
British Forces in Italy 1917-1918

Branch Battlefield Tour : 12 to 16 September

Graham Adams

The Branch's first battlefield tour was ten years ago and a decade on it undertook its most ambitious expedition to date: entitled *British Forces in Italy 1917-1918*.

On this occasion the tour party was led by Dale Hjort, whom many will know is an authority on British operations in northern Italy during the final two years of the war. The length of the tour was five days, comprising three nights at a hotel in Asiago and one in Montebelluna, and included two full days on the Asiago Plateau and the mountains to the north, and one down on the Venetian Plain by the River Piave: transport was by a locally hired bus. The transfers from and to Venice Marco Polo Airport also afforded opportunity to visit sites associated with the battle areas.

Our party of ten gathered at Arrivals at Venice Airport and we set off for the town of Asiago. Dale handed out a comprehensive folder of maps and photographs and for each of the eight CWGC cemeteries visited we were supplied with a list of the more interesting headstones to seek out. Whilst we travelled in the bus Dale took time to give us an insight into the background of the British involvement in northern Italy and how the long standing rivalry between Italy and Austria-Hungary, over the possession of two former Italian provinces ceded to the latter in Napoleonic times, had persuaded Italy to switch from its alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary to the Allied side in April 1915; British promises and inducements also playing a significant part.

Our first stop after the airport was at Montecchio Precalcino Communal Cemetery Extension, where we paid special attention to the graves of Private George Griffett of 1/5th Gloucesters (who joined up at the same time as Bob Brunson's grandfather) and Lieutenant Robert Fowler Taylor, of the same battalion and Joe Devereux (Snr) told us something of their background. Graham Sacker placed a poppy cross on the grave of Private Hezekiah Page, 48th Battalion Machine Gun Corps, on behalf of a relative, for whom he had undertaken some



Graham Sacker at the grave of Private Hezekiah Page

research. At each cemetery, where an individual was especially remembered, Dave Gargett gave The Exhortation.

After leaving the cemetery we headed into the mountains up a steep road with many twists and turns and it became obvious why Dale was insistent that our flights arrived in sufficient time to make the journey before nightfall. We made a brief stop at Campiello Junction, a former railway station, which afforded excellent views, before arriving at the Hotel Paradiso in Asiago at about 7pm.

After settling into our rooms, we gathered for the traditional group dinner and Dale asked us to remember, as 'absent friends', three

people who should have been with the party but had been prevented by family illness and in one instance a premature death. Rather ominously, Dale predicted that 'there would not be much time for relaxation' on the tour – he was right!

Next morning we were all ready to go at 9am for our first full day on the battlefields, having been introduced to our new bus driver, Vincenzo. The bus climbed up another tortuous road called the Val d'Assa and into former Austro-Hungarian territory: it was a long drive but with some spectacular scenery. Eventually we reached the Werk Gschwent or Fort Belvedere, one of the largest forts built by the Austro-Hungarian Army, which overlooks the Valdastico Valley and is one of a series situated on the pre-Great War frontier. The fort is now partly restored and owned by the local authority, and significant parts are open to the public as a museum devoted to the battles of the area. Dale had arranged for us to have an English speaking guide, Karl, to take us on a ninety minute tour of both the external defences and internal rooms and passageways. Surrounding the fort were some spectacular views of the mountains.

The visit to the fort took up all the morning and in the early afternoon we descended the mountain road and stopped to view the Zita Chapel, situated on a plateau once the site of an Austro-Hungarian Army corps headquarters. Zita of Bourbon was the wife of Emperor Karl I, who succeeded Franz Joseph and was regarded as a 'holy figure' by the troops. Continuing, we took a packed lunch stop at the Osteria all'Antico Termine, which was the former frontier post between Austria and Italy and after moving on were able to view the Cimbrian Bridge, on the old road, which the Italians blew up on 22 May 1916, to try to halt an Austrian advance towards the Asiago Plateau.

Arriving back on the Plateau we stopped to view the British June 1918 positions on San Sisto Ridge and Mount Lemele from the Edelweiss Spur and former railway track, before heading for Granezza British Cemetery, wherein lies the grave of Captain Edward Brittain of 11th Sherwood Foresters.

