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## Sportsmen in the Salient

### Branch Tour : 4-7 September 2014

**Graham Adams**

The theme of the seventh annual battlefield tour was *Sportsmen in the Salient*. We would examine significant actions from 1914, 1915 and 1917, where a sportsman had featured. Several tour members were new to the Salient so the itinerary also included visits to a number of the more familiar sites.

Once again Bob Brunsdon was our lead guide and organiser and we had a new professional driver, Bruce Cherry, like Bob a member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides.

After an uneventful journey to Belgium, using the Eurotunnel, the party of 15, including driver, arrived at Tyne Cot Cemetery, where we met up with a further two members who had travelled across independently. On the journey Bob handed out the usual comprehensive pack of information and maps of places to be covered on the tour.

At Tyne Cot members had the option of undertaking a short guided tour of the cemetery with Bob, who outlined its history; locating some names on the Memorial to the Missing with Helen and Dave Earle, which included two Gloucester RFC players, or taking an individual look around both cemetery and memorial.

That complete, we headed off into Ypres and our base, the Ariane Hotel. Unlike previous tours we did not hold the usual group dinner on the first evening as a suitable venue that could accommodate the party could not be found: members walked the short distance into the centre of town to dine in one of the numerous restaurants.

At 8.30am the following morning the bus set off for the first stand of the day, Nonne Bosschen, where Graham Adams opened the batting with the story of the defeat of the Prussian Guard on 11 November 1914, an action in which Captain A E J Collins, 5<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers was killed. In 1899, when a schoolboy of 13, he scored 628 not out in a cricket match against a rival house at Clifton College, Bristol – the highest ever recorded individual score, which remains a world record to this day. Nonne Bosschen was the climax of the battles of First Ypres, which



*Awaiting the presentation at Nonne Bosschen*

prevented the Germans breaking through to the town and threatening the Channel ports. It was then time for a refreshment stop at the Café Dreve at Polygon Wood and a brief pause at the memorial at Black Watch Corner, a place which had featured in Graham's narrative.

The next two stands looked at the gas attack of April 1915. At the base of the Brooding Soldier Canadian Memorial at Vancouver Corner, St Juliaan, Bob Brunsdon told the story of how the German's first use of gas, in a surprise attack on 22 April 1915, caused panic amongst the French colonial troops. Of the 18,000 Canadians sent forward to seal a large breach in the line, 2,000 were killed. A minor role in the action was played by a Gloucestershire cricketer.

As we were so near to the site of the Cockcroft Operation of 19 August 1917, opportunity was given to Colin Hardy to relate the story of the operation to attack and capture four German strong points making use of nine tanks. All objectives were captured and 600 yards gained on a mile long front in ninety minutes. As Colin explained, the absence of a preliminary artillery barrage, use of smoke and fascines to bridge trenches was a rehearsal of the tactics which proved so successful at Cambrai in November 1917.

The sporting link was resumed when we travelled to the site of Kitchener's Wood, which has now disappeared. Bob Brunsdon described a hastily put together night attack by the 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry (supported by the 2<sup>nd</sup>, which included ice hockey star 'Scotty' Davidson). The troops were ordered to fix bayonets and advance 'following the North Star' across broken ground,

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through hedgerows and into the undergrowth of the wood which, amazingly, they captured, although at a high price – 50% casualties. General Foch considered it one of the ‘finest acts of the war’.



*Negotiating a trench near Mousetrap Farm*

We then drove to Buffs Road Cemetery near Wieltje and thankfully everyone managed to negotiate a ditch and clamber up a large mound of earth to obtain a broad view of the battlefield around Mousetrap Farm. Evidently this was formerly known as Shell Trap Farm, a name considered to do little for the troops’ morale, hence the name change! Using the report in the Battalion War Diary, written by acting Adjutant Captain Thomas Linky, as his main source, Andy Hinks told the story of the stubborn resistance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers at and around the farm on 24/25 May 1915. This prevented the collapse of at least the northern flank of the British defences around Ypres. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers suffered catastrophic casualties: the battalion strength on the morning of the German attack had been 17 Officers and 651 Other Ranks, only 1 Officer (Captain Linky) and 20 Other Ranks would emerge unscathed. One of the officers killed was Captain Basil McClear, who represented Ireland at Rugby Union on eleven occasions between 1905 and 1907.

Our packed lunch was then taken at the hospitable Café Dreve at Polygon Wood before we headed back to Ypres for some free time: tour members visiting the *In Flanders Fields* museum or exploring the town.

In late afternoon it was back on the bus and we headed for Ploegsteert. On the way we stopped at Perth Cemetery (China Wall), where Joe Devereux, with the aid of several large photographs, treated us to the story of the Chavasse family, at the grave of 2/Lieutenant C A Peters, 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion King’s Liverpool Regiment, with whom there was a close link. We then stopped by the field, north of Ploegsteert Wood, where the 1914 Christmas Truce football match took place. The field had been cleared in readiness for a centenary re-enactment.

The journey ended at Hyde Park Cemetery, wherein lies the grave of the English Rugby Union International Ronald Poulton Palmer, who was awarded seventeen caps from 1909-1914. Dave Earle told us of his life and how he was killed by a sniper’s bullet whilst supervising trench works on 4 May 1915. Dave also told us the story of Lieutenant Max Seller, 5<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Infantry Regiment, whose grave is nearby and across the road, in Berkshire Cemetery Extension, Helen Earle

led us to the graves of the Crossley twins, both killed on the same day in 1916.



