

Jacqueline's Visit to the WW1 Battlefields of France and Flanders, 2004

An essay by Jacqueline Winspear

*The skylarks are far behind that sang over the down;
I can hear no more those suburb nightingales;
Thrushes and blackbirds sing in the gardens of the town
In vain: the noise of man, beast, and machine prevails.*
—From "Good-Night" by Edward Thomas

Thomas was killed in action at the Battle of Arras in 1917

Standing in a field close to the town of Serre in France, I heard a skylark high in the sky above and closed my eyes. They wrote of the skylarks—in letters, and some, in poems—those soldiers that lived and died in France during the Great War. The point at which I had stopped to listen was in the middle of a field that had been, in 1916, the no-man's land between British and German front lines at the beginning of the Battle of the Somme. It was a terrible battle, one of the most devastating in a war that became, perhaps, the first defining human catastrophe of the twentieth century.

I had finally made my pilgrimage to the battlefields of The Somme and Ypres, to the places where my grandfather had seen action in the First World War, and where, in 1916 he was severely wounded during the Battle of The Somme. Though the losses during the first few days of The Somme beggar belief—some 20,000 men from Canadian and Scottish regiments died during the first hour of fighting at the Beaumont Hamel/Newfoundland Park battlefield alone—the "battle" actually lasted 142 days, with a loss of more than 1,200,000 men from Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Germany. Now, in 2004, almost 90 years after hostilities commenced in what became known as The Great War, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the terror and devastation war had wrought on a generation.

With two significant anniversaries this year—the 60th anniversary of D-Day in June, and the 90th anniversary of The Great War in August—thousands will travel to France and Belgium to pay respects to the generations that were lost. They will come to learn, to remember, and to grieve. I decided that it might be a good idea to get a jump on the crowds and make my visit early in the year, so in mid-April I joined James Powers of [The Somme Battlefield Tours](#) and his wife Annette on their first tour of the season. I'm generally more used to independent travel, but on this occasion I felt that the in-depth knowledge offered by a professional tour leader was essential, so I chose the company because they specialize in very small groups (never more than 6 people) and are flexible enough to be able to meet specific interests and needs, plus Powers is able to go to areas not accessible to the larger tours. From the moment I received my information kit, complete with maps, a reading list and a detailed history of each stop along the way, I knew I had chosen well.

James Powers, a former senior policeman, is an expert on the subject of The Great War. Following his first visit to the battlefields in his late teens, he returned time and time again on a quest to reconcile the landscape of today with the photos and maps of what, during the years 1914-18, resembled a muddy, sodden, lunar landscape. His now encyclopedic knowledge of the region means that he can tell you exactly what happened in the very spot where you are standing. More than anything, James has a deep appreciation of the emotional impact of seeing battlefield cemeteries and the former trenches, and of the need that his guests have to sometimes be alone with their thoughts. One of our group, an Australian, particularly wanted to visit an Australian cemetery that was not part of the original tour plan, so James drove him early one morning to Villers-Bretonneaux where he was able to pay his respects alone and in peace.

General Haig said that he did not have soldiers, only “civilians in khaki.” The Serre Road No2 cemetery, one of the largest of the 242 Great War battlefield cemeteries dotted across the French countryside, speaks to the bravery of those khaki-clad clerks, factory workers, bakers boys, farm hands and—sadly—schoolboys. The British and Commonwealth practice of burying the dead of war close to the battlefield differs from the large American cemeteries where soldiers’ remains were brought to one central place for burial. The distinction makes them no less poignant. Indeed, it was the sight of three such cemeteries dotted along what had been no-man’s land, that brought me to tears. When Sir Edwin Lutyens designed the cemeteries, each marked by the Cross of Sacrifice that can be seen for miles, he said that he wanted to bring to mind a battalion of soldiers marching in an English field. With plain stone non-secular markers set amid freshly mown grass and well-tended flowers, he achieved his vision. There’s a memorial at Sheffield Park, just behind the trench where the Accrington Pals went over the top on the first day of the Somme—you can see it nestling beyond the trees in a ploughed field. I stood there looking at that one cemetery for what seemed like a very long time, the famous words from one of Rupert Brooke’s poems uppermost in my thoughts:

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.*

The men of the Accrington Pals, like so many of the “pals” regiments, were not regular soldiers, but friends, neighbors and fellow workers who had enlisted together, part of a clever recruitment ploy by the British government, who knew that a man might not go forward to die for his country, but he would certainly lay down his life for his friends.

