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Musical Box -
Writing a
wrong



Deborah -
An obsession



All's well
with England;
Poulton's on
his game



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From the Editor

The World Wide Web and the resources it offers to researchers has brought us all enormous benefits which mean that we can all prepare our material far more easily and to a far higher standard.

But it is that word “easily” of which we must beware: someone once said that getting information from the Web was like trying to get a glass of water from the Niagara Falls. Not only is there too much information but we can never be sure of its actual source. Recently I was forwarded a story about the origination of the “Last Post” and a poem purporting to be the words inspired by it... all good heart stirring stuff except it attributed it all to an incident in the American Civil War.

Five minutes was sufficient to show that the original sender had taken an American web-site posting and simply changed the word “Taps” for “Last Post”. I can only assume that they were anxious to be able to sex up their next delivery at the Menin Gate but in so doing they tainted the whole affair with dishonesty and hence undermined the very thing they were trying to accomplish.

The Web is a powerful tool in the right hands - but it is also very dangerous in the wrong ones. One only has to view a number of web-sites dealing with any topic on battlefields [especially WW1] and one rapidly becomes aware of common wording and phrases. It is all too tempting to copy another web-site and thus enabling for mistakes and complete distortions of the truth to become accepted as historical fact.

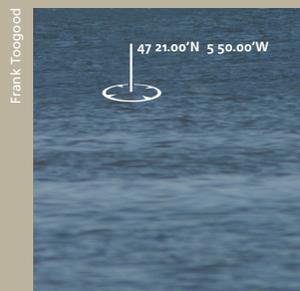
Assignment 6 of validation requires us to take three sources and analyse them. It is a valuable lesson for us all and one swiftly realises that the wealth of information from the web is both a blessing and a scourge. Easy access to incorrect facts creates instant experts whose uncorrected pronouncements when made publicly available become almost impossible to refute.

Truth, like freedom, needs to be guarded all the time.

Mike St Maur Sheil
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designed by Frank Toogood.
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THE BATTLE FOR THE ATLANTIC

by Mike St Maur Sheil

Battlefields are generally simple places to define with well-described features, numerous eye-witness accounts and modern maps to enable us to describe our location. But a 'battlefield' of empty, heaving sea when all that one has to define the culmination of weeks of battle is simply 47.21N, 05.50W? Now there is a problem 'on tour'!

For the individual sailor his view of events is generally restricted to his own fighting station aboard ship and even those in command may see little other than a green blip on a radar screen. He faces two enemies, his fighting foe who he will probably never see until some crashing explosion reveals his presence, and the sea which he can always see and feel and which, given the slightest opportunity, will destroy him.

And yet the ruthless conflict on anonymous and hence unvisited 'battlefields' such as the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans is one which helped determine the outcome of two World Wars. So how does one 'guide' them? Books and charts are indeed an essential start but as every guide knows, it is the individual stories of the men who took part which give life to any tour.

In both World Wars the submarine blockade of essential supplies from the Americas was a critical factor in the final Allied victory. During WWII the battle of the Atlantic was effectively the longest running area of conflict and primarily it was about the balance of tonnage. At the height of WWII, Britain needed to secure trans-Atlantic supplies of 1m. tons of material a week to sustain the war effort and the Axis needed to disrupt those supplies.

In the event over 3,500 merchant ships and more than 30,000 merchant crew, plus 175 warships, were lost to enemy action whilst



Deutsches U-Boot Museum, Cuxhaven. www.dubm.de

Vereran crew members on the forecastle of U-214. In the middle is Oblt.z.S. Fischler von Treuberg who was killed cammanding U-445 on 24/8/1944 when it was sunk by HMS Louis here:



the Axis lost over 780 U boats. During the height of the battle between June 1940 and the end of 1943 the balance see-sawed back and forth as each side made technical advances - ASDIC, Enigma, long-range aircraft, Lend-lease ships and merchant aircraft carriers [MAC ships] on the Allied side were countered by things such as Metox, 'Milk-Cows', Schnorkels, and 'Wolf-packs'.

