

Tanks on the Western Front

Branch Tour: 9-12 September 2010

Graham Adams

The theme of the Branch's third annual battlefield tour was Tanks. In the two days available we would examine the role and performance of these armoured vehicles in the context of actions in 1916, 1917 and 1918.

As with previous tours, it was led and organised by Branch member Bob Brunsdon, a member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides. Our base was the Holiday Inn Express at Arras, which had proved a convenient venue in 2009 and it was here that our party of fourteen (including professional driver, Chris Nation, who was with us last year) arrived in good order on the Thursday evening, following a smooth journey and ferry crossing from Cheltenham.

That evening saw the traditional convivial group dinner at a local restaurant. Bob had produced a laminated place-mat for everyone, which depicted the workings of a Mark IV Male tank and strategically placed about the table were laminated cards giving potted biographies of tank personnel awarded medals for gallantry in the Great War. Pride of place was given to two scale models of a Mark 1 and Mark IV tank, supplied by Robert Davies.

A full day was planned for Friday and Bob was anxious for a prompt start at 8am. However, there was a delay due to a tour member having gone 'awol'! The old adage 'what goes on on tour, stays on tour' applies as to the reason and the person concerned eventually returned to the fold, safe and sound.

Our first stop was at the Vallee Raison, near to Bray-sur-Somme. This was the site of The Loop, the rail unloading point for the tanks used in the first action on 15 September 1916, and where these

novel machines were demonstrated to senior Army officers. After a brief introduction, Bob handed over to Robert Davies, who gave a detailed and descriptive presentation on *The History and Development of the Tank*.

Making use of a flip chart, Robert illustrated the evolution of the Mark 1 tank, before moving on to describing its inner workings and the conditions experienced by the crew. He then unveiled his 'tank', a large plastic tarpaulin, on which he had painted the floor plan of a Mark 1. Using this very effective and imaginative prop he explained the workings of the tank and stage by stage invited the eight crew members to 'step on board'. Once fully crewed he brought out a ball of string, which was stretched down the length of the 'tank' at the height of the interior of the vehicle. This graphically illustrated the restricted nature of the interior of the first operational tank.



The 'tank' fully crewed

We left the area of The Loop and after a refreshment stop, prepared for the second presentation of the morning, entitled *Walking with Tanks*; a battlefield walk, led by Graham Adams. The morning mist, which had carried with it a few drops of rain, had almost cleared and it presaged well for what would be a part driven, part walked tracing of the route followed by two tanks that gave support to 41st Division's attack on Flers, on 15 September 1916.



On the battlefield walk at Flers

Departing from Delville Wood, appropriate stops were made along the Longueval to Flers road, to indicate the succession of German defence lines, which the tanks had to cross. The fate of two specific tanks was explored: D17 (*Dinnaken*), commanded by Lt Stuart Hastie and D6, under the command of Lt Reginald Legge. We followed Hastie's route down the road into the village of Flers and Graham described the street fighting nature of the resistance encountered. Hastie's tank was the one famously spotted from the air 'walking up the High Street of Flers, with the British Army cheering behind'. Legge, in D6, took a more convoluted route, much of which we followed on foot, leaving our bus parked in Flers. We visited the spot, near to Bulls Road Cemetery, where D6 fired on a German battery and traced its route up to the junction with the Pilgrims' Way track, where, just beyond, having engaged another battery, it was hit by shell fire and all but three of the crew killed or taken prisoner. This was the furthest incursion into enemy territory on that day.

From Flers we travelled to La Boiselle for an enjoyable lunch at the Old Blighty Tea Rooms, before starting the afternoon session with a visit to the Tank Corps Memorial at Pozieres. Bob pointed out the various types of tank depicted in bronze on the memorial and gave a brief résumé of the life of Major Arthur McCulloch Inglis DSO, who commanded the tank *Crème de Menthe* in action near Courcellette, on

15 September 1916. Inglis was invalided home in 1918, died a year later and is buried in Prestbury Churchyard.

This was followed by a short visit to Dantzig Alley Cemetery, where Andy Hinks told the story of Cheltonian Second Lieutenant Cecil Hirst, 9 Devons, killed in action on 1 July 1916. It was interesting to visit this cemetery, with its fine views and to hear a story which was linked to Andy's presentation to the 2009 Branch Tour.

We then journeyed to Villers-Bretonneux, pausing in the village for a refreshment stop, where we encountered a party of Australians on a barge holiday, who used bicycles to explore the surrounding area!

The reason for visiting the Villers-Bretonneux area was to jump ahead in time to 24 April 1918, which saw the first tank versus tank encounter. This part of the programme was entitled *Clash of the Titans* and after a brief outline of the German attack on Villers-Bretonneux, Bob split the party into small groups and using such information as is available from contemporary accounts of this encounter, we were encouraged to try to determine exactly where the shots were exchanged. Needless to say, we came up with several different theories, all of which carried some form of plausibility. In truth, the exact location of the action is not known; only the general area, which is marked by a small memorial.



Bob briefs the group at Villers-Bretonneux

The following day dawned sunny and we were able to set off on time at 8am, for a journey to the Cambrai battlefield. On the way Bob made use of the microphone to describe the objectives and

preparations for the Battle and the structure of the Hindenburg Line. It is, of course, impossible to cover the whole of the Battle of Cambrai in a day, so Bob had selected a series of stops which would represent the various stages of the initial attack.

