

Verdun 100 - Ils ne passeront pas!

Branch Battlefield Tour 15-18 September 2016

Graham Adams

To mark the Branch's 10th Anniversary year it was decided that the annual battlefield tour would be somewhere out of the ordinary and where better than Verdun, on the centenary of the Great War's longest single continuous battle. Once again Bob Brunson was chief organiser but the principal guide would be our regular driver, Bruce Cherry, a fellow member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides, who just happened to be an authority on the Verdun battleground.

It is a long way to Verdun from Cheltenham and this necessitated a 7am start and after picking up various members of the 15 strong party and several stops en-route we arrived at our hotel, Le Tulipier, deep in the Argonne forest, in the early evening. Thanks go to Dave Earle for preparing an entertaining quiz to help pass the time on the long motorway journey. The traditional arrival evening group meal took place in the hotel.

Friday morning saw a very misty start and after breakfast the party assembled by the bus, to listen to Bob give an overview of the Battle of Verdun, aided by an extremely large, clear sketch map which was attached to the bus by magnets. Bob had also prepared a very informative 'tour booklet' which was supported by a large scale IGN map of the area.



Bob's sketch map

The battle lasted some 300 days, from the opening bombardment on 21 February until the final French offensive on 15 December 1916: casualty estimates are around 800,000 in total. It can be broken down into six phases (including preparation) and Bob explained that our

tour would relate to these, rather than follow a chronological order. The River Meuse flows through the area and it was the intention to explore the right (or east) bank area on this particular day and on the next the left bank, where we would also take in some sites relating to the American Army in 1918.

The theme of the first day could perhaps be described as 'forests and forts'. Bruce drove us to the Bois de Caures and then led a walk up a forest track and into the heart of the German lines prior to their attack on 21 February, when over a million shells fell on this area. We were encouraged to fan out as we walked through the undergrowth and soon discovered that we were negotiating remains of trench lines and shells holes. Also present was clear evidence of bunkers and openings to tunnels.



Bruce tells a story in the Bois de Caures



The grave of Colonel Driant

Some units of the French Army showed great valour in resisting the German attack, in the face of overwhelming odds. None more so than the 56th and 59th Chasseurs, commanded by Colonel Emile Driant.

Numbering about 1,200 they held out for two days, despite being almost surrounded. Driant was killed whilst attending a wounded comrade and was buried with honour nearby. We paid a visit to his command post and to his grave.

We next concentrated on the forts of Douamont and Vaux, taking a packed lunch in between at a café adjacent to the vast Ossuary at Douamont, which comprises a high tower and long central gallery, under which are stored the bones of an estimated 130,000 individuals. There was time to visit this and the vast French National Cemetery opposite.



Ossuary & French National Cemetery at Douamont

At both forts the public can explore the roofs and the shell torn ground bears witness to the tremendous pounding each fort took during the battle. At Vaux a smashed steel carapace, about 30cm thick, still lies adjacent to its turret. The views from the top indicate how the forts had a commanding field of fire over the surrounding countryside. The inside of both forts can also be visited (we took advantage of the 'group ticket' which covered entry to both). At Vaux exploration was assisted by an English audio commentary.



Inside Fort Douamont

Douamont is a very large structure and was considered the 'jewel in the crown' of the ring of forts protecting Verdun. By February 1916 it had been stripped of much of its armament (much needed elsewhere) and was garrisoned by only 70 men, in the charge of a Warrant Officer. It was captured without resistance on 25 February: there are a number of stories as to exactly how this came about but its fall was a great propaganda coup for the Germans and a severe blow to French morale. It was not recaptured until 24 October 1916, after several attempts.



Fractured carapace on top of Fort Vaux

In contrast, Vaux, the smallest of the Verdun forts had been quickly re-armed after the fall of Douamont and its six 75mm guns posed a threat to any German advance on Verdun. The Germans failed to capture it in March and May but subjected it to a sustained bombardment which severely weakened the structure, such that outside communication was limited to signal lamp, pigeon or runner and there was serious shortage of water. On 1 June the Germans gained access and the galleries and passageways within the fort saw savage fire fights. Having run out of water and hope of any relief, the garrison CO, Major Raynal, surrendered with honour on 7 June.

We next visited an entrance to the now derelict Fort Souville – described by General Petain as 'the last bolt on the door to Verdun'. Here on 23 June the German attack on the right bank of the Meuse reached its highpoint. Nearby we stopped at the 'Wounded Lion' Memorial to the French 130 Division, which marks



Wounded Lion Memorial

the official extreme point of the German advance at Verdun. In our tour booklet Bob had included a previously unpublished photograph of the sculptor, Rene Paris (who fought with 130 Division), a copy of which was given to him by Monsieur Paris' great nephew.

The village of Fleury is one of thirteen settlements completely destroyed during the battle. It now comprises a rather melancholy memorial area; we walked the path through it and on either side stones indicated what had once stood there, such as a bakery, blacksmith or 'farm'. A railway station once stood where there is now a museum: unfortunately time did not allow a visit to the museum but outside Andy Hinks delivered an interesting talk on the famous 'Soixante Quinze' – the French 75mm Field Gun, backed by a comprehensive piece in the tour booklet.

After Fleury, we visited the celebrated 'Trench of Bayonets': reportedly a trench wherein French soldiers were buried standing upright with the bayonets of their rifles protruding. There is now very little evidence of any bayonets under a substantial concrete covering. Following this we drove through Verdun town, with a stop at the Memorial to the Fallen and a walk onto the bridge over the River Meuse. A short time was spent at the remains of Fort Sartelles, to the west of the town where, after a scramble through bushes, we were able to walk part of the moat and view the main entrance before returning to the bus.