Whilst one cannot underestimate the importance of the American industrial effort which was able to build over 30M. tons of 'Liberty' ships to counter the

14M. tons of shipping sunk by the U-boats, the simple fact is that as Rear Admiral Leonard Murray, Commander-in-Chief Canadian North Atlantic, remarked "...the Battle of the Atlantic was not won by any Navy or Air Force, it was won by the courage, fortitude and determination of the British and Allied Merchant Navy." And one of those men was a young man from Henley-on-Thames. Born into a family of 8 boys and one girl, Ron Buckett left school at 14 and found work as a delivery boy for a laundry, starting work at 0430. His father had served in the Army in India and then served in

the Ox & Bucks LI in 1914-1918 when he was gassed. Ron recalls him with respect - *"he was a severe man who took his belt of with a purpose in mind. But we were well educated - we all had a good schooling and knew our three Rs. I loved the poetry and still remember what I learnt"*.

Life was not easy: vegetables from the family allotment were swapped for scrag-ends of meat from the local butcher and in 1943 when he was 17 he volunteered for the Navy without telling his father. He had seen the sea only once before whilst camping on Beachy Head with the Sea Cadets and the first time he actually went to sea was on the ferry to Belfast where he joined HMS Louis, an Ewart Class diesel electric ship built in the US and which in the Royal Navy were known as 'Captain' Class frigates.

In total there were 78 'Captain' Class vessels designated as destroyer escorts and they were named after naval captains of the Napoleonic era: delivered in 1942-3 they typically took about 5 weeks to construct and another 10 weeks to commission before delivery. They were sailed over from the USA with skeleton crews and then fitted out to Admiralty specifications in Belfast.

Ron's first experience of real sea life was as a Boy Seaman as HMS Louis did her sea trials in the Irish Sea and the Clyde. A ferocious Hebridean storm revealed that the Captain, Cmdr. J P Majendie, who Ron bluntly states 'was as mad as a March hare' did not know the meaning of fear unlike Ron who admits to his sheer terror when at the height of the storm they had to put about. The seas managed to lift the 3" forward gun turret off its mountings and Ron simply sought

relief in death - *"I was sea-sick for two weeks - I just wanted to die"*.

But perhaps the worst moment came when he managed to pour a mug of steaming hot 'ki' - the hot drink of unique to the Royal Navy which is made by boiling up chunks of cocoa carved off solid slabs of the stuff - down the Captain's sleeve and immediately learnt some new words.

It was whilst working up their Asdic off Campbelltown, using



Ron Burdett's Collection

HMS Louis, Ron's frigate that sank U-445

grenades to 'attack' the submarine that life improved as the Quarter Master started to train him as a B'swains Mate which meant that he worked on the bridge as a helmsman and so commenced active service in early 1944 escorting convoys across the North Atlantic until the summer of 1944 when Louis was an escort on D-Day saving the men aboard the L.C. Susan B Anthony which was mined off Omaha beach.

They then patrolled in the Bay of Biscay and on 24th August about 80 miles off St Nazaire whilst Ron was on the bridge

manning the engine telegraph's they obtained an Asdic contact and in the resultant attack he *"saw the stern of the submarine rear up and then disappear"*. U-445, commanded by Oblt. Rupprecht Fishler, Graf von Treuberg had been sunk with all 52 hands in position 47.21N, 05.50W. 14 days before U-445 had shot down a Wellington from RAF 172 Sqn. which was a specialist long range anti-submarine squadron who developed the technique of stealth attacks at night on surfaced submarines using a combination

of radar and powerful searchlights and whose motto was *"We ambush the ambushers"*.

Then in mid October HMS Louis found herself as part of the escort group for Convoy JW61 herding for Russia: the force included three escort carriers and the cruiser HMS Dido. At first very heavy weather slowed their progress and once north of Bear Island as they headed into the Barents Sea HF/DF detection equipment picked up radio transmissions from a wolf-pack of no less than 19 U-Boats. Ron recalls the problems that



the Asdic operator experienced due to the layering of different water temperatures meeting but although the U-Boats fired quite a few acoustic torpedoes at the ships the deployment of 'Foxyer' decoy noise making equipment meant that they reached the Kola Inlet on the 28th October without loss.

Three days later the escort group was at sea again seeking to clear the route for the convoys return but HMS Mounsey was struck by a torpedo which killed 11 of her crew but otherwise their return to the UK was without loss. Patrols in the Irish Sea and North Atlantic with one more Russian convoy were ended when the Louis was sent to Hull where her diesel electric engines were used to provide power for the bomb shattered docks.