The first of these was outside Fins New British Cemetery. B Battalion's tanks were brought to Fins by rail and unloaded. Making use of a large map, Bob showed us the route the tanks took to the start line and described the painstaking preparations for the attack.



Demonstrating tank tactics at Ribecourt Road Cemetery

We then headed for Ribecourt Road Cemetery, near Trescault, which was near to the start line for the tanks of D Battalion. From here there is a superb panoramic view over the battlefield, from Havrincourt round to the village of Ribecourt. Bob produced a set of props – some short strips of tape, to indicate trench lines and strips of foam marked 'barbed wire', which were laid out to indicate a trench system. These were joined by some model tanks and soldiers, to serve as infantry. Using party members to move the various pieces, we were treated to a description of the tactics employed by the tanks and infantry to crush the wire, bridge, enfilade and clear out trenches. It was an imaginative presentation, supported by diagrams in the literature handed out.

Our next stopping point was the village of Flesquieres and the memorial park, established in recent times by Philippe Gorczyński, in co-operation with a local

land owner. This is a memorial to those who fell in the Battle of Cambrai and features a symbolic path, set out in the shape of a Union Flag, replica tank tracks and flag poles featuring flags of all the nations which played a part in the Battle. There is also a large information board, which depicts, in graphic terms, the course of the battle. The park is also superbly sited, with panoramic views.

Bob described the attack by 51st Highland Division on Flesquieres and the Germans' resistance. This Division employed a variation of the standard tactics employed by tanks to break through the trench lines; the method used was illustrated in one of the handouts.

Lunch beckoned and this was taken at the Café du Centre in the village of Fontaine-Notre-Dame. The size of the baguettes, served with chips, was a source of wonder!

The afternoon featured two main events. The first was a detailed study of the attack, by 152 Brigade, (51 Division), on the village of Fontaine-Notre-Dame on 23 November 1917: the second, a visit to the home of the Mark IV Tank D51 *Deborah*.

The study at Fontaine focussed on the role played by the various tanks and their crews. Bob invited each member of the tour party to select an envelope: inside was a name of an individual, some biographical detail and the part they played in the action. As we walked around the village the various individuals spoke, telling the story of what happened to them and their tank, at the appropriate spot. A couple of the roles were German officers, where a degree of dramatic licence was encouraged. We learnt that the battle for Fontaine was more like the street fighting associated with WW2, than conventional trench warfare.



On walkabout at Fontaine-Notre-Dame



The visit to Tank Deborah with Philippe Gorczynski

Our exercise in Fontaine was split into two parts, as the middle of the afternoon was devoted to a visit to the barn in Flesquieres, which houses the tank *Deborah*. We were privileged and honoured to be hosted by Philippe Gorczynski, her custodian, who gave us two hours of his time. He told us the fascinating story of how *Deborah* came to be discovered and the exercise to raise her from the ground and bring her to the barn. He talked about her role in the attack on Flesquieres on 20 November 1917 and the battle damage she sustained, much of which is evident today. Philippe spoke of his hopes that she may come to be housed in more appropriate surroundings than at present, where her fabric may be better preserved, and be the focal point of a remembrance museum to those who fought in the Battle of Cambrai. Philippe also showed us around the many other relics from the Great War inside of the barn and the small museum located there, which houses the personal collection of a local individual.

Our final act of the day was to pause at the Memorial to the Missing of the Battle of Cambrai at Louverval, where Colin Hardy said a few appropriate words, upon the laying of the Branch wreath.

The heavy overnight rain had abated by the time we left the hotel next morning. Before leaving, opportunity was taken to give formal thanks to Bob Brunson for his superb organisation

and leadership of the Tour and to present him with a copy of *The Tank Corps Book of Honour*.

With the morning free before heading for Calais, it was agreed to spend some time at various sites directly connected with the Great War. The first of these was the Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery and the Memorial to the Missing in Arras. Prior to leaving the bus, Joe

Devereux (Jnr) played us an audio piece *The Ballad of Bill Hubbard/Amused to Death*, in which Corporal Alfred Razzell, 8 Royal Fusiliers, tells the sad story of having to abandon his wounded chum Bill Hubbard on the battlefield. The story had moved Joe greatly and we were able to find Bill's name on the Memorial to the Missing.

We next visited the large German War Cemetery of Neuville-St-Vaast, which contains the remains of about 44,830 German soldiers - making this the largest German war cemetery in France - before moving on to Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery, Souchez. Here Cecil Ballantine told us something of the history of the cemetery and the story of how his aunt first visited the grave there of her husband (Cecil's uncle). To her amazement she discovered that buried next to him was a former boyfriend. Both were from the same Trench Mortar Battery and were killed on 15 May 1918. Poppy crosses were placed on the grave of each man.

Our final destination was the French National Cemetery and Mausoleum at Notre-Dame de Lorette, where opportunity was taken to visit these and the adjacent museum and reconstructed original trench system.

The return journey passed uneventfully and we arrived back in Cheltenham on schedule.

This tour had a mixture of first time participants in a Cheltenham & Gloucester WFA Branch Tour (and in one instance a first time visit to the battlefields) and 'experienced hands'. Thanks to the imaginative programme, informative hand-outs and innovative presentations, everyone came home feeling that their knowledge of the Great War had been enhanced and that they had had an enjoyable few days in each other's company. The days out were long but somehow time passed all too quickly. ■