

Going over the top



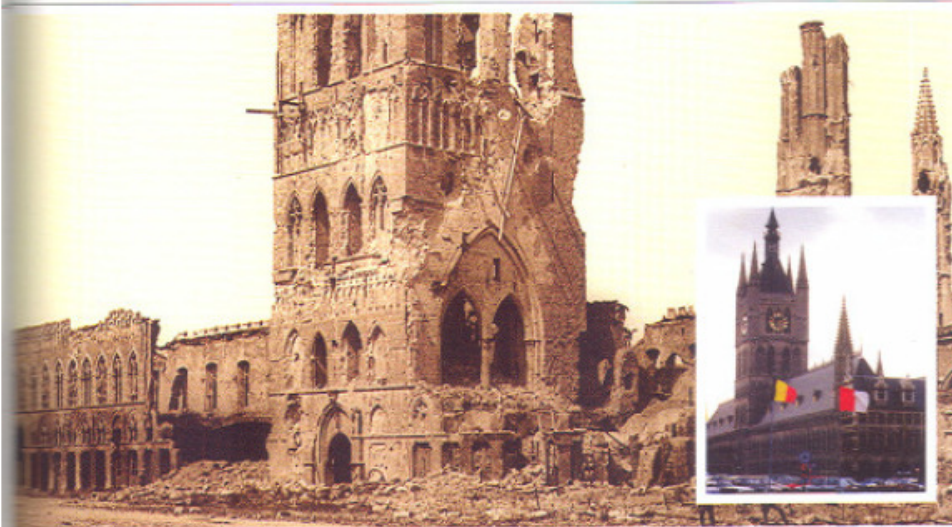
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Last summer, my father and I visited the First World War battlefields in Ypres and The Somme. I had previously visited Ypres on a short tour with Scouts, led by Judith Gamse. I found it fascinating and decided that I wanted to spend more time there.

The journey to Dunkirk was uneventful and soon we started to see signs reading "Commonwealth Cemetery - Great War", in English and French.

The first cemetery we reached was the Mont Noir Military Cemetery in St Jans-Cappel. Although I had visited several war cemeteries with Scouts the year before, the raw emotional power of such places was still there. The Cemeteries are all beautifully maintained in the style of an English country garden. On a tour of the battlefields on the fifth anniversary of armistice, King George V gruffly declared that each of the fallen should be buried in cemeteries the style of a traditional English Garden, with the shadow of a rose across each grave-stone. This wasn't quite achieved but many of the grave-stones are shadowed by a rose. Mont Noir is a mixed cemetery with both French and British burials reflecting the joint nature of the war. It contains 232 burials, the majority of them British, with some graves unknown (an unfortunate but all too frequent sight), these bearing the sombre inscription "Known unto God".

Soon we reached Ypres town and the camp-site that we were staying at. Ypres is a Belgian town near the French border that stood between invading German forces in 1914 and the North Sea ports. The British army saw it as being strategically vital as the ports were needed to ferry troops across the channel. They needed to defend the area at all costs,



Cloth Hall then and now



Jewish headstone



War cemetery



Somme trench

regardless of the damage done to the town and its surroundings. The town was totally destroyed by shelling during the war, including its beautiful 14th century central area, most notably the Cloth Hall, a vast cathedral-like structure built in the Gothic style.

However, all of this was accurately rebuilt after the war, due to mayor (who escaped with the medieval plans) and a photographer who intensively photographed the town and escaped with the negatives.

After pitching our tent, we spent the afternoon at the In Flanders Fields Museum, which is housed in the beautiful Cloth Hall in the town centre.

There are many excellent exhibits about topics as diverse as medical care, night-time, no-mans land and gas attacks. The one about gas was particularly poignant. It is in an area of the museum bathed in a yellow light containing long pipes and gas-masks and steam and smoke rises up from ground level. A recording is played of Wilfred Owen's famous poem, *Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori* (It is sweet and right to die for your country):

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and
stumbling,

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime .

Dim, through the misty panes and thick
green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking,

drowning.