Ron was then transferred to the Far East to serve aboard a Fleet minesweeper, HMS Maenad. His time in the Far East was clearly no picnic as they spend 8 months on almost constant mine clearance - Rangoon, Singapore, Jahore, Penang, Palambang, Kalimantan.

It was here that he was introduced to the time honoured lower deck tradition of broaching the rum ration simply using hot water and some ingenuity, thus discovering why the man who draws the ration is often known as the 'bubbly bosun'! He was in the landing party which, armed with Lanchester SMG's, stormed ashore to liberate the Seychelles only to be confronted by the locals armed with an old wind up gramophone playing Bing Crosby! It was clearly a successful trip as they returned to Colombo with an old car lashed to the quarter-deck and he then spent a celebratory 14 day leave period up in the mountains

and visited the extraordinary rock fortress and royal palace of Sigiriya and was amazed to find that they had red, double-decker buses in the streets of Colombo.

It was small wonder that he nearly decided to stay and join the Malay Police but the death of his father meant he felt he should come home and help support his Mother. In fact all the seven sons that went to war returned safely.

So what happened to this experienced young sailor? Like so many men returning from the war he married and in 1963 took a job working on an estate in Oxfordshire from which he only 'retired' in December 2008 at the age of 83! And even that retirement appears nominal as he still works most days doing odd jobs which include dry stone walling - a metre of local dry stone wall means moving about a ton of stones - so that like Sir Christopher Wren, if you want to

see his memorial you only have to look around our village to see where his hands have carved stone and built walls.

There are few of his war-time comrades left but he can still 'guide' a pretty graphic tour of the North Atlantic and his description of life as an 18 year old steering a plunging destroyer listening to the eerie Asdic 'ping' revealing the lurking enemy is rather different from the modern perception of sailors grieving for their lost iPods.

'Heart of oak' may seem a cliché but as the ditty goes;

"Any sap can make a rate. But only God makes a Boatswain's Mate." ■

Story and photography by Mike St Maur Sheil unless otherwise stated. U-Boat photo thanks to Horst Bredow at the Deutsches U-Boot Museum, Cuxhaven. www.dubm.de



**Left: Photographs of Ron and HMS Maenad together with this medals
Above: Ron some sixty years later**

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

GLOBAL WARMING AND THE CWGC

by Mike St Maur Sheil

As guides, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is one of those organizations we think we all know about and we really don't question its activities. So it was good to be jolted out of my complacent 'know-it-all' attitude whilst attending the recent inauguration of the Pheasant Wood Military Cemetery at Fromelles when I was surprised by the statement that this was the first CWGC cemetery to be created since the completion of the Second World War cemeteries.



Because I was wrong in my assumption that the CWGC still has responsibility for those who die in military conflicts: the simple fact is that all conflicts since WWII have been regarded as purely British military or in the case of the Korean War, United Nations operations and hence not the responsibility of the Commonwealth War Graves

Commission. Today all British military deaths are the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.

The CWGC only commemorates those who died during service or associated causes during the two World Wars which number almost 1.7M Commonwealth service-men and women.



These consist of 935,000 identified casualties and almost 212,000 unidentified individuals in 2,500 cemeteries world-wide as well as 760,000 names on memorials to the missing. Additionally the CWGC is contracted to maintain 40,000 graves of other countries and more than 25,000 non-war and civilian graves in an amazing

23,000 locations in 150 countries.

As we are all aware, the original concept was to create cemetery environments which would give a sense of peace and serenity. To achieve this Sir Edwin Lutyens sought the advice of the horticulturist, Gertrude Jekyll and it was her usage

of traditional English plants which did so much to create the “country garden” style of the First World War cemeteries with their roses and herbaceous borders with variations to accommodate the casualties’ countries. As most of these are along the Western Front whose climate is not too dis-similar to that found in England, this means that they could sustain such planting but during the 2nd World War the increasing number of cemeteries in other climatic and pedological regions presented the CWGC with some interesting challenges.

Whilst the style of planting is the same, different grasses and plants are used in different areas and as the CWGC operates in such an huge range of global environments it has developed a unique expertise in horticultural activities around the world. In recent years, reports from its teams around the world have left the CWGC in no doubt but that world climate is changing: temperatures are generally rising, growing seasons are changing and weather systems are generally becoming more erratic.



