

IN SOME CORNER OF A FOREIGN FIELD

As a child, I never really gave much thought to either the first or the second world wars. Although my own father fought in World War II – spending four-and-a-half years as a Prisoner of War (POW) in Poland – he never talked about his experiences, preferring to forget about them and move on with his life. Even when something inadvertently forced a memory to resurface, he was economical with the details when relating it.

It was not until many years later that I finally gave the subject the consideration it deserved, particularly after reading *Bird Song* by Sebastian Faulks. That book – along with the play *Journey's End* by R C Sherriff and the *Regeneration* trilogy by Pat Barker – had a profound impact on me. All of them managed to illustrate the horror of the First World War, as well as the terror and fear of young, unsuspecting soldiers – many of whom were still teenagers – who suddenly found themselves in a situation for which they were totally unprepared and inadequately equipped.

Therefore, with this in mind, when a friend of mine told me he was organising a tour of some of the war graves and battle sites of the First World War – I knew it was a trip I could not turn down.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

As we had quite a long day ahead of us, the coach was due to leave Greenhithe at 7.30am. This was fine for most of the people on the trip, who lived nearby, but not so fine for my husband and I, as we were driving down to Kent from London. Fortunately, the coach seats were comfortable and I was able to catch up on some valuable shut-eye before we reached the ferry at Dover. I am definitely not a morning person.

Arriving at Dover, we experienced French customs at its best. Although we arrived in good time for the 10.10am ferry, by the time the French official had faffed around checking and double-checking our driver's paperwork – walking up and down the coach checking passports – we missed our allotted boarding time for the ferry. The official then informed our driver – quite bluntly – we would have to wait another hour for the next one. Not a good start. However, at least it gave us time to queue up for the toilets... and every woman knows what a performance that can be.

Finally boarding the 11.10am ferry, we were then faced with having to make up the time by adjusting our schedule. Unfortunately, that meant the breakfast stop had to go.

THE GERMAN CEMETERY AT LANGEMARK

Our first stop on the tour was the German cemetery at Langemark. There are 44,000 soldiers buried there. However, unlike the Allied cemeteries, this one is remarkably unspectacular. It seems the Germans were less sentimental about commemorating their war dead and the result is a stark and utilitarian space – made all the more mournful by the four gloomy statues standing guard at its entrance. Many of the headstones are just flat squares on the ground and contain multiple names.

The cemetery is divided into several sections. Among them is the Comrades Grave, containing the remains of 24,917 servicemen. Another section contains 10,000 soldiers, including 2 British soldiers killed in 1918. There is also a section containing the remains of 3,000 school students, killed during the first battle at Ypres in 1914.

These students were drafted in by the Germans to make a frontal attack on the Allied positions. They were seriously inexperienced and faced highly trained French infantry and British riflemen. The result was a suicidal attack. According to legend, the young soldiers were singing *Deutschland Über Alles* while being mown down by the Allies. However, this is unsubstantiated.

The village of Langemark was also one of the first places the Germans used gas as a means of attacking the Allies during the second battle of Ypres in 1917.

HILL 62 AND SANCTUARY WOOD

Our second stop on the tour was the site of Hill 62 and Sanctuary Wood. There is a memorial nearby which commemorates the actions of the Canadian Corps in protecting the southern stretches of the Ypres Salient, as well as their part in the battle at the St. Eloi Craters, Hill 62, Mount Sorrel and Sanctuary Wood. Unfortunately, our tight schedule did not allow us enough time to walk through the woods to reach it.

Just two miles from the centre of Ypres, Hill 62 was so named because it stands exactly 62 metres above sea level, and for two years was an excellent vantage point for the Canadian troops who held the position. However, on the morning of June 2nd 1916, they experienced their worse bombardment ever. The third division of the German army attacked the Canadians with such ferocity that whole sections of their defending lines and trenches were completely annihilated, and the soldiers themselves were literally blown from their positions. The site was then lost to the Germans until the Canadians eventually counter-attacked. However, they suffered heavy casualties and failed to recapture it, but their attack was so ferocious it forced the Germans to leave the hill. Caught between Allied and German front lines, with neither side controlling the position, Hill 62 remained almost in a state of limbo, effectively becoming a 'No-Man's Land'.

