

Recapturing the Somme - from Hamel to the Hindenburg Line Branch Tour : 13-16 September

Graham Adams

For this, the Branch's fifth annual battlefield tour, it had been intended that the main presenter would be our Branch (and WFA) President Professor Peter Simkins. Unfortunately Peter's illness and recuperation prevented him from joining us; however, he worked closely with tour organiser, Bob Brunsdon, to plan the itinerary. Bob made use of his contacts within the Guild of Battlefield Guides (GBG) to identify hotel accommodation in Peronne and source a suitable bus to take us. For the first time on one of these tours, Eurotunnel was our chosen means of making the crossing to France. Bob, a full badge member of the GBG, took on Peter's role as main presenter, assisted by various members of the 15 strong tour party. Our professional driver was, once again, Chris Nation.

The journey to our base in Peronne was extremely smooth and Bob assured us that he had had nothing to do with the overflight of a Spitfire and Hurricane, as we took a break near Folkestone. Once everyone had settled into their hotel rooms we gathered together to walk to a local bistro, for the traditional first evening group dinner. Bob outlined the objectives of the tour and bearing in mind it was to cover the offensive actions of 1918 it was appropriate that everyone received a laminated place mat entitled *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*.

The tour set off at the designated 8am, with the sky looking rather grey. Our first stop was the Villers-Bretonneux Australian National Memorial. The majority of the party climbed the stairs to the top of the tower, where Bob helped us to familiarise ourselves with the surrounding countryside and landmarks connected with the Australian attacks in the area. He also

pointed out the damage from fighting here in the Second World War.

A cold wind was blowing and Andy Hinks sensibly chose one of the stone shelters near to the tower to lay out a rectangle of green cloth, complete with model guns and soldiers, to assist with describing how technology, in the form of sound ranging, enabled the Royal Artillery to undertake accurate counter battery fire. For those who found keeping up with the scientific terms difficult Andy had provided a comprehensive, illustrated, handout!

The next item on the itinerary was a study of the Battle of Hamel, which lasted a mere ninety three minutes on 4 July. This date was chosen by General Monash to mark the appearance, albeit in very limited numbers, of American soldiers in an offensive operation, alongside ten battalions of Australian Infantry. As Graham Adams explained, Hamel saw the introduction of an 'all arms' attack, with the co-ordinated use of technology (tanks, aircraft and artillery) preferred to the massed deployment of infantry.



Walking to Pear Trench Redoubt

A short walk was taken up to the site of Pear Trench Redoubt, a German strongpoint, which afforded a superb all round field of fire in front of Hamel. Graham described the action of 15th Battalion in taking this and in particular the gallantry of Private Harry Dalziel, the recipient of the 1,000th Victoria Cross awarded. The attack by 16th Battalion, who took

Vaire Wood, was also described: where a further VC was awarded.

After a brief refreshment stop we drove up to the Australian Memorial above Hamel, where Graham described the taking of the village and the high ground beyond, known as The Wolfsburg, by 11 Brigade.

Robert Davies then gave an informative talk on the Mark V tank, which saw its debut at Hamel. He described in some detail the improvements and modifications which made this a much more powerful weapon than its Mark IV predecessor.

Lunch was taken at a familiar venue, The Old Blighty Tea Room at La Boiselle, before we set out to look at three of the more unusual actions which took place in the Somme sector in August 1918.



Bob's talk about two brigades of the 37 Division

For the first we travelled to a remote railway crossing just south of Achiet-le-Grand. In this area, on 23 August, two brigades of 37 Division mounted an attack to take the village and also Bihucourt further east. A major obstacle was a thirty foot deep railway cutting, the banks of which were honeycombed with German dugouts. 37 Division had never worked with tanks before but making good use of them the heavily defended railway line was stormed and taken. Although stiff resistance in other areas denied total success, the second objective was reached on over half the front attacked.

There was a short stop at the Thiepval Memorial Visitors Centre for a refreshment

break. Some members of the party took opportunity for a short visit to the Memorial.

The next stage was undertaken in the bus, although initially it was feared that a temporary road closure to accommodate a cycle race might prevent progress! We travelled the road down from Thiepval, via Grandcourt, to Miraumont, following the direction of an outstanding night attack mounted by 64 Brigade, 21 Division on 23/24 August. Bob explained that the valley of the Ancre below the road was very marshy and deliberately flooded in parts. There were a limited number of bridges and if these could be captured intact it would greatly assist the plan for a major advance in that sector. The German garrison at Miraumont was holding out and it was feared that they would destroy the bridges before withdrawing. Three battalions, under the command of Brigadier-General Andrew McCulloch, were tasked with advancing down Battery Valley, over rough ground and across Boom Ravine to take the ruins of Miraumont. This was achieved in darkness, a distance of about 4,000 yards and up to 400 Germans were taken prisoner.

From Miraumont we travelled to Longueval Road Cemetery, which overlooks Bernafay and Trones Wood - familiar ground in the context of the 1916 Somme Offensive. The passing of a rain shower enabled us to gather together in the cemetery to hear Joe Devereux, the youngest member of the party, describe the taking of these woods by 53 Brigade, 18 Division on 27 August. An interesting feature of the attack was a manoeuvre to switch the direction of the attack through ninety degrees in order to clear the woods entirely.



Joe's talk at Longueval Road Cemetery

It was then time to head back to Peronne for dinner and a night's sleep before our second day on the battlefields.



