



THE WAR GRAVES PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT



In Association
with the CWGC



News from the Front line

October 2012

Sitting here towards the end of September on a very wet Sunday afternoon makes it a good day for the first roast of the winter but that will have to wait. So fickle is the weather just yesterday I was making the most of the last of the summer sunshine with a relaxing hour on the lounge in the garden!

Considering the British weather is so changeable I think we would all agree that the Summer of sport here in the UK was not affected at all and we should consider ourselves, and the competitors in the Olympics, very lucky indeed. I did not actually make it to any of the events but one of our Omani corvettes that I am currently working on in my day job did manage to be on sea trials around Portland Harbour during the sailing competition so had a bit of a grandstand view at no costs. Always a bonus! Small world though as Jon Wort who has helped the project immensely during his tours of the Far East with Poppy Travel was helping in the organisation of the venue as part of the Military contingent brought in at the last minute. Jon managed to pay a revisit to the local cemeteries on the Isle of Portland and has forwarded an article to be found later in the newsletter.



Portland Sailing village

Peter Maguire, who has been a volunteer with us since the beginning, was also involved as one of the hundreds of 'Games Makers' working hard to ensure that the Olympics went smoothly in London and at other events throughout the country.

On completion of the Olympics, much play was made of the fact that the success was not only down to those competing but the keenness and enthusiasm of those volunteers helping.

At The War Graves Photographic Project we certainly know that, if it was not for those of you out there that help, we could not exist.

Thank you one and all.

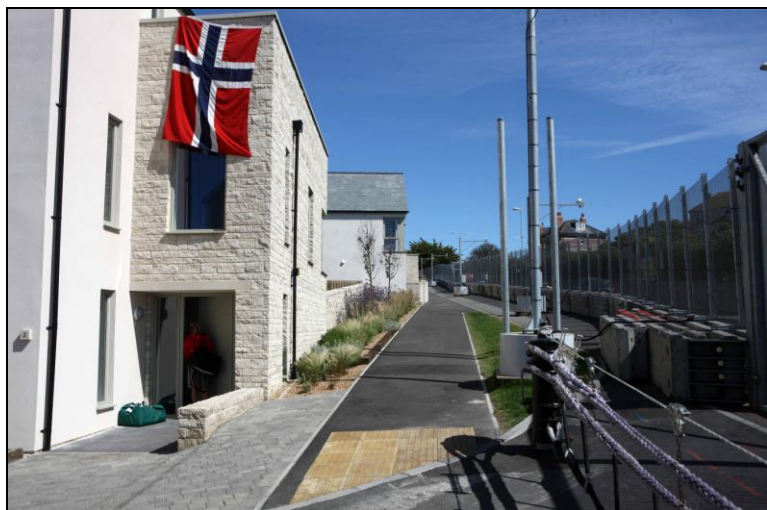
Steve



Peter Maguire gets his hand on a torch

Portland Stranger's Burial Ground - A Hidden Gem By Jon Wort

During the Olympics I was mobilised in my Territorial Army role as the Deputy Joint Regional Liaison Officer for the South West. During the course of my duties I spent some time in the control room at the Olympic Sailing Village, where a colleague asked me whether I had seen the cemetery within the Olympic Village.



With a negative response and not being one to miss a photographic opportunity I discovered a rather forlorn cemetery, contained within the high security "ring of steel" put up and manned by G4S to protect the Olympic athletes during the sailing for the Olympics and Paralympics.

I entered the cemetery to find not only two CWGC headstones but also three Christian crosses designating the final resting place of three French sailors killed in the Second World War.

Olympic Sailing village and high security fencing

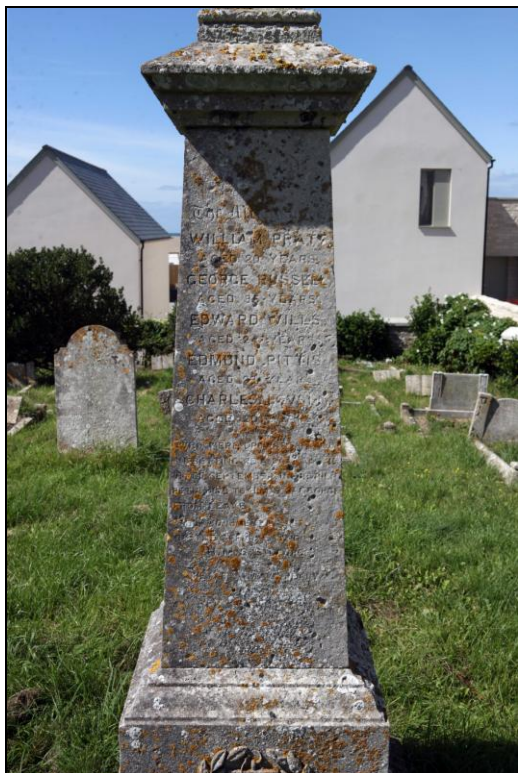
Having photographed them and various other views of the cemetery I was feeling rather pleased with myself until I checked the CWGC web site to find that I had missed **Painter SJ Dines RN**, a CWGC recorded burial. After several trips up and back and still having no joy, I Emailed Steve who was immediately able to advise me that I was looking for a Private Memorial and that he was interred within the Morris family plot. After that, finding it was much easier but sadly it has been laid flat and is in dire need of some tender loving care.



