

Loos 1915

Branch Tour: 8 – 11 September 2011

Graham Adams

Loos 1915 was the title of the Branch's fourth annual battlefield tour, led, once again, by Branch member Bob Brunson, a full badge member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides. The party, fifteen strong, was joined by our professional driver, Chris Nation, himself a veteran of our last three tours. As in previous years, the tour was based at the Holiday Inn Express in Arras.

The journey to Arras was uneventful and after settling into the hotel the party assembled for the traditional first evening group dinner at a local bistro. To get us in the mood for what was ahead Bob had prepared laminated place-mats depicting the first Army Order of Battle on 25 September 1915. These depicted photographs of Sir Douglas Haig and each of his Corps commanders, together with the individual sign of each participating division. About the table were laminated photographs and brief biographies of those awarded a Victoria Cross during the Battle of Loos.

As in 2009, breakfast on the first morning was in competition with hordes of lycra-clad charity cyclists, en route from London to Paris. However, this did not result in any undue delay and at the appointed time of 8am everyone was on board the bus and ready to go. Then the bus would not start, due to a flat battery! Undeterred, a few hearty souls gave the vehicle a good shove and using a modest slope to advantage, Chris was able to start the engine and we were soon on our way to Dud Corner Cemetery.

En route Bob provided some background information on the Battle of Loos and Colin Hardy contributed some thoughts on what determined the scale of the attack and the relationship between the Commander of BEF, Sir John French and his subordinate Sir Douglas Haig.

Dud Corner Cemetery, with its good viewing facilities, afforded an excellent place for Bob to introduce us to the main



Andy Hinks talks about gas as a weapon at Dud Corner Cemetery

landmarks of the battlefield, despite noise from the busy Lens to Bethune road. Audibility improved at the rear of the cemetery, where, under dark skies and in a slight drizzle, Andy Hinks gave a detailed presentation on the use of gas as a weapon. This was backed up by very informative notes included in a most impressive tour information pack, which Bob had compiled.

After a brief refreshment stop in the centre of Loos-en-Gohelle (the full name of the town after which the Battle was named) we drove onto the Grenay Ridge, which runs north east from Dud Corner. We walked down a track to the site of the British Front Line on 25 September 1915. This was the start point for a close look at the advance of 15 (Scottish) Division on that day, which took them through to Hill 70. Bob recounted the story of Piper Daniel Laidlaw VC, of 7 King's Own Scottish Borderers. When an enveloping gas cloud threatened to stall the attack he rallied the troops by playing the bagpipes, despite suffering wounds. As we listened, the sound of pipes floated across on the breeze from a group atop the viewing point at Dud Corner: an eerie moment.

The Battle of Loos was the first occasion on which the British Army used gas: a capricious weapon, as Andy Hinks explained. He produced three replica types of gas mask, which were then worn by volunteers as we walked back to the site of the former German Front Line. Those wearing the masks could vouch how hard it must have been to fight with them on; not only were they uncomfortable but it proved difficult to communicate with or recognise individual comrades.

Back on the bus, we followed the line of 15 Division's attack into the centre of Loos and



Preparing to advance on the German Line, equipped for gas

listened to an account of the street fighting there. Helen Earle told us the story of Emilienne Moreau, 'The Lady of Loos', who cared for wounded British soldiers and shot several Germans intent on killing them. She was decorated for her bravery and in WW2 served in the Resistance.

With the weather improving, we travelled to Hill 70 and chose a quiet spot, just below the summit, to listen to Bob tell of the heavy fighting that ensued there on the first day of the Battle. In the confusion of battle, parties of retreating Germans were mistaken for advancing British Infantry, causing 15 Division to veer markedly off course. It presented the Germans with an opportunity to counter-attack and Hill 70 stayed in German hands until 1917.

On this day the hotel had provided us with a packed lunch, which was partaken on the way to and at St Mary's Advanced Dressing Station (ADS) Cemetery. A tour member complained that he could not hear Bob due to the sound of the contents of a dozen or so potato crisp packets being consumed in unison!

Inside the cemetery we visited the headstone which bears the name of Lieutenant John Kipling and discussed the controversy surrounding it. Helen Earle read Rudyard Kipling's heartfelt poem *My Boy Jack*.

The last scheduled item on the day's itinerary was a look at the attack by 1 Division on the opening day of the Battle. To hear Bob's presentation we walked into the (harvested) fields near

to Bois Carre Cemetery. This Division included the 10 Glosters and we charted their experience, with reference to an excellent set of maps included in the tour information pack. Despite problems with gas blowing back into their trenches or drifting in from 15 Division's area, 1 Division did break through the German Front Line and advanced to the Lens - La Bassee road.

A walk was then undertaken across the fields to an iconic feature of the battlefield – The Lone Tree. Graham Adams told the story of how a replica of the flowering cherry tree,

present in this immediate area at the time of the Battle, came to be planted in 1995 and a memorial, to all those who fought in the Battle of Loos, put in place. The majority of the group then walked the track past Le Rutoire Farm, to meet the bus driven down from St Mary's ADS Cemetery.

With some time still available, opportunity was taken to visit Vermelles British and Maroc British Cemeteries, to visit graves of interest to individual members of the tour party. The day was rounded off with dinner in Arras, preceded by a celebratory drink with Paul Haigh, to toast the arrival of a new granddaughter!