More than anything, it was the seemingly endless lists of names of the missing that will stay with me forever. I remember, when I was at school in England, we would go to church at the beginning and end of each term. The service never inspired me, so I used to read the list of names of the local boys who had died in the two world wars. There’s such a list in every church in Britain, and a war memorial in almost every town and village. You’ll see them in post offices, in stores and in other public places. It was a small town, yet the list of those who died in the

Great War seemed endless and each one was a name I knew, for the local names in small communities are easily recognizable. I wondered then, in my childish way, how a list could be so long in our small town. Yet here I was, looking at columns in the tens of thousands, names recognizable in cities, towns and villages across the globe.

Hundreds of thousands of men were listed as missing during The Great War. On this tour we visited Vimy, Tyne Cot, Thiepval and the famous Menin Gate memorial in Ypres. There's a story told, that in World War II, during the German occupation of Ypres, two German officers were returning to the town in darkness, and came across one of their own soldiers—he was drunk and urinating on the Menin Gate memorial. He was placed under immediate arrest and later shot for disrespect for the dead of war.

Killing one's own, the military execution, took the lives of over 200 British servicemen in the Great War, and during our tour we had the opportunity to hear the story of one of those young men. Avril Williams, who is British, runs a tea room and guest house in the small town of [Auchonvillers](#).

Soon after taking over the building, Avril's restoration project revealed a cellar area that was used by both the French and British as a first-aid station during the war. Though teams of archaeologists have spent years tracking the system of tunnels that run from the cellar, Avril's own research revealed that the cellar was also used as a makeshift jail for a young shell-shocked soldier. The poor boy had initially enlisted though under age. During his first major battle, he was found stunned and muddled some distance from his company, and as a result was later shot at dawn for the military crime of desertion.

Also on the tour was the former battlefield at what is now known as Newfoundland Park at Beaumont Hamel, named for the men of Newfoundland who died there. So great were the losses that, after the war, the political map was changed forever. Before the war, Newfoundland was independent, a British colony. Such a significant portion of the population was lost that many politicians considered Newfoundland unable to survive without either becoming part of the then Dominion of Canada, or part of the British Isles. Years later, the great loss of life became one of the contributory factors to Newfoundland becoming part of Canada. After the war, the Canadian government bought the 80-acre site that formed the battlefield, and put a fence around it. No attempt was made to reconstruct trenches for visitors (though a small trench has since been recreated close to the visitor center). Instead time and nature have been allowed to reclaim the area, but early post-war pilgrims to the site certainly took home a bounty of battle souvenirs. Visitors today see a verdant landscape, though one where first and second-line trenches are still clearly visible, along with shell craters and supply trenches. These were the trenches that were choked with the dead and dying, as more and more soldiers were pushed forward to go "over the top" to their deaths. In their memory, shrubs native to Newfoundland have been planted, and looking out towards the cemetery is the magnificent caribou sculpture, as if ever-watchful over those who were lost. In the distance, another sculpture, that of a Scottish soldier, commemorates men of the Scottish regiments that were killed in the area.

One of the things that really impressed me about the Canadian memorials, is that they are staffed by students on a 4-month “tour of duty” in France. I spoke to a young man from Ottawa and a girl from Prince Edward Island who were working at the Vimy memorial. They told me that competition for one of the coveted places is intense. Obviously the opportunity to spend time working in Europe is a big draw, but the students were really interested in their work, seeing it as an honor to serve.