I was intrigued as to whether I could find out some more about the grave and a quick "Google" unearthed a fascinating website which explained some of the local rivalry that exists in many places, non more so than on Portland:

"Burying the dead on Portland has always well illustrated the animosity between Tophillers and Underhillers and between Portlanders and others (Kimberlins or Strangers). The dead of Tophill were always buried on Tophill, Underhillers in Underhill cemeteries and the rest here, in the Strangers' Cemetery. This animosity still exists amongst the older Portlanders but is rapidly dying out as the Portland-born residents are becoming rapidly diluted by incomers from the Mainland" (1)

Another website (2) gives a comprehensive list of many of the burials contained in the cemetery and the two significant events that struck me was that Louise Fowler died on the 25th November 1872 having been drowned in the wreck of the Royal Adelaide. It appears that the Royal Adelaide (3) was carrying 32 crew and 35 emigrant passengers and was bound for Australia when it ran into difficulties in severe weather, attempted to beach at Portland and sadly ran aground at Chesil Beach. Despite supreme efforts of courage and ultimate sacrifice seven people on board died, including 71-year-old Louise Fowler. What made this tragedy more notable was the fact that it was carrying 30,000 tons of cargo (mostly alcohol) and a treasure hunt started on-shore for goods washed up when the ship broke up. Four revellers were found dead the next morning including 15-year old George Neale, a grocer's apprentice.



The final series of entries that makes this cemetery so interesting is the list of sailors' names who died on the 8th September 1868, drowned by the upsetting of a boat when returning from leave (Charles Lovell, Edmund Pittis, William Pratt, George Russell and Edward Wills). There appears to be a small obelisk memorial at the far end of the cemetery, but it is so worn and lichen covered that it is impossible to read the engraved names.

A similar tragic accident was repeated in 1948 when a "liberty boat" (returning to HMS Illustrious from Weymouth on the 17th October with 49 sailors on board) capsized in rough seas drowning 29 sailors, including the 18-year-old coxswain. His family continue to struggle to clear his name after he was blamed by the Royal Navy in a secret inquiry. This is the subject of another article following a morning photographing the graves in the RN cemetery

I hope it will not be long before the Olympic Village is open to all and the chance to visit this lovely cemetery is once again available to everyone.

<http://www.geoffkirby.co.uk/Portland/680735/>

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~pbtvc/MIs/Strangers.html>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/southwest/series9/week_six.shtml

Gurkha Connections – Jim Foulds

40 years ago my daughter graduated, and with 3 of her student friends shared a sumptuous flat in one of the Georgian terraces of Edinburgh's New Town.

On the same landing their neighbours were a delightful elderly couple, Lt Colonel Mitchell and his "lady wife". Following a lifetime's Army service on the North West Frontier of India, they had retired to the "Old Country". Colonel Mitchell was a Doctor and all his working life was spent as a Medical Officer attached to Gurkha Regiments.

I was pleased to be invited to take sherry with the Colonel and Mrs. Mitchell and once there was enthralled to see the trophies and mementoes of this dedication.



Displayed in a glass-topped cabinet amongst this collection of our history a silver cigarette box inscribed with the names of the Officer's Mess of the 6th Gurkha Regiment, welcoming Doctor Mitchell on his appointment as their Medical Officer. Amongst those signatures that of Capt. W. Slim (later, General Bill Slim) Commanding General of the 14th Army, which swept the Japanese from Burma.

Repeated visits to the Colonel instilled in me an abiding regard for the fighting men of Nepal. On the recommendation of the Colonel, I read the iconic book of such times "Bugles and a Tiger", written by John Masters recording his time as a young Officer of the 4th Gurkha Regiment and also on the North West Frontier. I then decided to provide a pension for one of these indomitable men then retired to their Nepal homes. "My man", ex 4 Gurkha Rifles, lives in a mud hut with spring water and an open fire for cooking the food he grows on his two acre of impoverished thin soil in the foothills of the Himalayas. His food lasts about six months. The rest of the year his support is the pension I send him. To collect this he walks for a day and a half, each way, to the nearest Gurkha Office. He is now aged 88. Lest We Forget!

All of this background came flooding back to me on my recent visit to the CWGC Cemetery at Rheinberg, Germany. There, as normal, the beautifully tended lawns, flower beds and precision lines of headstones, affront the Cross of Sacrifice.



However, in addition to this normal presentation, there in a corner of the cemetery was a single headstone, which of course, immediately attracted my attention. To my utter astonishment, the headstone recorded the last resting place of Rifleman Kale Pun, of the 4th Gurkha Regt!

Having a limited knowledge of 4GR, I had no idea of how they apparently came to be, only a year after D Day, so deep into Germany. I was unaware of any 4GR involvement in N.W Europe anyway. Intrigued, I determined to find out a little more about this solitary grave.

On my return home I contacted the Gurkha Museum and Records Office. Sometime later a return call brought the most astonishing news. Rifleman Pun's grave in Rheinberg was his second recorded CWGC resting place! He was also on record in a CWGC Cemetery, in North Africa. During the conflict there in 1942, the 4GR were in the front line opposing superior German forces, taking grievous casualties.