Burmuda Grass (East Africa)

All of which has huge implications for the future appearance of cemeteries: grasses and plants will need to be varied to take account of new conditions and there is a likelihood of new pests and diseases and the problems likely to be experienced are best summed up by the UK Climate Impacts Programme at Oxford University which predicts: “...heritage gardens may face particular difficulties in preserving a traditional display of plants as

climatic conditions change...” gardeners will need to adapt their planting and garden management practices to ensure survival of their gardens in the changing conditions.

As an immediate response the CWGC has been working with Prof Arnell at Reading University’s Walker Institute for Climate System Research to look at ways in which the CWGC can seek to mitigate the impact its activities have upon the environment and how it can best adapt to the likely consequences of climate change.

At first sight what is essentially a gardening operation might not seem to have a huge impact upon the environment but one has only to consider the social and political implications of using irrigation systems in areas where water is critically short to appreciate the problems.

And water - either too much or too little - is a real issue. Recent summers have seen an increase in drought conditions, especially in Europe, and many trees are already showing signs of stress and there is



Drought (Dely Ibrahim)

a noticeable increase in certain pests and diseases. At the same time an increase in short periods of heavy rainfall has led to the regular flooding of some cemeteries with consequent damage to plants landscaping and sometimes, even structure. Rising temperatures also mean that insects become active earlier in the year and whilst increased levels of carbon dioxide means that plants may grow faster their leaves also tend to contain less protein: insects

therefore need to eat more of the leaves to obtain their food so their impact is greater.

In short the climatic patterns, which prevailed when these cemeteries were established around 95 and 60 years ago, are changing and the CWGC has been swift to accept that there may have to be a change in the planting practices which will be managed in such a way that hopefully the visitor will not really notice any difference.

To this end the CWGC initiated trial landscaping at four cemeteries near the Franco-Belgian border namely Les Moeres Communal Cemetery, Oostduinkerke Communal Cemetery, Oye-Plage Communal Cemetery and Railway Chateau Cemetery to examine the way in which drought tolerant grasses and plants survive in colder and wetter conditions than those they normally experience.

The most radical trial was at Railway Chateau where the entire cemetery was 'dry-landscaped'. The CWGC does have similar cemeteries in



Oostduinkerke (West Flanders)

other regions such as North Africa but according to Derek Parker, the CWGC's Director of Horticulture, the public response to this site was initially quite critical but the latest comments are more accepting of this trial which is currently being reviewed at the end of the first year. Overall the intention is not merely to establish appropriate plant and grass selections for future plantings but also to raise awareness of the issues

and the possible solutions the CWGC might employ and to gauge public willingness to accept the changes implied by these solutions .

Recent government statements to the effect that only scientific research which has a clear financial reward should receive government funding has reverberated around every university but the CWGC are confident that despite receiving 80% of their budget from the MoD, their long term funding is secure and that it will continue to fulfil its function as admirably as it has done in the past.

As guides, cemeteries play an enormous part in our delivery on battlefield tours. The impact of global warming upon these familiar places will be something which many will no doubt find hard to accept but surely the fact is that it will be far better to have updated landscaping which will still represent the care and attention that the CWGC has always taken. In addition it will give those of us who lead school parties an opportunity to raise the issues of global warming



Tree disease (Cassino)

and hence extend the educational impact which in turn will increase the importance of such places to all those who visit. ■

Story and main photograph by Mike St Maur Sheil.
Photographs on this page are courtesy of the CWGC.
www.cwgc.org

LEADERSHIP AT RORKE'S DRIFT by Lucy Cooper

The victory at Rorke's Drift has gone down in British Imperial history as one of the most important engagements. A tiny, outnumbered outpost repelled a sustained Zulu offensive which made for patriotic tales of British might and resilience that captivated the world over. Besides the heroics of the British that Rorke's Drift is best remembered for; there were many other pertinent dynamics beyond heroism that tilted the balance favourably towards a British victory. An examination of the circumstances which lead to the battle, an analysis of the leadership of the opposing forces, the ground covered, and discrepancies in equipment and training will explain more precisely why the British were victors over the Zulu at Rorke's Drift in 1879.

