time we were heading north and would be travelling as far as the Belgian border to Armentieres. Our first stop of the day was at La Targette British Cemetery next to an enormous French cemetery. Fortunately Steve decided to leave the French one for another visit. The next stopping place was Cabaret-Rouge British Cemetery. With over 7500 burials our rolling barrage technique came into its own and we finished the cemetery in no time at all - helped by the fact that more than half the burials were unidentified. Later we were just finishing one cemetery when what sounded like an air raid siren went off. As this was at 12.00 we decided it was probably the start of a lunch break or similar and that we need not worry. The weather by now was nice and sunny but we still had a strong wind blowing.



**Peter determined that pickings were best this side of the trough**

Today's lunch was to be baguettes again due to most places being closed on Sunday. Provisions had been purchased by Susan and Noel and prepared beforehand by Duncan and Elaine and an alfresco meal was had in situ after we had tackled St Mary's A.D.S. Cemetery, Haisnes. There were a couple of smaller cemeteries behind St Mary's and a small detachment of our troops was ordered to infiltrate, photograph and return. Phil did the smaller of the two on his own and returned to advise us he had found a live hand grenade next to a headstone which he carefully moved to a safer location and left beside a recognised sign of live armaments. After lunch a few of our team decided to do a bit of field walking across the road in a ploughed field. There was mixed success with the ladies coming out on top with Lynn and Jackie finding between them some shrapnel fragments, an unfired rifle cartridge, half of a grenade and some other odds and ends.

Steve reminded us that it is not recommended to take anything home from battlefield visits as the battlefields are regarded as protected areas and the Customs take a dim view to such 'souvenirs'.

Our last cemetery of the day was the Cite Bonjean Military Cemetery and New Zealand Memorial, Armentieres. This took some finding but, with the help of several map readers, 35 back seat drivers and two circuits past the railway station we eventually found it. By now it was mid-afternoon and we were heading back to Arras for a visit to the Wellington Tunnels. On the way back we passed two cemeteries at Neuve-Chapelle which were only small but we were unable to do due to time restraints. 'Scoops' very kindly agreed to do these the following week as he would be in the vicinity with some friends on another trip. (As it turned out he could only manage one of them.)



The tunnels were originally dug by the locals in 18c and 19c to provide limestone for building. These were apparently forgotten about and then when the Allies were holding Arras they were told about the tunnels by the locals and promptly set about extending them. The tunnels we visited were extended by New Zealanders after whom they were called the Wellington Tunnels. An interesting guided tour was undertaken by us all and we were shown some of the original signs on the tunnel walls from the First and the Second World Wars when they were used as shelters on both occasions.

Back to base to prepare for our last night in France. We went to a nearby restaurant and initially asked for a table for 14 which eventually increased to a group of 19. We were served by one young waitress who got my vote for Local of the Tour. She looked after us from start to finish on her own. She took the food orders and then back for the drinks orders to keep the thirsty Brits in order. At the end of the meal she went round everyone individually or in pairs to work out what each had and gave them their own bills. She deserved every bit of the, hopefully, generous tip she received.

## **Monday 18 May**

09.00 start once again after breakfast and we headed for Vimy Ridge to visit the memorial and the reconstructed trench system and a tour of the tunnels. The weather once again was lovely and sunny but we still had the strong wind. The view north from the impressive monument was tremendous and it is very obvious why this was such an important area to control. Steve had asked us to be back at the coach for an 11.00am departure, sooner if all had returned. Scoops was busy cementing Anglo-Canadian relationships talking to Jessica one of the young Canadian students who give up their summer to act as guides both at Vimy Ridge and Beaumont-Hamel on the Somme.



The last cemetery of the tour was Longuenesse (St Omer) Souvenir Cemetery with 3276 burials. This also contained Chinese, German, Czech and French burials. Here the photographers often needed the help of a 'gardener' as a lot of the headstones were close together and a lot had two inscriptions on them. This, together with the abundant foliage, required assistance from the 'gardener' to carefully move away the plant life so that a good photograph could be taken. Task completed we headed for the train home.

No sooner had we arrived at the terminal, debussed and headed off to buy sandwiches for lunch, than we were called for our crossing. So, back on the coach for the return to Blighty. Farewell at Folkestone to our band of Southerners and then on to Northampton to drop off Liz, Kevin and Nic and a short comfort stop. On then to Henley where the last of us bade farewell to each other and agreed to meet again in September for the get-together at the National Memorial Arboretum.

I asked some of the newcomers to the tour to put down their thoughts on the weekend and some of those were:

*Having received the itinerary, sixty one cemeteries, possibly over 97000 pictures to take and a 5am start from Henley. I knew this was not going to be a 'Holiday'.*

*I thoroughly enjoyed myself the whole weekend, met a lot of new (to me) project members all of whom were generous with their advice and seemed to accept me without reservation.*

*All I can say now as a member of the project is "When is the next one?"*

**Peter 'Scoops' Maguire**