The exhibit stirs up a feeling of tension and fear which is heightened by the dull, yellow light and choking sounds heard in the background.

Another exhibit depicts the Christmas truce of 1914. It shows two men, cast in plaster of Paris, shaking hands through a glass wall. This represents how the men at the front tried to overcome their natural prejudices, but there was still a wall between them that was created by their commanding officers.

After finishing at the museum, we went to Essex Farm cemetery to place an AJEX grave marker next to the grave of a Jewish Sergeant killed in the area. I had visited the cemetery the previous year and remembered seeing his grave and strongly felt that I should return to properly commemorate him.

Afterwards what was quite an intense and emotional afternoon, we returned to the campsite. After a quick supper we went to the Menin Gate to hear the Last Post being played in memory of the fallen. Menin Gate is a huge memorial arch built across the main road into Ypres, to commemorate the thousands of allied soldiers who died in the area but have no known grave. There are 54,896 names inscribed on the walls.

Every evening at 8pm buglers from the Ypres Fire Service sound the Last Post, which is followed by a minute of silence. This has happened at Menin Gate every evening since 1927. The only exception was during the Second World War, when Ypres was occupied

by the Germans, but even then, the ceremony took place in England. From the day the town was recaptured by Allied forces in 1945 the ceremony restarted.

We arrived at 7.30pm to find the area busy. Just before 8pm, six buglers in smart uniform stepped forwards and on the dot of 8pm, played the Last Post. The crowd fell silent and remembered the losses of the young men who gave their today for our tomorrow. I thought about how the Germans had also had massive losses, in fact more than the British, and how they were ultimately human beings too. After the ceremony finished, I walked around the memorial and was very moved to see a note pinned to a small wreath, in very spidery writing saying "to my brother, I miss you every day – you will not be forgotten".

The next day we took a tour to the Somme (some 80 miles from Ypres) with Over The Top Tours. The Somme was the area that saw the bloodiest day in British military history.

The first site we visited was the Pozieres tank memorial where there was a slightly raised platform that gave you an overview of the battlefield. It was a chilly morning and I shivered as I looked over the battlefield, but not perhaps through the cold. Across the twelve and a half mile front, at 7.30am on the morning of the 1st July 1916, tens of thousands of young men clambered out of the trenches and started walking across no-mans land. They were mown down in their droves by German machine-guns. On that day alone there were 60,000 casualties of which 20,000 died and by the end of the day, there was no change in the position of the German or British front line. When darkness fell, the survivors combed the battlefield for wounded. Even a general participated in the search.

Next, we drove to Dartmoor Cemetery, where lies Lieutenant Henry Weber, the oldest British soldier to die in the war (he was 67 years old). Also in this small cemetery, side by side, lie George and Robert Lee, a father and son who served in the same artillery battery and died together on the same day, probably killed by the same shell. The two head-stones next to each other cannot fail to move even the hardest of hearts.

Then on to the Devonshire Cemetery. On the 1st July 1916, a company of the Devonshire Regiment some 150 strong went down a hill, platoon by platoon. All 150 killed within half an hour and rest together in this cemetery. As you walk down the rows of white head-stones the date is always the same – 1st July 1916, 1st July 1916, 1st July 1916 Repeated another 147 times. Each one a tragedy.

Afterwards we went to visit the main German cemetery in the area - Fricourt. Fricourt contains the remains of 17,000 German soldiers, of which 11,970 lie in four mass graves. At one point the legendary Manfred von Richtoven, the Red Baron, was buried in this cemetery but his body was later moved to Germany for a reburial as a national hero. 14 Jewish soldiers lie in this cemetery, all of them in individual graves under a tablet shaped head-stone (unlike non-Jews who are buried under black crosses). Fricourt is a very dark and shadowy place. It doesn't stand out

at all, like the French and British war cemeteries do. This is because one of the many conditions placed on Germany by the French government was that their cemeteries were to be unobtrusive and blend into the countryside. As a result all German war cemeteries are very dark, hidden and unobtrusive. From a distance they just look like any other part of the surrounding area.