Rifleman Pun had, apparently, been identified as one of the dead and buried there. The surviving 4 GR were rounded up and transferred to a POW camp in Germany. Rifleman Pun was in fact, amongst this number. Apparently, later, as chaos developed in the shrinking Germany, with fighting on 2 fronts, Rifleman Pun escaped.

Whether he was shot during his escape is not known. The fact is he was killed on 7 July, 1944 and lies buried in the Rheinberg Cemetery. He is almost certainly the only Gurkha soldier to have 2 CWGC graves. A picture of his Rheinberg grave follows. Maybe, one day, I'll close this loop with a visit to N Africa.

Who will replace the headstone ?

With a number of revisits being conducted across the UK to update the archive, new volunteers are taking it upon themselves to search out some of the previously unfound graves. The plot marking of many cemeteries has changed over the years which makes it difficult when trying to find those who had had a 'Private Memorial or 'PM' erected over them. This was quite within the family's right for those casualties that were repatriated back to UK and subsequently died of wounds. However, some 90 years on many of these original headstones have fallen in to disrepair or even disappeared under the turf as many can vouch for. Having been erected by the family they effectively own the headstone and therefore it cannot be replaced even though any surviving family may be totally unaware of the grave itself.

The CWGC are now trying to contact families in order to get the headstones replaced where the regional inspectors have deemed that the casualty is no longer sufficiently commemorated.

Perhaps via our network of volunteers throughout the country someone may recognise a local name and assist in the process of getting these casualties the headstone they deserve.

A list of the families trying to be contacted can be found at this link:

<http://www.cwgc.org/news-events/news/appeal-for-relatives.aspx>

It is probably best leaving it to the Inspectors to determine the condition of particular headstones rather than inundate enquiries with suggestions!



A visit to The Australian War Memorial – Kevin Patience

A visit to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra is an unforgettable experience. This impressive stone building in a Byzantine style stands at the far end of a sweeping tree-lined approach road known as ANZAC Parade which, in itself, is a series of memorials commemorating specific military campaigns or services, such as the Vietnam War and Australia's wartime nurses. The grandiose cruciform design was the result of a collaboration between two architects, John Crust and Emil Sodersten in the 1920's, although the depression of the 1930s delayed completion until 1941.



The Inner Courtyard

The museum was the idea of Charles Bean, an Australian journalist and war correspondent who first witnessed the horrors of war at Gallipoli in 1915. While recovering from a wound he noticed that the soldiers were avid collectors of battlefield souvenirs and began planning for the post-war preservation of the Anzac legacy via the establishment of a permanent museum and memorial and the collection of records relating to Australia's war effort. Bean went on to write the Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18. In May 1917 the Australian War Records Section was established under the command of Captain John Treloar to manage the documents and relics. Attached to the section were members of the Australian Salvage Corps who would select items of interest from the battlefield debris.

The Memorial consists of three parts, the Commemorative Area including the Hall of Memory, with the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier, the Memorial's galleries and Research Centre. The Memorial also has an outdoor Sculpture Garden featuring amongst others a bronze of John Simpson, otherwise known as The Donkeyman. Although he died while serving in the Australian forces he had in fact been born John Kirkpatrick in South Shields where he is also commemorated by another bronze statue.

A visit to the Memorial should begin with a walk through the courtyard with its eternal flame and its panelled corridors either side listing thousands of names of those who lost their lives. At the far end is the Hall of Memory with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier laid to rest here in 1993, and four large figures of an airman, soldier, sailor and servicewoman.

Entering the building leads to the Gallipoli gallery with a lifeboat from the ANZAC beach landing and some of the finest dioramas ever put on public display. These date back to the 1920s and now nearly a hundred years later their fascinating detail still draws thousands of visitors. The First World War collection is massive ranging from the barrel of the German Amiens railway gun through a number of original fighter aircraft including an SE5a and a German Albatross, to two guns from H.M.S. Sydney and the German cruiser Emden. These symbolise the first major Australian naval engagement off the Cocos Islands in 1914.



The Hall of Valour displays sixtyone of the ninety-six Victoria Crosses awarded to Australian soldiers, although a close study of the crosses shows they are most likely copies bearing in mind the value of the award today. Close by is one of the most famous paintings of the Menin Gate which reminds one of the two lions in the entrance of the original gate. These were presented by the Mayor of Ypres to commemorate the soldiers who served there.

One can either continue into the aircraft hall or the Second World War gallery. The former has an Australian built Mosquito, together with a Mustang and a Japanese Zero, and other notable aircraft and relics.

At the rear is the ANZAC Hall completed in 2001 which displays one of the most famous surviving Avro Lancaster bombers, 'G George', as well as a Japanese midget submarine from 1941. Here also are the Sydney Emden relics and WW1 fighters. During the day they stage a moving sound and light show featuring the Lancaster taking off on a raid to Germany with intercom talk and colour footage of Lancasters taken in 1943. This is followed by the midget sub attack and a re enactment of the last fight of the Emden. The aircraft also feature, with film footage of air combat, in the skies over France.



