

A Gunners Battlefield Tour of Europe 2005

Since joining the Regiment back in 1980, I started to nurture an interest in the origins of the 1st AIF, particularly the history of the Regiment. This strong interest has seen me venture to many parts of the globe where the Australians have fought in numerous battles.

The Battlefields of Europe, mainly Somme and Flanders have always fascinated me, specifically the areas where the 1st AIF served. In my past trips to Europe I have hastily visited these areas, so in 2005 I decided to do a in depth pilgrimage and finally visit all the key places of interest of the AIF and other famous battle sites of the European continent.

My "Battle plan" was prepared after many hours of research on the internet, watching WW1 DVD documentaries and flicking through a copy of the original Regiments publication the "Yandoo". My plan was painstakingly put together, and was to cover 12 days on the road. My itinerary covered many famous battle sites, a few other "touristy" things was topped off with a couple of Belgium breweries hic hic.

Areas covered reads like a display of Regimental colours. WWI; Verdun, Compiègne (signing of the Armistice) Poizieres, Villiers Bretonneux, Albert, Polygon Wood, Peronne, Mont St Quentin, Bullecourt, Fromelles, Paschendaele, Ypres, Hill 60 and Vimy Ridge. WW2; Normandy (D Day landings), Bastogne, Maginot Line and the Arndennes (Battle of the Bulge) with a couple of others thrown in for good measure being Azincourt (1412), Waterloo (1815), where my ancestor served in the 33rd Regt of Foot.

The journey commenced in Brussels one fine September day after meeting up the previous day with a fellow ex Gunner of the Regiment, Ken (Spider) Webb. With the Belgium and French road atlas in hand we headed south for a short drive towards Waterloo, which is on the outskirts of the capitol. This area is full of monuments, museums and original French farm houses, from the era. The Brits being renowned for their love of monuments erected a 43 metre mound and placed a 28 ton cast iron lion on top. This mound gives an excellent vantage point to relive the battle, the only problem is you must walk up 226 steps, however once on top it's well worth the sweat and loss of breath.

Next stop was Longuyon to see Fort Fermont of the legendary Maginot line, which due to the wind down of the tourist season were only conducting tours on weekends, so we planned for the 1530 tour. However due to various Sunday drivers and the winding roads of the dense forests, we missed the 1530 tour, despite new land speed records being set by yours truly. Luckily, Saint Barbara heard our prayers and the fort decided to run one last tour for the unfortunate people who had missed the last one.

Fort Fermont was an underground fortification manned by over 600 personnel using 75 mm guns from both fixed and disappearing turrets, machine guns, mortars and observation posts. Like all other forts of the time it had its own power plant, air purification, ammo storage, accommodation and a kilometer of a electric narrow gauge train system. This was a city underground!.

As history has recorded the Germans found these forts difficult to overrun, so they decided to go around them, in the so called impregnable forests.

The tour (in French of course) of the fort, took just under 2 hours and covered all of the forts main infrastructure, including a ride of the train (bloody cold with only shorts and t shirt), dedicated displays and museum.

Since it was getting late we our made are way down to the Fortress town of Verdun, and since this town was the centre of many battles we decided to stay 2 nights to rest up and take in all the sights. Verdun like most places near the front line was basically rebuilt after WW1. The town was under siege by the Germans who wanted to take Verdun and break the will of the French people to fight.

From our Verdun base we explored all local attractions. We started with Fort Vaux which was one of a number of forts that were built before WW1. The fort was taken by the Germans after a 4 month bloody battle. Whilst

the Germans occupied the fort a German soldier caused an accident in one of their ammo bays. This accident in a confined area of the under ground fort saw some 500 odd German killed.

Other places visited were:

Fleury, this town was totally obliterated after changing hands some 16 times. All that remains are shell craters, basic house foundations, shell craters, sign posts identifying where streets, people's homes and businesses were once located and you guessed it, yes more shell craters.

Ossuary of Douaumont, this is a large church like structure containing the remains of some 130,000 unknown soldiers, as well as 15,000 French soldiers buried in the cemetery.

Underground Citadel, this was a 7 km underground tunnels to house up to 10000 men, it even had its own bakery.

The Bayonets Trench, this is where a detachment of French infantry were buried under German shell fire. The only surviving evidence of the presence of these men were a few centimeters of their bayonets emerging from the ground.

