

Northern Western France battlefields tour – July 2008

Arriving at Lille, a thriving modern business centre in northern France saw the start of our tour on June 1, 2008. Over the next four days we would travel the districts of Ypres, Amiens, Fromelles and Pozieres set amongst the fertile farming regions filled with crops of wheat, barley, sugarbeet, potatoes and dairying. Driving through the region were the magnificent crops which rival our irrigated crops, one cannot start to comprehend the enormous loss of life and destruction that occurred from World War 1 and later World War 2.

Battles that dragged out for a number of years where young men, some still teenagers, gave their lives like lambs to slaughter, and for what? A war where the aggressor (Germany) like many other nations before, wanted to expand their domination of the world. This led to the allied forces of the British Empire including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India and later the United States of America, joining forces to help France defend their territory from the invading German army. The battles raged on many different fronts for months on end, the to and fro of the battle lines and hand to hand battle of ground forces in conditions so hard for us to imagine.

Travelling the area and having the opportunity to see firsthand museums and areas of destruction that have been preserved, and sighting the many cemeteries and monuments to the fallen, gave us a better understanding of the tragedies that changed history.

We need to remember the time of World War 1 – 1914–1918 – there were no modern communications, machinery, and limited fighting aircraft in an area where the landscape is very flat. The battles were carried out with hand rifles, machine guns, bombs, horses, trenches and tunnels dug out by hand.

Trenches often wet, muddy and in freezing and foggy conditions with little or no cover from trees and foliage. Soldiers sent into battle only to be mowed down and killed in their thousands.

We struggled to understand the senseless loss of life of these young men, until in the village of Fromelles, we met by chance the Mayor of the town, and when asked about the huge loss of life and devastation, he replied, I quote – “We owe so much to the Allied Forces who gave so much to give us the freedom which we experience today”. If there is any justification of the war effort where hundreds of thousands of lives were shed, then the Mayor's words helped us a little to understand. The path of history would have been different had the Germans not been stopped from taking over France.

The tour took in visits to some fifteen cemeteries and memorials, (including all 5 Australian Divisional Memorials), with thousands of headstones of known and unknown soldiers. A solemn reminder of the war. The cemeteries are immaculately kept with garden plots in front of each head stone and the surrounding lawns beautifully maintained. Amongst many others, highlights included:

- St. Martin's Cathedral in Ypres, rebuilt after the war and displaying a plaque to the memory of more than one million British Empire soldiers (which includes Australian soldiers) who died in World War 1.
- 5th Australian Division Memorial at Polygon Wood.
- Menin Gate and the sounding of the Last Post which has been repeated every evening since 1928.
- Toronto Avenue Cemetery in Plugge Street woods which contains graves of only Australian soldiers.
- Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. Here in April 1918 Australian courage and determination provided a stunning victory that proved a turning point in the war. Also the visit to the museum at the Victoria School.
- Australian 2nd. Division Monument at Mont St. Quentin.
- The Australian 4th Division Memorial, less visited by tourists because of difficult access, proved rewarding after a 1.5km walk through the wheat fields to the summit.

All in all the tour was a wonderful and humbling experience with our fellow Australians and Nuffield's, giving us a greater appreciation of one of the great battles of W.W.1, in addition, the courage of the Australian soldiers who gave their all to the European Allies.

I would encourage all if given the opportunity, to visit the region and experience firsthand these areas which formed so much history and the life that we know today.

Many thanks to Jim Geltch, Murray Gmeiner and any other helpers for organising this memorable excursion.

Phil Donges

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