The Second World War gallery displays vehicles, guns and relics from the 1939 - 45 conflict and features the Far East campaigns in which Australians were foremost. The Kokoda trail in New Guinea is one example. Around twenty two thousand Australians were captured whilst fighting in Malaya in 1942, of which thirteen thousand worked on the Burma - Siam Death Railway. Over two thousand five hundred lost their lives in the construction and are commemorated here and on the Kranji Memorial in Singapore.

There are a number of grave markers from different periods, including one from Gallipoli made from a biscuit tin as well as a wooden cross from the Second World War.

There is so much to see and understand about Australia's part in conflicts from the Boer War to Afghanistan that it takes at least two days to see this magnificent tribute....

To quote Charles Bean whose idea it was "*Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved; and here we guard the record which they themselves made*".

A Unique Peninsula Grave?

Lieutenant- Colonel The Honourable George Augustus Frederick Lake.
Killed in action 17th August 1808 at Roliça (Roleia) – by Peter J Butt



Having found that an ancestor fought in the Peninsular War 1808-1814, we have been on 2 battlefield tours with Alan Rooney of The Cultural Experience (1): 'Wellington in Spain 1810-12' and just recently 'Wellington in Portugal 1808-1810'. From a TWGPP point of view a Peninsular war grave appears to be a rarity. On the first tour we visited the British Cemetery at Elvas, Portugal, which may contain the bodies of 6 soldiers who were killed or wounded in Spain. On the second tour, we only saw George Lake's grave. Yet Wellington, when in conversation with Earl Stanhope in 1836, stated that he had, 'lost in Spain, killed, prisoners, deserters, everything – it amounted to 36000 in 6 years'(2), and estimates of the French dead alone begin at 250,000 and extend to as many as twice that figure (3). After Talavera, 27 and 28 July 1809, Sergeant John Cooper 2/7th (Royal Fusiliers) wrote what would appear to be typical of the aftermath of Peninsular battles: 'The first work to be done, was to remove nine or ten thousand wounded into Talavera and to bury four or five thousand dead bodies. What a task it was for 16 or 17 thousand hungry worn out men to undertake! 'Twas impossible! We had but few tools, and the ground was hard and rocky, therefore the dead were either thrown into dry beds of winter torrents, and scantily covered with earth or, together with dead horses, gathered into heaps and burned' (4).

In November 1807 the French had taken Lisbon. During the first week of August 1808 Wellesley's (Wellington's) army landed some 95 miles further north along the coast before heading south. The French took up a defensive position 40 miles north of Lisbon on the 300ft high ridge south of the village of Roliça that blocks the southern end of the Obidos plain. The slope of the central part of the ridge varying between 45° to the near vertical but has 2 deep ravines cut into it which at least lessened the angle of approach but they narrowed further up the ridge. With brushwood on the sides of the ridges, the French position was a 'defenders dream'. Wellesley divided his forces into three. Two to outflank the French on the right and left and he led the main force in the centre of the valley which included the 1/29th (Worcestershires) commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Lake. Unfortunately Lake was the wrong type of leader for a diversionary attack compounded by the fact that the 29th became isolated in front of the rest of the army and he wanted to win glory for himself and his regiment so as soon as they arrived at their ravine he advanced up it. Lake was on a charger 17 hands high and dressed in an 'entirely new suit, his hair powdered ... his cocked hat placed on his head square to the front'. His reply to the comment, 'Colonel you are dressed as if you were going to be received by the king', was, 'Egad Sir, if I am killed today I mean to die like a gentleman' (6). Lieutenant Charles Leslie who was one of only three officers in the 29th right wing not to be killed, wounded or taken, wrote: 'We entered the pass, which was extremely steep, narrow and craggy being a dried-up bed of a mountain stream, so that at some places only 2 or 3 men could get up at a time. The enemy kept up a tremendous fire at point blank ... The further we advanced the more the ravine receded into the centre of the enemy ... after clearing the narrow defile, we entered upon some open ground thinly wooded under shelter of which the officers lost no time in forming

the men, the whole then pushed forward and at last gained the wished-for heights ... When the enemy, who appeared to have been lying down behind a broken earthen fence, suddenly rose up and opened their fire. Colonel Lake called out, 'Don't fire, men; don't fire; wait a little, we shall soon charge, the bayonet is the true weapon for a British soldier', which were his dying words for as he moved forward to superintend the line being prolonged, he was marked and killed by a skirmisher, and his horse galloped into the French lines', to become the property of the French General Delaborde (5).



At least with the French being diverted by the 29th, other regiments were able to press home their planned attacks with less casualties. George Lake's body was buried by his troops where he fell, and the monument was 'erected by his brother officers as attesting of high regard and esteem'. It is in the middle of the now farm track facing down the way that the 29th had fought up. Wellesley in his report of the battle wrote: 'we have to lament particularly of that gallant officer the Honourable Lieutenant-Colonel Lake, who distinguished himself upon this occasion'(7).

The monument was restored in 1903 and the stone paved area and cast iron railings added by the offices of the 1st Battalion Worcestershires. Some 20 years ago when Alan Rooney first visited the site he had to clear away bushes that had overgrown the monument and found that it was still there. The grave is now clear and an information board has been added which tells of the incident in Portuguese, English and French and was sponsored by: Câmara Munciple de Bombarral, The British Historical Society of Portugal, The Worcestershire Regiment Museum Trust, and Association of Friends of the Waterloo Committee.