Our final evening was spent in Ypres. We would visit the battlefields of the region the following day, but on this last evening we were to attend the Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate. I knew before I even embarked upon the tour, that this part of our journey would be an emotional one. The Menin Gate, a memorial to approximately 55,000 of the missing from the British Commonwealth who died in the Great War, was completed in 1927. The Last Post has been sounded at the memorial by members of the local fire brigade each day since November 11, 1929 (although there had been previous daily ceremonies), the only exception was during the Second World War. Knowing that the German army was advancing on Ypres, the bugle was sent out of Belgium to Britain, where the ritual was continued at the Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey. As soon as the war ended, the bugle was returned to Ypres and the service resumed. Every day in summer, visitors come in their hundreds to the Menin Gate, to listen while the names of men who died on that particular day during the Great War are read aloud. Then the Last Post is sounded and the verse said aloud:

*They shall not grow old as we who are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.*

A group of teenagers was standing next to me and—say what you like about kids and manners—this group immediately closed their eyes and repeated the final line along with everyone else, then huddled together for reassurance. Looking around me I saw people hold hands, others comforting each other, for the memory of wartime’s loss touches us all. The final day blew in blustery and cold, a fitting end, perhaps, because one reads of the cold, the mud and the slicing rain that made life hell for the men who gave their lives in The Great War. With the terrible sights and sounds of the battlefield forever etched in their memories, you could say that even those who survived gave their lives to war.

At Hill 60 we visited the wonderful old museum and coffee shop run by Michel Dennoyer, and his father before him. The museum is really a somewhat rickety old house, but it is full of artifacts from The Great War. In the center of the main room, where Dennoyer served the most deliciously satisfying hot cocoa I have ever had in my life, a bank of about sixteen or so ancient stereo-optic machines held a photographic account of the war that would probably be deemed too terrible for any book or documentary. I placed my coin into the side of one machine and, peering into the binocular-like viewer, turned the handle to look at the 3-D photographs taken

a lifetime ago. This was the terror of war that no imagination can readily comprehend. And this is the reason why the term “shell-shock” was first used in the years 1914-18.

Siegfried Sassoon, the famous Great War poet and author, wrote, “I died in hell. They called it Passchendaele.” At the Third Battle of Ypres, more usually known simply as “Passchendaele.” it is estimated that the remains of some 40,000 men—mainly British, South African, Australian and Canadian—still lie some 15-20 feet below the rich farmland. The clay soil had been aerated to such a degree by the intense shelling, that the mud was at least 15 ft. deep. If men were not killed by enemy shelling, then they drowned, their lungs filled with mud and gas.

After visiting Tyne Cot Cemetery and Memorial it was time to head towards the Channel Tunnel again for our journey back to England, though a detour had been planned for Kat, one of our group. Kat is a paramedic in south-west England and also a member of the medical corps in the Territorial Army, the “reserve” army in Britain. She wanted especially to see the grave of Captain Noel Godfrey Chavasse, a 33-year old RAMC officer who earned his place in history with bravery rewarded by two Victoria Crosses and the Military Cross. I’m glad we made the detour, for not only was it part of Kat’s pilgrimage, but this cemetery—literally squeezed between a couple of houses—was a casualty clearing station cemetery. Most of those who died there were medical staff or patients, and among the graves were those of several German doctors. When doctors were taken prisoner by the enemy—whether British Commonwealth, French or German—it was understood and accepted that they would go to work immediately, for the job of a doctor is to save the life of friend and foe alike.

The last leg of my journey was from Ashford railway station in Kent, on a small branch-line train to the hamlet where my parents live in Sussex. As the train chugged its way through the windswept Romney Marshes on this spring afternoon, I looked out across the land and watched as newborn lambs gambled in the sun. I was trying to reconcile everything I had seen and felt. My grandfather was still removing shrapnel from his wounded legs until the day he died at age 77. He had lung damage from mustard gas and was shell-shocked, though, like many “old soldiers” he had returned from war and life was expected to resume as normal, his work as a soldier and stretcher-bearer behind him. How must it be, I wondered, for those who see battle, to suddenly be at home, away from the terror of war? One minute they are in the middle of the fray, and the next sitting down to dinner with the family. During the years 1914-1918, the sound of cannonade could clearly be heard from the coastal towns of Kent and Sussex. How sad and strange that must have been, for mothers and fathers, wives and sweethearts, to know that the ones they loved were facing those guns.

My parents picked me up from the station and, because I had a craving for some good old British fish and chips before flying back to California the following day, we went along to the nearest “chippie” in a neighboring village. By chance we parked the car alongside the local war memorial. I stopped in my tracks. It was the list of names. Almost seventy from this one small community. Five boys from one family, three from another, four here, two there. A generation lost.

They shall not grow old as we who are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them.