*Dave tells the story of Ronald Poulton Palmer*

Our visit was timely as it coincided with the ceremony of sounding the Last Post, which is held at the Ploegsteert Memorial on the first Friday evening of each month. This is a much lower key event to that which the Menin Gate has now become. A fair number of people attended and there was a small music group, plus the parade of about a dozen standards (including one from the RBL), plus the laying of wreaths. Somewhat incongruously there was a gathering of the Chippenham Morris dancers; someone said they were due to perform but arrived a bit late! After the ceremony we headed back to the Ariane, where we were able to hold a most enjoyable tour group dinner.

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*Awaiting start of the Last Post Ceremony at Ploegsteert Memorial*

Saturday morning, after another 8.30am start, we travelled up a very misty Menin Road before turning off for Shrewsbury Forest. The morning mist lent atmosphere to this densely wooded area. Here Bob had a task for us. Using source documents and maps we would try to establish exactly what happened to Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Mobbs, 7<sup>th</sup> Northamptonshires and England Rugby Union international, who was killed on 31 July 1917. The exact circumstances of his death have never been properly determined. The Northamptonshires were attacking a significant German strong point called Lower Star Post and it was around this still recognisable feature that individual groups undertook an examination of the ground against contemporary maps and reports.

Understandably this provoked some discussion and views and theories were propounded over refreshments at the



*Briefing time in Shrewsbury Forest*

Café Dreve. A reasonable consensus was achieved and Bob will feed this into the RFU Museum at Twickenham, as part of information gathering relating to their Great War centenary commemoration, with which Bob has an involvement.

Time was pressing so it was decided to miss out the proposed visit to the grave of Scottish International footballer, Jimmy Spiers, at Dochy Farm New British Cemetery and to head for Langemark German Cemetery. Here those who had not visited previously went on a short tour with Bob, whilst the rest explored the cemetery. In the tour hand out Bob had included two photos taken in 1940 when Adolf Hitler paid a visit – could we establish where they were taken?

We then travelled a short distance to De Meiboom, where, near to the site of Louis Farm, Bob related the story of Bernhard von Gazen, who, representing Germany, won the bronze medal in the individual scull at the London Olympic Games of 1908. On 23 September 1917 he was an Oberleutnant in the Infantry Regiment 185, and as a stormtrooper, took part in a raid on the British lines. Unfortunately for him the raid coincided with a significant British attack and he was wounded and captured: he later died and his is one of a number of German graves at Dozinghem Military Cemetery.

Next we were to look closely at the battle for Passchendaele in October 1917, following the fortunes of the 49<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry and that of the athlete Alexander Decoteau, who ran for Canada in the 5,000 metres event at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm. Starting near to Gravenstafel we were due to walk much of the road up the slope to Passchendaele New British Cemetery. That curse of the tour guide, a road closure, intervened! The roar of vehicle engines and squealing brakes indicated that a saloon car road time trial was taking place exactly where we wanted to be. Bob had therefore to deliver his presentation at a point where we could look towards Passchendaele in safety and after we had travelled by a circuitous route to the cemetery, complete it there. After paying our respects at the grave of Private Decoteau, who served as a runner, our packed lunch was consumed.

We then travelled to Pilkem Ridge, stopping at the new Welsh Memorial, to the excavated trench system known as Yorkshire Trench. From there it was on to Essex Farm. After a few words from Bob by the side of the Ypres Canal we took a look at the former Dressing Station before taking up a spot in an open

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area adjacent to it. Here Robert Davies told the story of Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae and assisted by Helen Earle read some of his poems – including the famous *In Flanders' Fields*. As someone pointed out poetry formed part of the Olympic Games in Ancient Greece! It was interesting to discover that, although a field surgeon, McCrae's first love was gunnery!



**Menin Gate wreath layers, Paul, Helen & Graham**

It was now time to return to the hotel and prepare for the Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate, where Helen Earle, assisted by Paul Haigh and Graham Adams laid a wreath on behalf of the Branch. The ceremony is now attracting huge crowds and with about a dozen wreaths being laid and the presence of a large band it took over thirty minutes to complete. It appears to be becoming more of a tourist spectacle

than an act of remembrance. For evening meal the party split, some dining in one of the town's restaurants whilst others enjoyed the excellent food at the Ariane.

Sunday morning, it was time to pack up and go. On the way to the Eurotunnel we stopped at Brandhoek New Military Cemetery, to visit the grave of Captain Noel Chavasse VC & Bar, MC, which rounded off Joe Devereux's earlier presentation. After this a stop was made at Poperinghe New Military Cemetery, where a poppy cross was placed at the grave of our Branch Treasurer's great uncle: Helen Earle relating details of his life and military service.

Our final stop was at Talbot House, which we had time to explore and partake of refreshments, which included a slice of delicious cake, baked by Helen.

Our journey back to Cheltenham was without incident and we said goodbye to another extremely successful tour. We had visited well known and much less familiar parts of the Salient, which proved of interest to old hands and newcomers alike. The sporting theme worked well. As always and perhaps even more so on this trip, much fun was had on board the bus and around the dinner table.

Special thanks go to Bob for organising and leading the tour. Also to those members who contributed research and undertook presentations; Helen Earle, who facilitated the accommodation at the superb Ariane Hotel (due to the Great War's centenary, room availability is getting scarce) and provided the cake, and to our driver, Bruce, who conveyed us safely and whose knowledge of the Salient was passed on for our benefit.



**Tour party in the garden of Talbot House, Poperinghe**

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