References

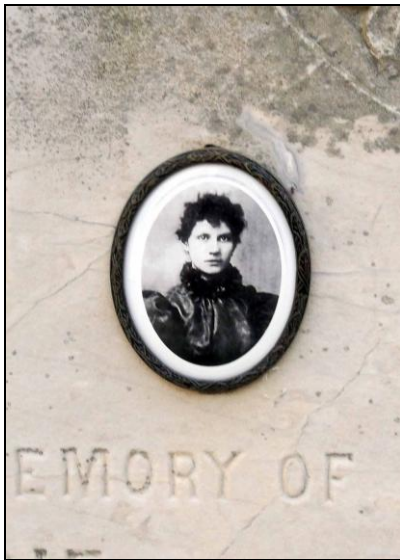
1. www.theculturalexperience.com
2. Wellington at War in the Peninsular, by I C Robertson, Pen and Sword Books, page 328
3. Peninsula Eyewitnesses, C Esdaile, Pen & Sword Books, ISBN 1844151913, page 278
4. Talavera, by P Edwards, Crowood Press, ISBN1861267673, page 230.
5. *ibid*, page 52.
6. To War With Wellington, P Snow, Murray, ISBN 9781848541047, page 16.
7. The London Gazette 16177, September 3rd 1808, page 1186

An unexpected find at Rabat, Malta – By Denis Darmanin

Rabat in Malta is the suburb of the island's old capital city of Mdina (pronounced *Imdina*), which was formerly part of a larger Roman city *Melite* but reduced by the Arabs to a smaller and more defensive city from which Mdina was born. In Arabic Rabat means 'suburb' and Mdina or Medina means 'city' and both names date to the Arabic rule of the islands from 870 until ousted by the Normans in 1090 AD.

A particular area in Rabat still bears very strong archaeological evidence linked to the history of the area and of Malta. It is where the Roman *Domus* is located and which many know as the 'Roman Villa'. Across the *Domus* is a large car park, under which are the remains of more Roman dwellings that were levelled by the Arabs when creating Mdina and later by the Order of St. John when clearing a reasonable glacis and no-man's land between the existing buildings and the city's ditch.

Along the façade of the buildings facing the left of the Roman *Domus* is a small public cemetery dedicated to St. Margaret.



This cemetery is also built on the remains of the older city just like the remains of the Muslim cemetery behind the *Domus*, since burials were not permitted within the city walls.

Although I frequent this area I've never visited this local cemetery before. So recently, out of sheer curiosity, I paid it a short visit and was surprised to find graves and headstones belonging to the British Army and their dependents. These are likely to have been Roman Catholics who either lived in Rabat, Mdina or even stationed at Mtarfa Barracks. Of particular interest is that within Mdina, just beyond the main gate on the right, is the Baroque Vilhena Palace, commissioned by Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena in 1730. In 1858 the palace was converted into a new British military hospital that first served as an ophthalmic unit and in 1909 was inaugurated by King Edward VII as a hospital specialising in tuberculosis.

The hospital was closed in 1973 and the building re-opened as the Museum of Natural History. The first headstone and possibly grave with military connections at St. Margaret's is to the left as one enters. It bears the inscription; *IN LOVING MEMORY OF JESSIE, THE BELOVED WIFE OF SERG^T. EDWARD STAMP R.G.A. WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE 2ND NOVEMBER 1908, AGED 29 YEARS*. Of additional interest is that this is the only military related headstone that I have encountered that bears a photographic image of the deceased.

Another stone monument (seen top right) with its legend slightly eroded is to *PTE. FRED (SUT)CLIFFE, A COY, 1ST BTN. THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON'S REG^T. WHO DIED AT MALTA ON 28TH FEB^Y. 1898 AGED 19 YEARS & 7 M^S.*

Also badly eroded is the stone commemorating *PTE GEORGE BROWNE 'THE BUFFS', WHO DIED IN MALTA ON TH.....* The rest is much illegible but the stone carries the regimental badge carved at the top. Of additional interest is that this stone has the maker's name carved at bottom right of the base. *J. TESTA N^O. 92 STRADA SANTA LUCIA, VALLETTA.*

It is very likely that there were more burials in this cemetery but unfortunately only these four memorials survived. However, my next task is to try to locate the burial register for this period and possibly come up with a list of further interments.



Germans at Neuville St. Vaast – Steve Rogers

Thousands of visitors flock to the Vimy Memorial every year which lies on the ridge to the north of Arras and commemorates the missing Canadian dead from WW1 in the vicinity. On it are commemorated just over 11000 men who have no known grave.

Just 4km from Vimy lies the largest German Cemetery in France, Neuville St. Vaast Soldatenfriedhof which commemorates over 44000 Germans killed in the same area of Vimy yet visitor numbers appear few.



The cemetery lies alongside the D937 and quite open plan alongside the road on which many cars pass. If this was a Commonwealth cemetery similar to the stature of Tyne Cot (3587) or even Lijssenthoek (9877) this would be a prime attraction with a visitor centre.

The sheer numbers has put off others taking it on so Sandra and I planned a couple of days to try and complete the site.

