

Return to Flanders and The Somme

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I was fortunate to return to Belgium in June 2008 and also visit the battlefields of The Somme in Northern France. Visiting the battlefields can be quite a moving experience, an experience where there is an opportunity to reflect in silence as you travel through these areas.

As one walks over the ploughed fields, which were once 'No Man's Land', whether on the Somme or Ypres Battlefields, it is easy to come upon pieces of shrapnel, barbed wire, cartridge cases and other battle debris. Unexploded shells are still unearthed on a regular basis, even to this day, in what is known locally as the 'Harvest of Iron'. It is a common sight to see unexploded shells lying by the roadside after the spring and autumn ploughings, awaiting collection by the authorities.

Walking through woods, such as Delville, and Ploegsteert (Plugstreet), fought over with such terrible losses, is an eerie experience. These woods have been left almost as they were. Even today, they are still a mass of shell craters and old trenches, with many of the fallen still lying beneath your feet. There is an almost tangible silence in the depths of these and other woods which is difficult to describe. At Delville Wood, like many other woods, there was no 'front line'. Battles ebbed one way, then the other, as each side attacked and counter attacked. Shell upon shell fell relentlessly on the same spot, churning up the soil and those who occupied it in a relentless hell of artillery fire. The birds are silent in Delville Wood, not like most of the areas I had visited, where the birds whistled their familiar "*tune of peace*".

Perhaps the most lasting impression is that of the countless cemeteries on the Somme and Ypres Battlefields today, and throughout the Western Front, each with its own story to tell. Each uniform grave an individual, a son, a father, a treasured life, a name on a telegram, a loved one never to return. An individual to be talked of in years to come as being the distant uncle or grandfather, '*killed in the Great War*' - the war to end all wars.... This sentiment is always present in our minds as one walks amongst the seemingly endless rows of headstones. It is impossible to include every detail of the visits that I had made to the various cemeteries and memorials, but perhaps, the most moving was that made to Tyne Cot Cemetery, near Passchendale, where 11,952 men are buried and a further 33,000 are commemorated on the memorial wall at the back of the cemetery.

I was also fortunate enough to help a friend of mine, Johan Vandewalle, a well known tunnelling Engineer, in Belgium to deliver a larger number of metal walk tracks to those who were working at the dig in Fromelles. Johan was also responsible in the excavation of the Zonnebeke 5 which included the bodies of George Calder and John Hunter both AIF diggers KIA and who are now buried in the Buttes New British Cemetery Polygon Wood., Johan is also a man who has seen his share of digs in the Zonnebeke area, but it was very clear that this one was particularly special to him, and how twice now he has been invited to Buckingham Palace and presented to Queen Elizabeth and honoured for his archaeology work in what has become known as 'The Harvest of Bones.'.

Almost half the headstones bear Kipling's words - '*A soldier of the Great War - Known unto God*'; a body that could not be identified. Even sadder is the realisation that tens of thousands of the 500,000+ British and Commonwealth 'missing' have been denied the dignity of even an 'unidentified' burial.

Their memory is kept alive by those who seek to take a few minutes of their lives to try to understand what happened in this '*Great War*', the shadow of which can not escape touching us, even all these years on.

Steve Bloxham



Johan and me at the Aussie Bar Fromelles



Unloading the metal tracks at the Fromelles Dig



Johan loading the metal tracks for the Fromelles Dig



Me standing in Church Lane Fromelles with the dig in the background



Pozieres