The final stop was at the Voie Sacree (Sacred Way) Memorial, on the Bar-le-Duc to Verdun Road. Here Graham Adams gave a short talk on how, in 1916, the French Army established and maintained a round the clock supply system, using this road and adjacent light railway.

If Friday was a day for 'forests and forts', then Saturday was to be very much 'forests, hills and mines'. On this day we would concentrate attention on sites connected with the fighting on the left bank of the Meuse and touch upon the American involvement in the Meuse-Argonne area in 1918.

At 8.30am we said goodbye to Le Tulipier Hotel, as our overnight stop would be in Reims. For most of the morning we endured some heavy drizzle but as a large part was spent inside the forest, this did not matter over much and the weather improved as the day progressed.

Bruce drove us to the Haute Chevauche, a densely forested area, wherein lies a Memorial to the Battles of the Argonne, which includes an ossuary at its base and adjacent to it is a large mine crater, about half the size of Lochnagar Crater on the Somme. We then walked through the forest and the remains of a German trench system, which included 'The Kaiser Tunnel', connecting with the front line. Following this we visited the Ravin du Genie, where an historical group has reconstructed a French Army support area, including replica emplacements alongside the originals. Next it was a visit to the 'Abri du Kronprinz'. This was a rather stylised bunker featuring 'bay windows', said to have been used by the German Crown Prince during the initial attack at Verdun and later fighting in the Argonne. Once again we were able to explore former trench lines, shells holes, emplacements and bunkers.



The Abri du Kronprinz

After the forests we made a refreshment stop at Avocourt, where Helen Earle served up her delicious iced fruit cake, decorated in French colours, with symbolic forts and the inscription 'May the Forts be with you'!

Back on the bus Bruce explained that the fighting on the left bank represented 'mission creep' on behalf of the Germans. There were three areas of high ground, Goose Hill, Le Mort-Homme and Cote 304, all of which afforded good observation for the French



Tour party at Le Mort-Homme

artillery to enfilade the German advance on the right bank. Having captured Goose Hill, the Germans were forced successively to try to capture the other two hills.

Our visit to the memorial at Le Mort-Homme was made all the more interesting by an encounter in the carpark with Christian Maurer, a German motor-cyclist from near Heidelberg, visiting a place where his grandfather fought in 1916. Evidently, despite service on the Russian Front in WW2, it was his experiences at Verdun that affected him most. He shared with us some postcards his grandfather had sent home during the Great War and Bob handed him a copy of our tour booklet. The stark and sombre memorial, depicting a skeleton, was erected by the French 69th Division in memory of the thousands who died in the battle for control of this strategically important hill. The inscription on the memorial reads 'Ils n'ont pas passee' (They did not pass). This was a fitting spot for Dave Earle to lay a wreath on behalf of the Branch, remembering all those who fought and died at Verdun, including the relative of our recently acquired German friend.

Forestation is a recurring feature of the ground over which the Battle of Verdun was fought and none more so than at the peaks of Le Mort-Homme and Cote 304. It does take a leap of imagination to view the ground as it was in 1916, bare hills, completely blasted and to appreciate the strategic importance of the heights and why each side was so intent on holding or capturing them. At Cote 304 there is a memorial obelisk, financed by veterans of

21 French Divisions who fought there and helpfully narrow clearings have been cut through the forest to give some insight into what could be seen from the position, in the absence of trees.

We now undertook a short interlude, visiting places relating to the American actions in the Meuse-Argonne sector between 26 September and 11 November 1918. First we visited the Memorial to the actions at Montfaucon. This is in the form of a 180 foot high column and if you climb the 234 stairs you are rewarded with a panoramic view for miles. Below the column are the ruins of Montfaucon monastery, which incorporate a former German observation post. A short stop was

made at the German Cemetery at Nantillois before time was spent at the huge Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, the largest US military cemetery in Europe, where 14,246 are buried and 954 names are recorded on panels as missing.

Our final stop of the day was at the Butte de Vauquois. This area of high ground was once occupied by a village and it dominated the western approaches of both road and rail to Verdun. Consequently it was coveted by both the French and Germans and during 1915 and 1916 was subjected to extensive mining operations by both sides. Nothing remains of the village and the site of the church is now marked by a single stone. A Memorial is present and on the German side a large part of their former fortifications has been excavated and we were able to walk through these and over the top of the mined area.

Our visit to Verdun was now complete and we boarded the bus for our overnight stop at the Golden Tulip Hotel at Reims. The closer proximity to the Eurotunnel meant that we could afford time on the Sunday morning to visit the WW2 La Coupole 'V' Weapon museum, where opportunity was taken to buy lunch. This was fortunate as the bus refused to start and a breakdown vehicle had to be called. A battery problem was diagnosed. Thankfully the bus was re-started and we were on our way again, albeit an hour or so later than anticipated. Fortunately this did not impinge too much on our journey back to Cheltenham, via the Eurotunnel, arriving at 7.30pm.

Thanks were expressed to Bob for organising the tour and for Bruce Cherry for acting as lead guide and driver and they were each presented with a book and a card signed by all the party. We had spent two very full but totally absorbing days on the Verdun battlefield and covered an enormous amount of ground. We were all amazed just how much evidence of the battle still exists inside the forests. It was a long way to travel but well worth the effort.