The victory at Rorke's Drift has gone down in British Imperial history as one of the most important engagements. A tiny, outnumbered outpost repelled a sustained Zulu offensive which made for patriotic tales of British might and resilience that captivated the world over. Besides the heroics of the British that Rorke's Drift is best remembered for; there were many other pertinent dynamics beyond heroism that tilted the balance favourably towards a British victory. An examination of the circumstances which lead to the battle, an analysis of the leadership of the opposing forces, the ground covered, and discrepancies in equipment and training will explain more precisely why the British were victors over the Zulu at Rorke's Drift in 1879.

The circumstances that precluded the battle of Rorke's Drift go some way to highlighting and differentiating the motivations of each side. On 22nd January 1879 Prince Dabulamanzi KaMpande's force stood over 4,000 strong,¹ having been reserve during the devastation of the British troops at Isandlwana, his men pushed towards the Natal border thirsty for loot and a small taste of victory. The *ibutho* (regiment) was made up of older, experienced warriors who, on the summons of King Cetshwayo, had left their wives and families to

return to their military duties to defend Zululand against Lord Chelmsford's invasion.² The Zulu had covered many miles already on limited food. Dabulamanzi, well aware of Cetshwayo's orders to stay within Zululand borders, disobeyed protocol and crossed the Mzinyathi River.³ One might surmise from these circumstances that the advancing Zulu forces were verging on renegade opportunists. Indeed, the ridicule of Dabulamanzi by his tribesmen subsequent to that day supports this impression.⁴ However, one cannot reduce the professionalism of the Zulu forces so scathingly. On the contrary, the evidence testified by the likes of Chard and Bromhead in their reports revere the Zulu efforts as formidable and terrifying.⁵ Nevertheless, factors such as the exhaustion of the warriors, the prohibited territory they were fighting in, combined with the strategic insignificance of the outpost must have been crucial instigators for the Zulu withdrawal. By comparison, the British had no choice but to fight; 'like rats in a hole.'⁶

Alongside circumstances and motivations, leadership was of paramount significance to the outcome of Rorke's Drift in 1879. This was no formal clash of great, established commanders. Rather the battle collided an undistinguished Lieutenant Chard and the head-strong Zulu Prince

who had no direct tactical motive but to 'wash the spears of his boys'⁷ in the blood of the British. Their obscurity as military commanders however, did not lessen their impact on the outcome of the battle. To assess command and control in the British lines Edmund Yorke uses 'modern British military doctrine', breaking down events into examples of the key principles of war.⁸ One might argue, however, that much of the action was not planned or consciously driven upon the battle tactically by the commanders but actually the battle dictated it out of necessity. A more appropriate measure of command and control that exposes the dexterity of the commanders' capability is the decisions made, the tactical awareness demonstrated by these decisions, and the cohesion of the troops in performing these command decisions.

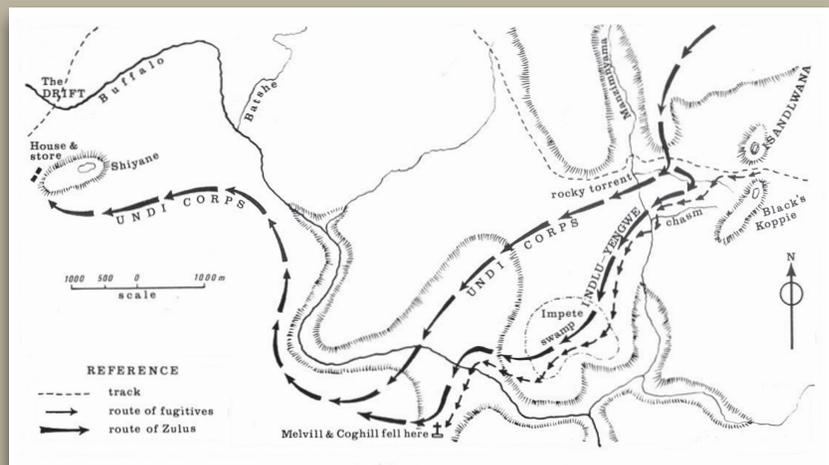
W.J.Wood and A.Greaves pontificate about the ambiguity behind whose decision it was to stay and fight at the drift; was it Dalton's⁹ or Chard's?¹⁰ These pontifications seek to undermine the sense of Chard's control over the situation. It is worth expressing here that a crucial element of good command is using experienced resources effectively; moreover, it would have been a natural response of the former-Sergeant Dalton to