Studying the 21st Division, AIF attack at Mont St Quentin

The sun was shining as we left the hotel at 8am for the short journey to Mont St Quentin and the weather stayed bright and warm for the rest of the day. The first part of the morning was devoted to the capture of Mont St Quentin by 6th Australian Infantry Brigade on 1 September. A feature of this and our previous Branch tours has been a high quality information pack containing maps and descriptions. On this occasion Bob excelled himself with a comprehensive collection of maps, including several Google Earth images on which pertinent features such as trench lines, places, directions of attack etc had been marked.

Using the information pack we heard a description of the fighting for this prominent piece of ground and then Bob led us on a battlefield walk which followed the path of 9 Platoon, C Company, 21 Battalion. Each member of the tour selected at random the name of an individual involved in the attack; along the way individuals were called upon to tell their story, using a script provided by Bob. It made for an entertaining session, especially the attempts at Aussie accents!

After a brief refreshment stop we visited the nearby Memorial to the 2nd Australian Division, the replacement for the one destroyed by the invading German Army of 1940.

After Mont St Quentin it was time to look at an action involving the American Army, who, after the Battle of Hamel, became increasingly involved in operations

during 1918. On the way to the Somme American Cemetery and Memorial at Bony Bob described the growth of the American Army during that year.

There are 1,844 burials in this cemetery of which only 138 are Unknown. Time was spent walking over the manicured lawns and between the long lines of pristine white grave markers. Bob had indicated that the Americans regard their cemeteries with great reverence and do not allow loud activity or food to be consumed within them: it did seem rather incongruous, therefore, to hear the strains of the US Marine Corps Hymn relayed over loudspeakers as we approached the entrance to the cemetery area!

From Bony we travelled to a an area of higher ground, called The Knoll, which afforded panoramic views of the surrounding countryside and in particular the ground over which the 27th American Division advanced on the Hindenburg Line on 29 September. Bob described how the 105, 106 and 107 Infantry Regiments advanced in foggy weather but their progress was stalled because the artillery barrage was placed too far ahead, the majority of the allocated tanks knocked out (some striking an old British minefield) and the advancing troops failed to 'mop up' pockets of remaining German troops. Some parties did reach the Hindenburg Line but were either killed or forced to surrender.

Our next stop was at the Bellicourt American Monument, dedicated in 1937, on which is inscribed: *Erected by the United States of America in commemoration of the American units which served with the British Armies in France during the World War.*



Lunch at Bellicourt British Cemetery

For lunch Bob had arranged for a supply of baguettes from a shop in Peronne and these were

partaken inside Bellicourt British Cemetery, after Graham Adams had told the story of Lieutenant Colonel The Reverend Bernard Vann VC, MC & Bar, Croix de Geurre, who is buried there. Soldier, priest, teacher and sportsman, he had a close link with the village of Coates, near Cirencester. Dale Hjort led us to another grave, that of Second Lieutenant Clifford Wainwright, RAF, who was killed in action on 20 October 1918. This man once lived in the house in Yorkshire where Dale was subsequently born! There was also a surprise in store for Bob, when Brian Ward presented him with a specially iced fruit cake, inscribed with the AIF badge, which Helen Earle had baked and sent over with him.

The St Quentin Canal was a key element of the Hindenburg Line defences. South of Bellicourt it enters a tunnel, which was used by the Germans to shelter troops on barges. Whilst the bus travelled on to Riqueval Bridge the majority of the party walked from the tunnel entrance to the bridge, via the tow path.

On top of the bridge Bob described how, on the misty morning of 29 September, troops of 137 Brigade, 46 (North Midland) Division stormed across the canal using a variety of aids such as lifebelts, lifelines and planks. Riqueval Bridge, the last intact road crossing of the canal, was guarded by a concrete machine gun post on its eastern side. A party of the 1/6th North Staffordshires and Royal Engineers surprised the defenders, who were sheltering from the bombardment and secured the bridge, destroying a German demolition party: thus the Hindenburg Line was breached. The iconic photograph of Brigadier-General J V Campbell VC addressing the men of 137 Brigade on the slope of the canal cutting, from the parapet of Riqueval Bridge, was used as the front cover of the Tour Information Pack. We learnt that Brigadier-General Campbell lived at Woodchester near Stroud after the Great War.



Wreath laying at the Memorial to 46th Division

Our Branch Tours have always included a moment to remember the Fallen of the Great War. On this occasion the ceremony was conducted at the Memorial to 46th Division near Bellenglise, where Andy Hinks laid the wreath.

We then returned to Peronne, where individuals were free for a brief visit to the Historical Museum or Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension.

On Sunday morning we left Peronne and travelled to the town of Montreuil-sur-Mer, which was the base for Field Marshall Haig and the General Staff for much of the War. Time was spent visiting the Citadel, which housed the telephone exchange, before walking part of the Ramparts and stopping off at the former locations of GHQ and the Officers' Club, finishing up at the statue of Haig, astride his horse, in the town square. On our journey Bob spoke about Haig's daily routine and the effect the arrival of the British Army had on the town.

It was then time to head up the autoroute to Calais and back to Cheltenham via the Eurotunnel. As one tour member remarked, *"I look forward to this trip all year but it is over so quickly!"*

Bob Brunson had fully expected to act as Adjutant to CO Peter Simkins for this particular tour but Peter's illness had seen him rapidly promoted. Despite a number of difficulties, he had delivered yet another excellent tour which had greatly enhanced our knowledge of the Allied advance of 1918. As a token of the Branch's appreciation Bob was presented with a Great War related book and our driver, Chris, the proceeds of the traditional 'whip round'. ■