This cemetery, like many Commonwealth ones in the area is a 'Concentration' of smaller cemeteries. It was not actually completed until the 1980's, having been restructured between 1975 and 1983, by the Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgraberfursorge (VDK). Many will have seen the layout of the Iron crosses on lawn and in the majority these had two names on each side so the routine for us was a camera each side walking down the rows. After four hours on the first day it was obvious that this site was not going to be completed in one weekend. The 'Iron Harvest' seemed to spread out to the horizon. Void of flowers or any colour it was nice to come across a traditional German wreath of moss and fir cones but these were very few and far between.



During the whole weekend we only met one other couple who enquired what we were doing (or why!). They were local French but did ask us if we were including those of the Jewish faith which were easy to pick out due to the change of style (*one is visible in the view above*). I guess they visited regularly to place a stone on the nearest Jewish grave to the entrance but there was a distinct lack of them on those headstones further afield in the cemetery. Leutnant Joseph Thom had received visitors at some point who had wired a crucifix to his cross.

Directly in the centre of one row of graves lies an old concrete bunker. Its entrance and exit still visible but very much sunken now or more probably in filled with soil to allow burials either side. It did feel strange seeing the row of crosses going through the centre line and we did wonder how many men had actually died in or around this bunker during the war. By the end of two days we had only photographed about 60% and had to get back to Calais for the return crossing.





During the next couple of weeks and making the most of what sunshine we did get during this Summer I was on the lounge in the garden thinking that there might be one of the Germans in the adjacent plots that we had not photographed waiting to be found by his family. Slim chance I know but having mentioned it to Sandra she agreed so we planned another trip over the channel (fortunately living within 3.5 hours of the cemetery albeit in UK) so we got up early one Friday morning (night as far as Sandra was concerned) and in the rain made the journey over. Never a good plan to chance the rain but in France the clouds were blowing away and by the time we got to Neuville and having been fortified by a warm Pain au Chocolate the sun was shining.

With the majority completed a couple of weeks before we were confident the remainder could be done in this one day visit and set off with pockets of rechargeable batteries and spare SD cards as the walk back to the car park from the other side of the cemetery was a trek! We had got to the plots alongside the main road when the clouds rolled in from the west but we persisted between heavy showers until the downpour was constant. It was time to call it a day so aimed to finish adjacent the 164th Regiment memorial which had been relocated here from its original cemetery. This leaves the plots between there and the main entrance (approx 2 hours) should anyone be going that way?



Memorial at Monte Camino – by Mike Sutherland

I was born on October 1938 in Croydon South London. I vaguely remember my Uncle, 2521540 Gdsm George Beale, visiting our house prior to his going overseas. George was my Mother's youngest brother and she doted on him. Uncle George was a quiet spoken man and lived in a flat in Blackheath and as far as I know he did not have any girlfriends.

The news of his death on November 9th 1943 arrived just before Christmas and my Mother never got over the shock. Although she had received a letter from his Company Commander (Major Potter) she would not accept that he had gone and convinced herself that he was wounded and was wandering around Europe and that one day he would come home.



The years passed and after the War my Mother at last accepted the fact that George was gone. As a young boy growing up in those austere years of rationing my thoughts were of playing with my mates who lived down our little street. The many bombed buildings in my locality were a paradise for us kids. Health and safety officers of today would have had a fit if they saw what we did.

My mother carried on with life, although I did not realize until much later that she was suffering deeply from the loss of her brother. It was not until I reached the age of ten that I realised just how much she was suffering. That was the year I accompanied her to the war memorial outside Croydon Town Hall on Remembrance Day, November 11th. As the last post sounded I looked up at my Mother and tears were streaming down her face, I held her hand tightly but she said nothing and just stared at the Memorial. After the service I made a promise to her that one day I would visit Uncle Georges grave and place a poppy on it for her.

As the years passed we continued to attend the ceremony outside Croydon Town Hall on Remembrance Day where once again tears would flow from my Mothers eyes.

By this time I had left school and started work as an engineer. Girl friends took my mind away from the annual visit to the War memorial and in 1957 I was called up to do my two years National Service. On completion of that I got married and lived away from my family. The memory of Uncle George was put on the back burner as my life was now devoted to my new wife and shortly my own family.

Sadly my Mother died at the tender age of 56 years mostly, I believe, of a broken heart. The years rolled by and I now had two sons, a mortgage, etc. Any thoughts of Uncle George had gone as I struggled to make a living and then in 1985 we were moving to a new home and my youngest son was trying to help packing by emptying drawers of old photographs and other items which were long forgotten by me. He suddenly said "Who's this soldier Dad". He was holding a photo of my Uncle George. Suddenly the memories of my Mother and I standing at the Croydon memorial came flooding back and my promise to her that I would one day find his grave and place a poppy on it for her.



Allied and German troops overlooking Mt. Camino

I contacted the CWGC to ask where his grave was and was horrified by their reply that he had "No Known Grave" but his name is inscribed on a plinth in Cassino cemetery. How could this be? I had the original letter from his Company Commander promising that his grave would be looked after. I decided to contact the Grenadier Guards for some answers who informed me that after the first battle all the dead had to be left where they fell and at the time his Company Commander had written the letter he did not know that one month later a terrific bombardment would take place on those positions where the dead lay.