offer assistance to support the comparatively inexperienced Lieutenant. Regardless of this ambiguity, it is evident from the rest of the battle that Chard was the decision-maker of the day, and a good one at that. It was Chard's initiative to bisect the yard with a new barricade of biscuit boxes.¹¹ This decision was taken under great pressure whilst the NCOs, officers and men of Stevenson's NNC Company fled the position leaving Chard's forces depleted from 300 to 140.¹²

his men. Chard's cool-headedness enabled him to maintain a grip of his decision-making faculties and a grip of his men. His decisions were sound ones because they were not only timely, but they also got the basics of defensive action against Zulu tactics correct. Keith Grint goes beyond this assertion stating that '...the Zulus lost the war primarily because their martial rather than their fine arts were inadequate. In other words because their organizational tactics were inadequate.'¹⁴

Isandlwana. One account more forthcoming on Zulu leadership is provided by Adrian Greaves. He tempers our expectations with a pre-emptive acknowledgement of the potential 'factual errors or omissions' of his findings.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Greaves discovered that during the initial attacks on the hospital 'the Zulu were not organized and their mounted chief, Dabulamanzi, now sheltering behind a tree, seemed unable to coordinate attacks even though he was less than 100

The route if the fugitives and the Zulu advance to Rorke's Drif



This demonstrates incredible foresight on Chard's part; not only could the men fall back to a smaller, secure compound if one building should fall, but it also established a killing gap for the Martini-Henry rifle to deliver its devastation on the advancing Zulus.

Other decisions throughout the battle such as the timing to withdraw to the inner defences, the building of the internal mealie bag citadel inside the storehouse compound, retrieving the water cart at 24.00Hrs¹³ were all shrewdly made by Chard under extraordinary pressure and were executed bravely and cohesively by

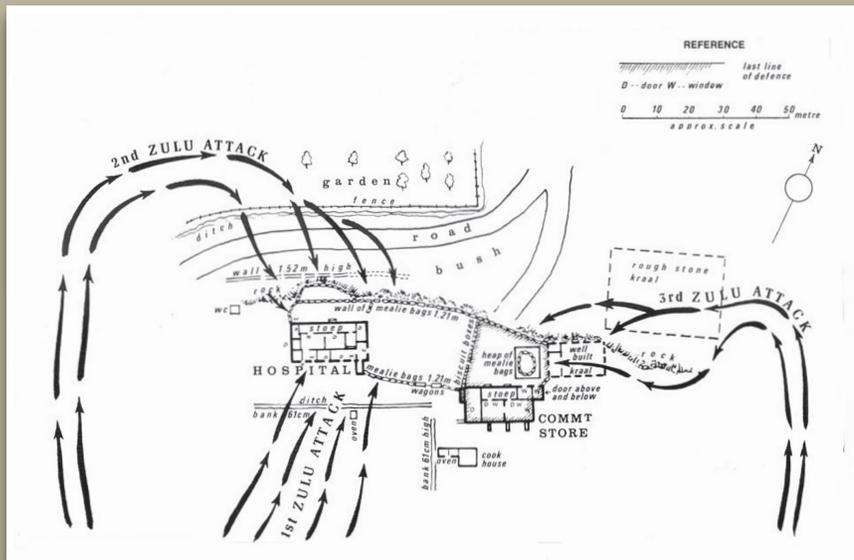
Finding sources on Dabulamanzi's command and control are nigh on impossible to come by. Donald R. Morris observes 'he had nothing to show for his disobedience but his losses. Only his blood relationship to Cetshwayo would save him from punishment',¹⁵ potentially suggesting that a low profile was kept by the wayward Prince following the battle. This perhaps explains the lack of historical material to judge him by. Moreover, undoubtedly the defeated side felt no compunction to recount the tale to the same prolific level the victorious British had, particularly in reaction to the embarrassment that was

yards'¹⁷ from the objective. If this was truly so, Dabulamanzi was disregarding customary Zulu command practice of placing himself centrally, far back with eyes on the enemy position. However, it was not customary Zulu command practice to assault such a position, so Dabulamanzi might have been acting under neither rigorous guidelines nor gathered experience. In juxtaposition to Greaves' findings Edmund Yorke speaks highly of the initial Zulu assault; judging that 'aside from the folly of attacking a defended post, the tactics of Dabulamanzi and his indunas (commanders) were