The attractive road leading up to the site and museum is called Canadalaan (Canada Lane) and is now lined with maple trees in honour of the Canadians. Run by Jacques Schier, the grandson of the original farmer who owned the land before World War 1, the museum holds a collection of war memorabilia, including helmets, weaponry, uniforms and shells. It even boasts a cook's wagon. There is also a large collection of 3-dimensional war photographs, accessed through special viewing boxes – some of which are not for the squeamish.

Outside, at the back of the museum, there is a well-preserved network of trenches and tunnels, used by the British troops. After the war, most of the returning farmers ploughed over the trenches when they reclaimed their land for farming, but Jacques's grandfather decided to preserve the ones on his land for posterity by simply clearing the debris and shoring up the sides with corrugated iron.

No matter what time of the year you visit, mud is usually present. However, I managed to walk along a fair length of the trenches before mud finally got the better of me. A trivial inconvenience compared to the living hell experienced by the soldiers, who had no choice.

TYNE COT CEMETERY

Our next stop was the Tyne Cot War Grave Cemetery near Passchendaele, West Flanders. This is the largest Commonwealth war grave cemetery in the world and contains the remains of 11,961 soldiers, 8,373 of whom are unnamed. Also buried here are four Germans, six Victoria Cross winners and four 'Shot at Dawn' soldiers. The latter were part of 306 men shot for various reasons by the army. Most were totally undeserved executions, although about a hundred probably deserved their fate, as they were rapists and murderers. The rest, however, were probably just suffering from Shell Shock or were simply terrified beyond endurance. In 2007, these men were all pardoned and the slate wiped clean – although that was of little consolation to the poor souls or their families.

Surrounding the entrance of the cemetery is a large, white, semicircular wall, containing the names of 34,000 soldiers, who were missing and unaccounted for. The remains of these soldiers are still laying undiscovered somewhere beneath the field opposite – the site of the battle of Passchendaele. There are also 52-53,000 names inscribed on the Menin Gate at Ypres. At the time of inscription, the total number of the dead was greatly underestimated and therefore the wall at Tyne Cot was erected to accommodate the remaining names.

The sheer scale and tragic beauty of the cemetery is unbearably moving. Spreading out over a vast area in neatly arranged, immaculately tended rows, it becomes even more poignant when you start to walk among the white headstones and read the ages of the men buried there. So many of them were only 19 years old.

In the centre of the cemetery is the Cross of Sacrifice memorial, made from Quebec granite and weighing 15 tons. We were able to climb to the top, giving us an amazing view across the field where most of the fighting occurred. Beautiful and tranquil now, it was hard to imagine the carnage that took place there.

THE MENIN GATE AT YPRES

Our last stop was the Menin Gate at the entrance to the town of Ypres. During the fighting, Ypres was almost flattened, but it is now a vibrant and attractive town, which is worth a visit in its own right.

A ceremony for the dead is held at the Menin Gate every evening at 8 o'clock, and has done so without fail since the end of World War I – the only exceptions being during the Second World War. As we had an hour to kill, a group of us found a nearby restaurant and exchanged thoughts about the day over a meal before joining the hundreds of people now crowding around the Menin Gate.

The ceremony began with a few words of introduction, followed by a reading from Laurence Binyon's poem *For the Fallen*. After the poem, buglers then sounded *The*

Last Post and a piper played *Flowers of the Forest*. Finally, the ceremony ended with a band of pipers, marching through the gate while playing the bagpipes. With everybody listening in silence, it was a powerful scene.

HOMEWARD BOUND

As soon as the ceremony ended it was time to return to the coach and begin the long journey home. It had been an exhausting and emotional day and was therefore no surprise when several of us fell asleep on the drive back to Calais. This time we had no holdups and were soon on board the ferry to Dover.

By the time we arrived back at Greenhithe it was one-thirty in the morning, and we were yet to drive back to London. Needless to say, by the time I eventually surfaced on Sunday, there was little left of the day. Despite this, however, it was one of the most rewarding trips I have ever experienced. It made me both profoundly sad and profoundly grateful for the sacrifices of those countless brave young men.

Places such as Langemark and Tyne Cot ensure that the dead of all countries involved are never forgotten, and are a poignant reminder of the lessons we never seem to learn. They are also places everybody should visit at least once in their life.