We then went to visit the Lochnagar Crater, one of the enormous craters made on 1st July 1916 when several huge mines were detonated just before the British "went over the top" – a very helpful warning to the Germans. Most craters were filled in by farmers as soon as war ended, but this one survived the war and it remains a tourist attraction. The crater is massive – over 100m from lip to lip and 30m deep. You could easily fit several large houses in it. The sheer size of it amplifies the horror of modern warfare and how dreadful it must have been to live through it.

After our visit to the Crater we went to Le Tommy Café for a coffee. Le Tommy Café is amazing as in the café gardens, the owners have built a small trench system consisting of various scenes of everyday trench life, with realistic sound effects. I really liked the visit to the café as it gave me a quiet place to think

"It is estimated that in the week before the battle started on 1 July 1916, over 1m shells were fired at the German positions"

about what I had seen earlier, but also it gave me a view of life on the Front – the mud, the filth and above all the noise, with whistles of shells, the explosions as they fall and the rattle of gun-fire. It also contained an impressive display of shells. Outside the café is a two metre high wall full of unexploded shells (I hope!). It is estimated that in the week before the battle started on 1 July 1916, over 1m shells were fired at the German positions and around half of these shells failed to explode. Many of these are still lying buried in the mud and regularly surface as the land is cultivated.

The next site we visited was the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont Hamel. On the first day of the battle, the 1,000 strong Newfoundland Regiment attacked the German forces, who were dug in on the site of the Memorial Park. By the end of the day, over 900 were casualties. After the War, in view of this enormous loss suffered by this Regiment, the 90 acre site was dedicated to the memory of the thousands of soldiers from Newfoundland who died for "the Mother country". At the heart of the Memorial Park is a statue of a Caribou (a Newfoundland reindeer), seemingly mourning and calling skywards. The Caribou is the national symbol of Newfoundland and symbolises the entire

nation mourning for its lost men.

From here we travelled to the Delville Wood Memorial, which was perhaps the most impressive memorial we visited. Delville Wood was considered to be of key strategic importance, so a South African brigade of 3,500 men was ordered to take the German held wood. A week later less than 800 came out unharmed, having held the wood successfully but at huge cost. Since then Delville Wood has had a place in the heart of South Africa. In 1926 a memorial was unveiled in and in 1986 a fantastic museum was opened, commemorating all the South Africans who died fighting for the Commonwealth of Nations. The most impressive items in the museum are the brass carved frescos on the walls depicting South African valour in both World Wars. From here we returned to Ypres – a long journey back gave me time to think about all I had seen that day, and realise how lucky I am not to have been born 100 years earlier.

Our third day was spent around Ypres and once again, guided by Andre. First stop was to return to the Essex Farm cemetery to visit some preserved bunkers. They were very dark and claustrophobic, with only a small doorway and a very low ceiling. It was in one of these bunkers that the Canadian army doctor and poet, John McCrae wrote In Flanders Fields, one of most famous poems of the First World War.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

It was a funny feeling, being on the spot where the beautiful and moving poem was actually written. Andre then pointed out to us some of the notable graves in the cemetery. The most well-known is that of Valentine Joe Strickwick. He was only 15 when he was killed. That's just 10 months older than I am at the time that I'm writing this article. As I saw his grave I felt a whirlwind of emotions. Slightly proud that this boy had chosen to sacrifice himself for his country but mostly resentment and anger with the system of the British army that had definitely not stopped and even encouraged under-age teenagers to join up.