relatively sound.¹⁸ Yorke gives credit to Dabulamanzi's 'testing of the weakest line of defence' and 'the posting of snipers on top of the Oskarberg Mountain.'¹⁹ With such conflicting reports, none of which seem to be based upon substantial evidence, it seems unfair to judge Dabulamanzi's command and control on specific command decisions during the battle. What can be assessed are more general and overriding decisions he made: Firstly, the overall decision to contravene Cetshwayo's orders indicates an improper lack of discipline unbecoming of a responsible induna, and secondly, the apparent misjudgment of

destroy the relatively tiny post the 24th defended. Ian Knight explains the difference in weaponry well; B company was armed with the Martini-Henry rifle which 'threw a heavy .450 calibre unjacketed lead slug to maximum range of over 1,000 yards', the bayonet was 'an 18-in. socket... whose wicked reach had earned it the nickname 'the lungier'.²⁰ At closequarter fighting the bayoneted Martini-Henry rifle outreached the Zulu stabbing spear by an arms-length.²¹ This fact was to prove essential to British survival, as Knight indicates 'the Zulus were... capable of manoeuvring very rapidly,

had access to some sort of firearm'.²³ Many of these firearms were antiquated Napoleonic systems such as the Brown Bess Flintlock, some warriors had the more modern Enfield percussion rifle yet these weapons could not rival the Martini-Henry in accuracy or reach. There was no weapons-handling training for rifles in the Zulu army; few Zulus could have been accomplished marksmen.²⁴ Furthermore, the 'clandestine gun-trade' available to the Zulu rarely sold 'good quality powder, ammunition or spares'²⁵ and David Rattray details how the Zulu often made their own shot.²⁶



The defence of Rorke's Drift

attacking a fortified defensive position and a failure to use Zulu dominance in numbers effectively.

Beyond the good decision-making that sustained the British at Rorke's Drift and their determination to survive, the weaponry at their disposal certainly goes far in answering why the Zulus were unable to

but were dependent on closing hand-to-hand to overwhelm their enemy.²² The British bayonet's reach deprived the Zulu's ability to get close enough to its enemy to exploit its true fighting prowess.

The Zulus were not limited to their assegais however, Knight estimates 'as many as two thirds of the Zulu army in 1879

It is unsurprising therefore that the snipers up in the Shiyane Hills, 300 yards away, were unable to decimate the North-facing British engaging the Zulu from the Southern shrubbery. On the contrary, Chard's men were well supplied and trained. With the luxury of being Chelmsford's supply chain depot, the British defenders of Rorke's Drift had an

estimated 20,000 rounds at their disposal and made full use of this resource: Out of this mass of rounds, only 800 remained unfired by daylight on the 23rd January 1879.²⁷ Donald R. Morris notes most of the men had 'fired several hundred rounds', such a rapid rate of fire had been maintained for so long that 'Here and there an overheated barrel glowed dully in the dark'.²⁸ It is clear that if the Zulus had had matching firepower and training as that of the British troops and equal ammunition supplies, the outcome of the battle would certainly have been different, regardless of their motivations, ground covered or leadership.

The motivations of the British and the Zulus at Rorke's Drift in 1879 were driven by the circumstances that lead to their meeting there on 22nd January. Sources supporting the intensity and proficiency of the fighting are equally met; the Zulus were notorious for their fierce Shaka approach and the heroics of Chard's men are still regaled worldwide even today. It is impossible and improper to claim one side's soldier fought better or more bravely than the other side's warrior. However, it was the British superior use of ground for defences, better weapons technology and training, and ammunition supply that gave them a better chance of survival. Above survival, it was beyond a question of firepower that delivered the actual victory at Rorke's Drift to the British, it was a question of leadership. From the onset of the Zulu approach until the end of the battle, Chard consistently and assiduously administrated and coordinated his men and resources more effectively than Dabulamanzi; by means of quick and timely decision-making

coupled with cooperation and diligence from his troops. Tried and tested British defensive training triumphed over the naivety of the Zulu leadership as it struggled to adapt and overcome the new breed of combat warfare it would now subsequently face. Chelmsford and his troops brought with them to Zululand tactical ability that would render many of the old Zulu skills and resources redundant. ■

In 2009 Lucy Cooper, GBG Member 225, swapped her hockey stick for an SA-80 and in December has just been commissioned into the Intelligence Corps. This essay, inspired by David Rattray's description of the battle, was written for her Sandhurst War Studies module and earned her the top mark of 92%.