It was now time to head West to the beaches of Normandy, via Compiègne, and as we all know this is the site of the signing of the Armistice treaty, however the French have strange opening days and timings (they close things for lunch), so we rock up on Tuesday and it's the day of the week they are not open, despite some quick talking from yours truly, they would not let us in. Anyhow we adjusted our plans and returned at a later date on the trip. The original train carriage was taken by Hitler during WW2 back to Germany, displayed and then ceremoniously blown up. The replica you see now is identical and has some original parts that were hidden away for safe keeping.

We finally made the coast of Normandy and "hit the beaches" (Sword beach) approximately late afternoon. My first impression was to cast my mind back to the landing scene in the movie Saving Private Ryan and the carnage that took place on the historical day on June 6 1944. Since it was getting late, a quick recon of the area was conducted, which are now mostly suburbs of the large town/cities, anyhow we maneuvered ourselves around the suburbs and narrow roads, which were busy with bloody tourist motor homes. With dwindling light, we decided to come back the next day and complete our visit, so we then headed inland to St Lo, which is an old medieval walled city. Unbeknown to us guys all the hotels were booked out, however luckily we found a couple of B&B rooms above a restaurant, so after some 8-10 hours on the road, a good feed and a couple of beers, it was time for lights out.

Next day we dropped into Mont St Michel which is an extremely famous Abbey and is just about on every French postcard. We then took off back to the D Day landing sites and visited the museums, beaches, cemeteries and monuments. One place that I will remember for the rest of my life is Pointe Du Hoc. This area was dedicated to the American Rangers who scaled a cliff face to take out the German gun emplacements. The area is now a memorial and the ground is scarred with some of the biggest shell craters I've ever seen.

We then headed towards the Somme visiting many famous battle sites, memorials and cemeteries. Places visited were:

Bullecourt:

Australian Memorial Park: This park commemorates 10,000 who were killed and wounded in the 2 battles fought in Apr-May 1917.

Slouch hat Memorial: Another memorial dedicated to the Battle of Bullecourt

Fromelles:

VC Corner Cemetery: It contains the graves of over 400 Australian soldiers who died in the Attack at Fromelles in July 1916, whose bodies were found on the battlefield but could not be identified. It was therefore decided not to mark the individual graves, but to record on a screen wall the names of all the Australian soldiers who were killed in the engagement and whose graves were not known. The memorial commemorates almost 1,300 Australian casualties.

Australian Memorial Park: This memorial park is on the site of original German blockhouses, which are still visible. Whilst we were visiting the local police were investigating the theft of the Australian and French Flags from the flag poles, obviously souvenired by someone with no respect.

Bellengise: In the middle of no where (furthest east of all Australian memorials) is a monument to the Australian 4th Division. This was the high ground of the Hindenburg line.

We then arrived in the charming little town of Peronne. This town has an excellent museum dedicated to WW I which is housed in the old Ramparts part of town. During the visit to the museum we bumped into a couple of familiar faces from the Regiment as they were part of a 2 Div tour commemorating the 90th Anniversary of the Division. Just outside of Peronne is the **Mont St Quentin**, this has a 2.5 metre tall slouch-hatted digger memorial dedicated to the 2nd Division. The original memorial depicting an Australian soldier about to bayonet a German eagle was removed by the occupying Germany army in 1940 (wonder why....).

Next couple of days we ventured further into the Somme and visited many more famous Australian and Commonwealth Memorials and cemeteries. Driving around the small country roads adjoining these famous towns is quiet enjoyable, as most of the battlefields are now again rich green farmlands and quiet scenic. Places visited were:

Poizieres: 2nd Division Memorial is located on the original site of a windmill and is dedicated to the hard fought battles of August 1916, of which diggers fell more thickly on this ridge than any other battlefield of the war. Just down the road a bit is also the 1st Division memorial.

Mouquet Farm: This area has a large copper bronze plaque dedicated to the AIF battle in August 1916, the Aussies called the area, Moo Cow farm.

Thiepval: The Thiepval Memorial commemorates the Missing of the Somme, bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave. This enormous memorial is located on some high ground and can be seen for miles.