Before we left for Granezza and overlooking San Sisto Ridge, Helen Earle related the story of Captain Brittain's fatal action there on 15 June 1918. He was the



View from Fort Belvedere



Entrance to Fort Belvedere



Helen lays a poppy cross at Captain Brittain's grave in Granezza British Cemetery

much loved brother of the author, Vera Brittain (and great uncle of Shirley Williams, the former Education Minister) who wrote movingly of her first visit to his grave in 1921 in her book *Testament of Youth*. Graham Adams read an extract from the book at the graveside and, just as Vera described on her visit, the

afternoon sun shone directly on the graves. Helen followed this with a rendition of Vera's poem *To My Brother*. Also buried in the cemetery is Lieutenant Colonel James Knox DSO, who was the CO of the 1/7th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, killed by shell fire in his dugout on 23 September 1918 and just up the road we discovered a memorial to him and all those of the 143rd Infantry Brigade who fell in action on the Asiago Plateau in 1918.

After a short visit to a WW2 partisan memorial and to Barenthal Military Cemetery we followed a rough track onto San Sisto Ridge. Hidden amongst the trees we found evidence of the British 23rd Division lines, where Edward Brittain was in action and where his CO, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hudson was awarded a VC. Bob Brunsdon even found a rusting bully beef tin as evidence of British occupation!

It was then back to the hotel for 6.15pm, after a very full and absorbing day, when the forecast thunder storms had not materialized.

On the following day, it was another 9am start (after Brian Ward had changed out of his slippers!) and we were to concentrate on actions during the Battle of the Asiago on 15-16 June 1918, involving the 143rd and 145th Brigades of 48th Division, the latter Brigade being home to the 1/5th Glosters. We headed for south west of Asiago, particularly the areas of Ghelpac Ravine, Perghele and Cesuna.

At a picnic area at Ghelpac Fork we spread out maps and using a contemporary British map planned a walk up a woodland track to try to identify the location of two defensive machine gun positions shown thereon. After walking under a former railway bridge we scrambled up slopes, through trees and rocky outcrops and were successful in identifying both of them, with their supporting entrenchments. This was a special moment for Helen Earle whose grandfather was in action here with the Machine Gun Corps. It was then on up the track to Pelly Cross, where the 4th Ox & Bucks Light Infantry and 1/5th Glosters held off an Austro-Hungarian advance supported by flamethrowers and we continued up the Princes Road, where we discovered another post in what had been the 4th Ox & Bucks Light Infantry positions. At one point we



Examining maps at Ghelpac Fork

thought we might lose Bob Brunsdon down a rather large bunker but thankfully we didn't! The track continued up to Boscon British Cemetery, where a CWGC gardener (and his dog!) was hard at work maintaining the cemetery in pristine condition. Here, at the grave of former King's School, Gloucester scholar Captain Basil Bruton (of 1/5th Glosters), Bob told us something of his life and how he was mortally wounded on 15 June 1918. Joe Devereux (Snr) then spoke about three 1/5th Glosters men, all killed on 15 June 1918; Serjeant Albert Coopey (Tewkesbury), Private George Wakefield (Berkeley) and Private George Organ (The Reddings, Cheltenham). Graham Sacker followed this with comments on some of the fourteen Machine Gun Corps men buried here and the role played by the Machine Gun Corps serving alongside the infantry.

After walking back to the picnic area, we rejoined the bus and drove along the Ghelpac Road to C del Guendiano, where, after a lunch break, we walked down a former railway bed and up a track to an area where the 1/5th Glosters had a command post in June 1918 overlooking a track called Pine Avenue.



Looking over the Asiago Plateau

Once again, we discovered evidence of trench works.

The bus then took us to Cesuna civil cemetery, where we obtained good views across 'happy valley' and the battlefield of June 1918, and in particular the ground where the Glosters and Ox & Bucks Light Infantry stopped the enemy advance.

It was then on to Magnaboschi, where the Italians had halted an Austro-Hungarian advance in the Spring of 1916 and visits to a Memorial Chapel (with a plaque to the Staffordshire Regiment therein), a Roman Column and a former Italian Cemetery, where the buried remains had been removed during Mussolini's time; now been restored as a 'symbolic international cemetery'. The nearby Magnaboschi British Cemetery overlooks it.

A grave which caught the eye in the cemetery was that of Private Shrapnell, of the Royal Warwicks and Joe Devereux (Snr) told the stories of two Glosters buried here - Lieutenant Mervyn Wilkins, 1/6th Battalion and Private Charles Arthur Coles of 1/5th. Dale also told the story of another burial, Captain Howard Lister DSO MC and 2 Bars, of 21st Field Ambulance, RAMC killed by a mortar bomb on 9 August 1918 when attending to the wounded of a raid.