Next we went to visit another German cemetery – Langemark. Langemark now contains the remains of 44,000 soldiers, but was originally much smaller. In the 1960's the Belgium government closed down numerous German cemeteries & ordered that the

remains be moved to Langemark. Eventually a huge cemetery evolved. Like Fricourt in the Somme, Langemark is very dark because the Belgians also wished to impose humiliating conditions on Germany, and instructed the designers to make it unobtrusive and blend in with the surrounding areas. At its entrance there is a large flower bed, half the size of a tennis court, which is in fact a mass grave containing 25,000 bodies! I was unable to even grasp in my mind that 25,000 people were buried in such a small place. Once inside the main part of the cemetery, there lie many headstones, small, flat and black in colour (a real contrast to the white stones which fill the British cemeteries). Under each stone are buried five to eight men. This is both to save space and also to symbolise comradeship in death. I was particularly touched by this idea.

On the way to our last cemetery, Tyne Cot and the Thiepville Memorial, we drove past a barn where there was a pile of old ordnance lying outside waiting to be collected by the Belgian army for disposal (known as the Iron Harvest). We stopped and went inside, where the farmer showed us some memorabilia he had found whilst ploughing the fields over the years. He had grenades, shells, detonators,



helmets, bullets, grenades and a rusty rifle - all the explosives were still live! I found this quite frightening and although I knew that the whole area is littered with live ammunition and explosives that could go off at any moment, to be actually so close to dangerous items was scary.

Soon we reached Tyne Cot. The vast cemetery contains 11,954 burials and seems to stretch on forever. The area was captured by Australian troops on 4th October 1917. That date bears special significance to me as it is my birthday. When I first visited this cemetery the year before, I found the grave of an Australian Jewish medic, Private Marcus Leslie Marks, who died on that date. At the foot of his grave-stone was the Hebrew inscription "Mordechai, son of Moshe fell on Chol Hamoed Sukkot 18th Tishrei 5678". I found this particularly moving. Seeing Hebrew in such a place made me feel proud that Jewish soldiers had also made sacrifices in this war. I laid a Magen David grave-marker in the shadow of the headstone and shed a tear as I walked away.

Our final destination that day was the preserved trench system at Sanctuary Wood. In 1916, the Canadians dug into the hill just before the battle of Mount Sorrel. The trench system survived after the war (unlike most trenches which were filled by farmers and returned to cultivation as soon as the war

ended) and was bought by a Belgian who had the vision to preserve the trenches. The shattered wood was planted with new saplings but the numerous shell-holes and craters were left. It was made into a piece of living history and opened to the public. The trenches are extremely muddy and about six feet deep and two feet wide. The corrugated iron has rusted over the years and been replaced, as have the wooden duck boards to prevent you from sinking into the mud. Only one thing has stayed the same - the mud. In certain places it is two - three foot deep. I slipped off a duck board and unfortunately fell in and was soaked with mud up to my thigh! Although I was muddy when I came out from the trenches, it gave me a little taste of the conditions seen by the soldiers who lived in them. Before our trip, I saw a film called *The Trench* (starring Daniel Craig and well worth watching), so I had some idea of the filth but I never realised how deep it was if you fell in!

On our last morning, we visited the newly opened Passchendaele Memorial Museum. As a modern museum, it exhibits artefacts in a way I did not see at any of the other more established museums we visited. For example, in the display on gas, it shows a cabinet full of gas-masks but next to that are three tubes labelled mustard gas, chlorine and phosphogene. If you smell the tubes, you can detect the strong odour of the gases. Although you

know it is not real, it's still terrifying and I could not stop coughing!

There is also a fantastic full size basement exhibit, which is a re-created underground dugout system. I climbed down a steep ladder into a badly lit and dingy dugout system, showing how life was life underground. As soon as I reached the foot of the ladder, I felt an over-powering sensation of claustrophobia, as if I wasn't going to ever be able to get out of it again. This made me think about how soldiers would have to go underground for days or even months without seeing sunlight. Every so often I heard the sound of an explosion and the ceiling, walls and floor vibrated. I spent 10 uncomfortable minutes in the system before leaving it. When I climbed out and I stood at the entrance, I really thought how lucky I was to be able to just walk out and get back into the car and drive home, back to my comfortable life. Millions were not able to make that journey.

I would particularly like to thank Judith Gamse, my Scout leader, for first taking me to the area - it really sparked an interest in modern history for me.

Daniel Levy