Albert: This little town has an excellent underground museum that stretches some 230 metres and displays the life in the trenches of 1916. During the battles, the town received it's fair share of HE (high explosive). The local church is famous for it's picture of the Virgin Mary statue, as it was never removed from it's high position and was left dangling on an angle during the war, despite then Germans best efforts to destroy it.

Sailly-le-Sec: This is the site for the 3rd Division Memorial, which takes a prominent position on the old Somme battlefield

La Boisselle: Lochnagar Crater is a impressive mine hole 100 metres across and 30 metres deep, which was detonated on the first day of the battle of the Somme 1st July 1916

Montbrehain: This area is the furthest the Australians occupied. Of interest, the Regiment received it's final Operational Order No 113 dated 5th Novemeber 1918 to deploy to the area. We also stayed in a lovely B&B in little village named Miraumont, just down the road.

Le Hamel: On the outskirts of this famous town lays a new Australian Memorial dedicated to the battle that commenced on the 4th July 1918. The memorial has excellent diagram/photo displays of which you can relive the battle. It also still has some of the original trenches. Of interest the Red Barron was shot down in the nearby village called Corbie.

Villiers-Bretonneux: This is the famous town where the Australians halted the German advance on 25th April 1918 and is now the site for the National Australian Memorial. The 10,770 Australian servicemen actually named on the memorial died in the battlefields of the Somme. Whilst we were visiting this site we observed the 2Div contingent conduct a commemorative parade, one of the one lookers was the ex Aussie cricketer Rodney Marsh. This memorial is must see on anyone's list.

The following words I came across in my research that highlight the Australians will to win, at all costs.

Shared experiences in the face of death that forged a deep comradeship and understanding between the men of a company. This is reflected in the famous battle orders issued by Lieutenant F.P. Bethune to his group of seven men in No.1 section, 3rd Machine Gun Company, when sent to defend an exposed position in March 1918:

Special Orders to No.1 Section 13/3/18

- (1) This position will be held, and the section will remain here until relieved.*
- (2) The enemy cannot be allowed to interfere with this programme.*
- (3) If the section cannot remain here alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case it will remain here.*
- (4) Should any man, through shell shock or other cause, attempt to surrender, he will remain here dead.*
- (5) Should all guns be blown out, the section will use Mills grenades and other novelties.*
- (6) Finally, the position as stated, will be held.*

*F.P. Bethune Lt
O/C No.1 Section*

Adelaide Cemetery: This is the cemetery where they exhumed the remains of the unknown Australian soldier. This digger again lies peacefully in the Australian War Memorial.

After a fairly intensive tour of the Somme we then headed north towards Flanders (Belgium). On the way we stopped at the Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge. This memorial has kept most of its original trenches, shell craters as well as maintaining some parts of the original underground tunnel system of which they conduct walking tours. These tunnels were carved out of chalk and run for kilometres, and were used to bring the troops and supplies up to the front line undetected.

We finally reached Flanders and stayed in Ypres for 2 nights. This town was totally destroyed by German Artillery, but luckily was rebuilt to its original splendour. This area was of extreme importance, thus many famous sites are close by. We visited the following;

Passchendaele-Zonnebeke: Another famous area where the 2nd Australian Division on 4 October 1917 captured 6 German pill boxes and has a memorial plaque on one of the original bunkers recognising their sacrifice in the large Tyne Cot Commonwealth cemetery.

Zillebeke Hill 60: This is the site for the 1st Tunnelling Company Memorial. The metal plaque has been rumoured to have been damaged by Germans in WW II using it as a rifle target.

Polygon Wood: The 5th Division Memorial sits atop a large mound that was once a rifle range butte (1914). During heavy fighting in September 1917, the Division recaptured the wood.

Kemmel: Pool of Peace, this is a large crater (now full of water) caused by the detonation of a British underground mine. It's believed that a couple of the mines were not detonated during the war as the trench lines changed, apparently lightning set one of them off in the 50's.

Ypres

Menin Gate: A huge arched monument erected for the 54,900 of the missing Commonwealth forces. Every evening at 8 pm they hold a commemorative service, and they block off the traffic and 2-4 buglers from the Belgium Fire Brigade play the last post. This service is very moving as the sounds reverberate around the large arch ways. This service has been performed since 1928, only ceasing during the German occupation of WW II.

In Flanders Fields Museum: Another good WW I museum situated in the magnificent re built Cloth Hall Tower building.