I then resolved to one day visit Italy and carry out my promise to my Mother, but I had to wait until the year 1990 when my wife and I went on holiday to Sorrento. We hired a car and one day I decided to drive north to try and find Monte Camino. The journey was uneventful driving up the A1 and we turned off the highway and found ourselves in the small Town of Rocca d'Evandro, I had no clue as to where Monte Camino was and yet I felt a strong pulling onwards. I drove through the town still not knowing where to go until I came to a "T" junction. Stopping, I could not decide which way to go, in front of me was a concrete wall covered by ivy, it was a hot day (June) with no breeze but suddenly the ivy parted by a gust of wind to reveal a sign and arrow to the right "Camino". I drove on up and up on a twisting road and eventually came to the Hamlet of Camino. Not speaking the language I approached three old ladies to ask where the Mountain was. Suddenly one of them called out "Julie" and a young girl approached and in a strong Cockney accent said "Yea, what do you want" I asked her where she was from and she replied Tottenham!!! She had married a young lad from Camino who lived and worked in Tottenham and they were visiting his father. From this meeting she introduced me to various people who helped me find the track to Monte Camino, the main one being from the hamlet of Formella.

Since that day I decided that I needed to visit this Mountain more often. It became an obsession with me as I had at last placed a poppy on Georges' resting place (Point 819) and honoured my promise to my Mother but to me there was something missing. I thought the whole area needed a permanent reminder of the sacrifice of so many young men. By this time I had been joined by a very good friend who's father had fought there with the 6th Bn., was wounded but survived the war, so in 1995 we decided to build a cairn on Point 819 which we did and many villagers from Rocca attended our short services we held there.

Sadly in 1998 I was informed by the Mayor of Rocca that the Cairn had been totally destroyed. The Mayor and those of Rocca were devastated but undeterred we decided to build a new Cairn which was completed in the year 2000 and now stands proudly overlooking the Liri Plain with Monte Cairo and the Monastery at Cassino in the distance. It will, I hope be a lasting tribute to those of the 201st Guards Brigade and other Regiments who fought there during that terrible winter of 1943, "We Will Remember Them".

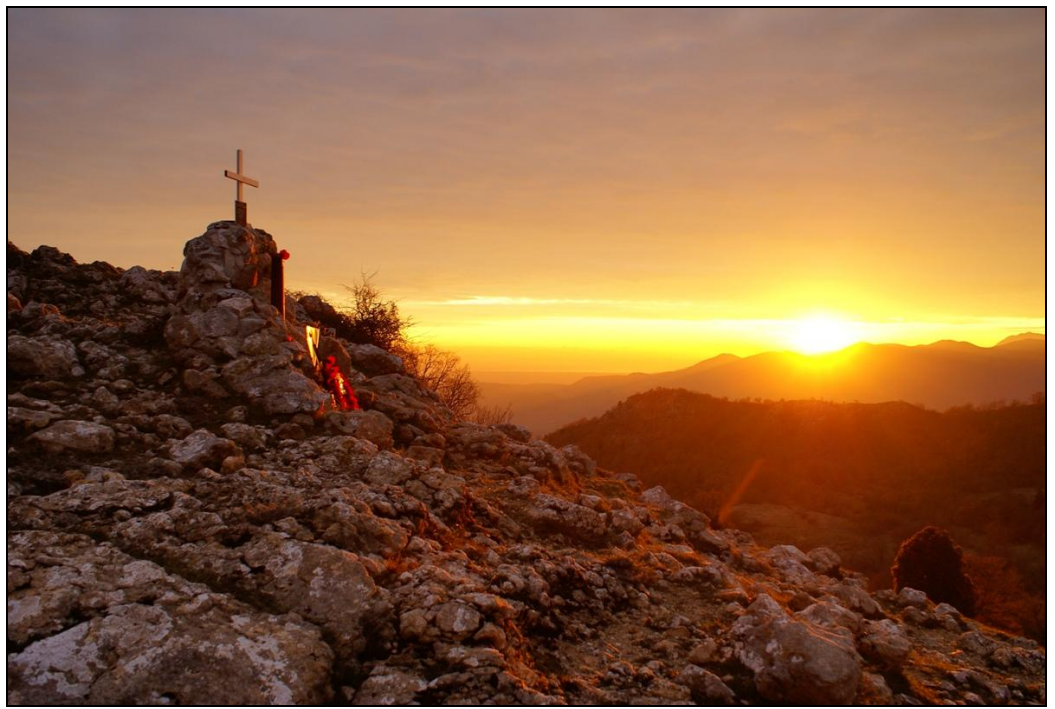


Photo by Giuseppe Giovini – not to be used without permission

To make one weep – By Ken Wright

Behind every grave headstone in Commonwealth El Alamein War Cemetery in Egypt, there is a story. One such story belongs to Sergeant Herbert Thomas 'Curly' Leeson. He was a 21 year old married electricians labourer when he enlisted in the 9th Division, 13 Platoon, 2/32 Australian Infantry Forces. He left his Australian state of Queensland bound for the Middle East on 4 May, 1940.