On the next morning the sun shone, which bode well for the first activity of the day, a battlefield walk. Led by Graham Adams, this took a close look at the disastrous attack on the German Second Line, between Hulluch and the Bois Hugo, undertaken by 24 Division, on the second day of the Battle. A New Army Division it, together with the 21st, had endured



A pause at The Lone Tree



Walking the 'Field of Corpses'

a long march to the battle zone, in poor weather. As part of the General Reserve, both divisions were sent forward in the belief that they were chasing a retreating enemy, when in fact they came up against a fully fortified German Second Line, suffered enfilade fire and were forced to retreat; 72 Brigade alone suffered 2,754 casualties. The title of the walk, *Field of Corpses*, was taken from a German description of the area.

Following a welcome refreshment stop in Hulluch, which was holding its annual fete, we travelled to the site of the Hohenzollern Redoubt. After a brief pause at the recently established memorial to 46 (North Midland) Division, we walked to a suitable vantage point to consider the fighting that took place here during several phases of the War. Bob explained that there was now very little similarity between the ground today and that when 9 Division attacked this German stronghold on 25 September 1915. This was because thereafter the area was subjected to intense mining and counter-mining and much of the topography had been totally changed by the resultant spoil and debris. The informative maps in the tour pack illustrated this well. We took time to remember Lieutenant G F M Hall, 1 Royal Berkshire Regiment, a former student of King's School, Gloucester who was wounded and went missing here on 28 September 1915. The Army conducted several interviews with soldiers to try to establish his fate. Members of the tour read extracts from their statements. He

was never found.

Lunch was taken in the centre of Loos: an ad hoc arrangement, enlivened by the activities of local firefighters holding a festival and the arrival at the Town Hall of a bride in a horse-drawn carriage.

For the remainder of the afternoon we were in the hands of Gilles Payen, a local guide. First he opened up the *Musee 14/18 Alexandre Villedieu* located in the Town Hall and after time viewing the various maps, photographs and exhibits, we were led to a former German blockhouse, situated in a field just below Hill 70; the sunken interior was explored by an intrepid Dale Hjort! The next stop was the site of 'Tower Bridge',

the large coal mine winding gear and conveyor system that became an iconic feature of the Battle of Loos. Nothing remains now, apart from a couple of traces of the foundations. Gilles then took us to a viewing point at the top of one of the extensive slag heaps which dominate the town of Loos. This overlooks the former 'Double Crassier', which, now much changed, was a key feature in the Battle. In perfect visibility, the view was breathtaking: round from Notre Dame de Lorette to the skylines of Lille and Lens. In the far distance was the high ground near Ieper and below us a panorama of the battlefield of Loos. Evidence of trench lines could be determined from the chalk spoil in fields.

The next stop was at Loos British Cemetery, where Helen and David Earle told the story of Private Gordon Stevens, 107 Canadian Pioneers, who died on 15 August 1917. A Gloucestershire man, he originated from King's Stanley and is named on the village war memorial. David also spoke briefly of the eventual capture of Hill 70 by the Canadians in 1917.

To celebrate the Tour, Helen had baked a fruit cake, iced and adorned with poppies and a picture of the



Looking over the battlefield from above the 'Double Crassier'



Helen, Gilles and the cake

Lone Tree. To our surprise the whole party was invited back to Gilles' house where he and his wife served up tea and coffee to go with a slice of cake. Paul Haigh, speaking in French, thanked them, on behalf of us all, for their kind hospitality. Evidently Gilles' interest in Loos and the Great War originated from his frequent discovery of shrapnel balls when digging his garden!

The day was completed by a return to Dud Corner for the laying of a wreath on behalf of the Branch. It was laid below the panels bearing the names of those of the Gloucestershire Regiment with no known grave. The ceremony was marked by readings from poems by two Gloucestershire poets, William Noel Hodgson and Ivor Gurney.

On Sunday morning, en route to Calais, opportunity was taken to visit the newly completed Pheasant Wood Military Cemetery at Fromelles, where the remains from

the mass grave from the Battle of Fromelles, discovered nearby, have been interred: we also visited the former burial site. From here we travelled to the Indian Memorial to the Missing at Neuve Chapelle, where Stuart Fraser told us the stories of some of the officers, with Gloucestershire connections, named on the panels.

After a brief visit to the nearby Portuguese Military Cemetery, we travelled to Berguette, an obscure village north of Lillers. Buried in a small military plot in the churchyard is Private John Walters Hack of 2/5 Glosters, who died in April 1918. Born at Charlton Kings, he became a celebrated photographer and early in the war many of his photographs of the Glosters in training were sold in the form of picture postcards. Brian Ward is a collector of these and he passed round some examples, whilst telling the story of Private Hack. He revealed that it was personally moving for him to visit his grave.

After a rather fraught time at Calais, due to long delays at Passport Control and the insistence of French security that all stowed luggage be scanned, we were fearful of missing the ferry. Much to our relief we were waved onto it – resulting in an impromptu rendering of La Marseillaise! Thankfully the remainder of the journey home was without trauma.

Thanks were expressed to our driver, Chris Nation, for his driving skill and excellent companionship. Special thanks went to Bob for his exceptional organisation and guiding and the quality of the supporting information pack. He was presented with a couple of books to enable him to prepare for future tours!

This proved to be an excellent tour, informative, well paced and full of fun. Everyone felt that their knowledge of the Battle of Loos had been greatly enhanced. These tours are now very much part of the Branch's calendar of activities and we look forward to the next. ■



Laying the Branch wreath at Dud Corner Memorial