Brian Ward's coffee craving was satisfied when Dale took us to a café/restaurant perched high on Monte Zovetto. The views from here were across the whole of the beautiful Asiago Plateau and we were able to pick out places visited and features previously described. For many this panoramic view enabled all the various troop and advances and retreats to be placed in context of the overall landscape. After leaving here we stopped to explore a former Italian observation post, expanded by the British in 1918.

We then travelled to Cesuna, where, on the former Austro-Hungarian line, Dale described raids made by 7th Division in August 1918, to assert dominance over no man's land. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped at the former Asiago railway station to view a memorial to the people expelled from the area to the south of Italy following the Austro-Hungarian occupation of the town.

Next morning, our last full day 'in the field', we left Asiago but not until arrangements were made for Joe Devereux (Jnr) to see a doctor about an insect bite



The magnificent viewpoint at Monte Zovetto



Asiago from the Sacrario Militare

which had become infected. Vincenzo, our bus driver, proved a gem in this situation, as he fixed up an appointment, went with Joe to act as an interpreter and Joe received a prescription for anti-histamine and antibiotics. This delayed our departure but during the time it took to get Joe seen the rest of the party walked up to the imposing Sacrario Militare mausoleum which dominates the town.

Once on our way we headed down the mountain road to Bassano, crossing the River Brenta and on to the Venetian Plain - almost following the December 1917 front line and on for a refreshment stop at Montello, a sheltered support area for the British.

One of the final actions of the war on the Italian front was the Battle of Vittorio Veneto in late October. A key to the main Italian advance was the capture of Papadopoli Island located in the mile wide River Piave. The capture was assigned to the British 7th and 23rd Divisions, who were then to provide a flank guard to the main Italian attack upstream. The island was captured on the night of 23/24 October by means of a small boat operation and the hold was consolidated by the building of two trestle bridges over the

western channel during the night of 26/27 October. A crossing onto the far bank was made the following day and as the Italians had been prevented from crossing the river upstream by rising water levels the British found themselves spearheading the advance, which eventually led to Austria-Hungary seeking an Armistice on 4 November.

We took lunch at the 7th Division Memorial, adjacent to the Piave at Salettuo and overlooking Papadopoli Island, where Dave Gargett told us about the 528th (Durham) Company, Royal Engineers (of whom his great grandfather had been a member) involved with the construction of the bridges. The usual group photo was taken at the memorial.

After crossing the modern road bridge which now spans both the Piave and Papadopoli Island we travelled to the Montecano River bridge at Vazzola-Soffrata which was the maximum point of the subsequent British advance up to 28 October. There was fighting on the bridge and action by the Northamptonshire Yeomanry prevented it being blown up. We then retraced our steps to visit Tezze British Cemetery, opened on 27 October 1918. We finally reached our overnight stop, the Hotel San Marco, Montebelluna at about 6pm.

It was now our final day but before heading for Venice Airport we visited Giavera British Cemetery and Memorial to the Missing of the Italian Campaign. Here Helen Earle laid a poppy tribute, which she had made, on behalf of the Branch and Bob Brunson recited The Exhortation.



Poppy tribute laid at Giavera British Cemetery



Tour party at 7th Division Memorial near Papadopoli Island



River Piave from the Ossario del Montello a Nervesa

Dale pointed out the grave of Second Lieutenant John Scott Youll VC, 11th Northumberland Fusiliers, and Joe Devereux (Snr) related the story of two 1/5th Glosters' names on the nearby Memorial to the Missing of the Italian Campaign. Following this we stopped at a memorial to the celebrated Italian airman Francesco Barraca: co-incidentally, whilst there, a Tiger Moth bi-plane carrying RAF insignia flew over. Our final stops were at the Ossario del Montello a Nervesa, where a climb to the top afforded magnificent views over to the mountains to the north and south to the River Piave and Venice in the distance, and the ossuary Sacratio Militare di Fagare, where there was an example of one of the boats used to cross the Piave.

Our thanks were expressed to Dale for leading a fascinating tour to an area about which most of the party knew very little. His knowledge of the battlefields built up over many years is truly exceptional. We also thanked our helpful bus driver, Vincenzo, who drove us smoothly and safely along some challenging roads. We were blessed with almost perfect weather and probably saw the pretty Asiago Plateau and the majestic mountains in their full glory. There was only one complaint, at times it was just too hot, even on the higher ground!