On 13 September, 1940, the Italian dictator Mussolini had began the war in North Africa when five Italian divisions launched an attack into Egypt. The Italian forces halted at Sidi Barrani and consolidated. The British forces retreated to Mersa Matruh. On December 9, Commonwealth forces struck back and by mid December, the Italian army had been forced out of Egypt and was fighting a defensive war. Hitler sent General Erwin Rommel with his Panzer Afrika Korps and elements of the Luftwaffe to bolster Mussolini's army in March 1941. His instructions were to take command of the combined Italian/German preparations against the British and Commonwealth Forces and eventually seize the Suez Canal.

By January 1942, the war had swung in favour of the Axis forces and by the end of June, Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika* had pushed the Allies back deep into Egypt and the capture of Cairo and the Suez Canal seemed a distinct possibility. In desperation, the Allies established a new defensive position approximately 30 miles wide near the tiny railway station of El Alamein and hoped the impassable Qattara Depression [133 metres below sea level and containing at its lowest point a large salt pan] on one side and the Egyptian coast on the other would narrow the battlefield enough for them to make a stand and it was here that the fate of the whole campaign would be decided. The combined German/Italian force amounted to 180,000 men, 600 tanks and 500 guns. Opposing the Axis forces, were the Eighth Army commanded by General Claude Auchinleck with about 220,000 men, 1,100 tanks and 900 artillery pieces. This army was comprised of British, New Zealand, South African, Indian and the Australian Ninth Division under General Leslie Morshead. The Australians were to play a crucial role in two of the three important and decisive battles around El Alamein which helped to ensure the Allied victory in North Africa.

The first major battle of El Alamein from the Australian perspective comes from the war diaries and unit history of the 2/32 Australian Infantry Battalion.

17 July, 0230 hours. The Battalion moved forward ready to attack the enemy position. A-Company to the right, B-Company to the centre, C-Company to the left with D-Company held in reserve. The position to be taken was a ridge of high ground commencing from Trig point 22 in the north which was A-Company's objective to the Qattara track in the south which was C-Company's task. A silent advance brought the Australians very close to the enemy position



The Battalion quickly mopped up enemy posts and commenced consolidating the objectives. Approximately 700 Italian prisoners were taken and the battalion only suffered light casualties. D-Company although not actively involved in the attack, was ordered forward and took up a new position between Trig 22 and B-Company. Due to radio failure, contact with A-Company had been lost earlier that morning and it was later established that for some reason they had exploited too far and overshot their mark in the darkness by about 1,500 yards.

B-Company had captured its objective and took 60 prisoners and C-Company had also been successful as well as capturing 50 Italians and a number of 20 mm Breda guns. The Breda began service in the Italian Army in 1935 and was designed as a three crew duel purpose weapon for use against ground and air targets. Corporal Leeson, a qualified weapons instructor from 13 Platoon, C-Company, soon had one of these weapons working. It took a long time before the Axis forces realised an attack was taking place but as daylight came the enemy bombarded the Australian forward positions with mortars, machine gun and regular artillery fire including the use of the dreaded 88mm gun airburst shells

It was impossible to dig effective weapon pits or foxholes on the Makh Khad Ridge as the feature was called as it was just about solid rock and stones. The enemy brought up tanks and armoured cars which, owing to the inability of Allied anti-tank guns to secure suitable positions, were able to shoot with impunity.

During the first two enemy counter attacks, Corporal Leeson manned a captured Breda and under heavy fire destroyed three enemy armoured cars before a direct hit from an anti tank shell knocked him out of the weapons pit and damaged the gun. Although wounded he managed to repair the weapon and continued to engage the enemy. Later, under heavy machine gun and artillery fire, he went to the assistance of a wounded man just forward from his position and carried him to safety. He was wounded again, this time more seriously, but returned to the gun and continued to engage the enemy armour and low flying aircraft.

After the battle Corporal Leeson, along with the other wounded, was transferred to hospital for medical treatment. It was during his convalescence that he was promoted to Acting Sergeant and on 12 September, Sergeant Herbert Thomas Leeson was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions in the battle of 17 July. By mid October he was back to active service on special duties at HQ possibly in the role as weapons instructor to HQ staff. He rejoined his old unit on the 27th.

On the night of October 30, the 2/32 Battalion began an attack at 10pm towards the railway line. Despite mounting casualties they captured the vital one kilometre objective known as the 'Saucer' This area included a German medical post, the blockhouse, Barrel hill and a crossing in the railway embankment. During the following day the Australians struggled to hold the area but together with British troops, they fought a furious battle against a German counter attack with tanks. They still held the position by the evening of November 1.

After fierce fighting the enemy line was eventually broken near Tel El Aggagir by November 4 and the Axis forces were forced to retreat back towards the Libyan border. Although the battle for El Alamein was over, the Axis forces continued to fight a losing battle. By 12 May, 1943, all German and Italian forces in North Africa surrendered. Approximately 275,000 Axis prisoners were taken. Six hundred and sixty three escaped.

Sergeant Herbert Thomas Leeson, D.C.M, did not return home to Australia with his mates or see his wife or his parents. He was killed in action on October 31 near the El Alamein railway station. His gravestone in the El Alamein cemetery is a stark reminder of how many men of the 9th Division paid the ultimate sacrifice.