Dikkebus: Huts cemetery, this cemetery is where 7 members of the from 26 Battery are buried after being shelled in the wagon lines whilst having breakfast on the 11th September 1917, casualties reported (on the day) for this unfortunate event were 10 killed, 28 wounded and 4 shell shock (see website for War Diary report). Two thirds of the cemetery is filled by gunners from nearby gun positions. It was nice to see 6 gunner mates (Gnr Ryan, Gnr Seale, Bdr Dowling, Shoesmith Barblett, Gnr Smith and Saddler Shipway) of the Battery lying side by side in their plots IV D5-D10), for some unknown reason one other member is buried in another part of the cemetery (Dvr Nethercott VA 11) and 3 others in nearby cemeteries (Dvr Dale, A/Bdr Ferris and Dvr Alford).

We also visited many other Cemeteries/Memorials for particular graves as these individuals were special for one reason or another

Cite Bonjean Cemetery, Armenteries, Gnr G Cameron 27 Bty, and the Regiments first Casualty, 23/1/1917

Lijssenthoek Cemetery, Poperinge, Maj Tubb Lone Pine VC winner (7 Btn AIF)

Brandhoek New British Cemetery, Brandhoek, Capt Chavasse VC and Bar (British Medical Corp)

Poelcapelle Cemetery, Poelcapelle, Pte Condon aged 14 years (Royal Irish Regiment)

Annoeullin Communal Cemetery, Annoeullin, Capt Ball VC, aged 20, RAF shot down 43 planes and 1 balloon

Heilly Station Cemetery, Mericourt L Abbe, Brigadier General Glasfurd (12 Bde AIF)

Datmoor Cemetery, Mametz, Father and son (surname Lee) both killed on the same day (A Bty 156 Bde Royal Artillery), also Lt Webber aged 68 years, he is the oldest known casualty of the Great War (South Lancashire Regiment)

Mametz Woods, 38th Welsh Division Memorial, I had to go there, otherwise Jack Gwilyn would never speak to me again, umm maybe I should have had that other beer instead..... (sorry Jack)

Peronne Communal Cemetery, Peronne, Cpl Thurston MM and 2 bars (33 Btn AIF)

Delville Wood is where the South Africans have a nice Memorial/Museum

Beaumont Hamel, the Canadians have another memorial here and have kept the original trench lines and craters intact, and just down the road the Irish have a unique memorial in the shape of a little castle

Longueval, this is where the New Zealanders have a their memorial

Bastogne, this is where the Americans fought a large tank battle during WW II

St Omer, here we visited a La Couple, a underground WW2 V2 rocket site

Brussels Military Museum, a quite impressive collection of relics, guns, planes etc from centuries of battles fought on European soil, another on the must see list!

Pubs and Bars, I visited about 5 kilo's worth.....

Well that just about covers the trip (it was going to be a couple of pages, but we did see heaps of interesting things).

I remembered the 5 P's from my Army training (Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance). This ensured my plans were executed in a precise manner, thus not much time was wasted except for the occasional geographic embarrassment on the French Motorways, these are the way to go as speed limits are 130k and that was the slow lane.....

Overall, we clocked up 7000 k's and with petrol well over \$2 a litre, luckily the little 4 cylinder achieved good k's per litre. Accommodation was a mixture of B&B's and a couple of Formula 1 chain hotels, of which provides the basics , but not as basic as H block Singo.

If you have time and the money, a trip to the battlefields is strongly recommended to both the young and old.

If you have any questions re my trip, please drop us a line or catch up with me during one of the Association social events.

Ubique

Pat Sengos

Ex BSM of 28, 113 and HQ Batteries

Below are a few photo's that will interest you, more are available on the website.



Huts Cemetery Dikkebus:

The front row contain the 6 graves of the 26 Bty personnel killed on the 11th September 1917



Grave of 23369 Gnr G.G.Cameron 27 Bty
Died 23 Jan 1917 Cite Bonjean Cemetery, Armenteries,



Mametz Woods Welsh Monument to
the 38 Division (wheres my beer Jack)



2 Div Parade Villiers-Bretonneux Memorial



Australian Memorial Park Fromelles



**Service No 24398 Shoemith Charles Cyril Barblett
Born Eaglehawk Victoria Died 13 September 1917 Aged 22**



Menin Gate Ypres Belgium