- 1 Knight, *Rorke's Drift 1879 'Pinned like rats in a hole'* (London, Osprey, 1996), p.37
- 2 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, pp.20-23
- 3 *ibid*
- 4 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, p.32.
- 5 A. Greaves, *Rorke's Drift*, (London, Cassell, 2002), pp.353-385
- 6 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, p.3
- 7 R. Gerrard, *The Gerrard Collection – The Anglo Zulu War and The Anglo Boer War Inspirational Stories from the Lectures of Robert Gerrard*, Disc 3
- 8 E. Yorke, *ZULU! The Battle for Rorke's Drift 1879* (Stroud, empus, 2005), pp.186-198
- 9 W.J. Wood, *Leaders and Battles – The Art of Military Leadership* (Novato, Presidio, 1984), pp.125-126

- 10 Greaves, *Rorke's Drift*, pp.106-111
- 11 D.R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears – The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation* (New York, Konecky & Konecky, 1965), p.402
- 12 *ibid*
- 13 Morris, *Washing of the Spears*, pp.389-420
- 14 K. Grint, *The Arts of Leadership*, (Oxford, OUP, 2001), p.179
- 15 Morris, *Washing of the Spears*, p.418
- 16 Greaves, *Rorke's Drift*, p.9
- 17 Greaves, *Rorke's Drift*, p.116
- 18 Yorke, *ZULU!*, p.129
- 19 *bid*
- 20 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, pp.26-27
- 21 Yorke, *ZULU!*, p.116
- 22 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, p.31
- 23 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, p.33
- 24 D. Rattray, *The Day of the Dead Moon – The Story of the Anglo-Zulu War 1879, Part 1 Disc 1*
- 25 Knight, *Rorke's Drift*, p.33
- 26 D. Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon, Part 4 Disc 4*
- 27 Greaves, *Rorke's Drift*, pp.134-135
- 28 Morris, *Washing of the Spears*, p.414.

The Editor would like to thank the South African Military History Society for providing the maps. <http://samilitaryhistory.org>

“MUSICAL BOX” – WRITING A WRONG

By Steve Smith

The first Tank .v. Tank action at Villers Bretonneux on 24th April 1918 is well documented but there is also a lesser-known action that was fought by a British tank “Musical Box” on 8th August 1918 during the Battle of Amiens. There are a number of books which describe this action but they all contain what I consider to be a significant error which I would like to correct.

But first a brief overview to the battle of Amiens which is generally considered the turning point for the Allies on the Western Front and was fought between the 8th and 11th August 1918. It was designed to counteract the German advances that had been made by the Germans after their massive offensive,

which had started on 21st March 1918 that had almost pushed the BEF right to the outskirts of Amiens. This city was of strategic importance to the allies because of its railway network. Had the Germans been able to capture this supply route it would have seriously hampered the Allies ability to wage war.



A counter attack was planned that would involve American, Australian, British, Canadian and French divisions under the overall command of Haig who directed Henry Rawlinson to plan and prepare the offensive. It would also involve a ten-division attack on a ten-mile front from Morlancourt in the north to Hargicourt in the

south. Surprise was essential as the majority of the fighting would be carried out by the Australians and the Canadians who were respected by both friend and foe alike for their determined ferocity in battle. Had the Germans got wind that these two elements were being concentrated in this area then it could have gone very differently on the day.

There was an even bigger gamble for this offensive as Rawlinson was given virtually all of the Allied armour totalling to around 600 British and French tanks. This included 72 Whippet and 342 Mark V and V* tanks all of which were the newer variants of the tanks used in 1916 and 1917. Rawlinson also had 2,070 artillery pieces and 800 aircraft. The German sector chosen was defended by 20,000 soldiers and they were outnumbered 6 to 1 by the attacking troops. The plan relied on the infantry and tanks acting in co-operation and there would be no preliminary bombardment with Rawlinson relying on a creeping barrage as the troops advanced.

The battle was a major success for the hard pressed Allies and by the end of the first day they had advanced nine miles into the German lines capturing well over 13,000 men and around 200 artillery pieces. It prompted Ludendorff to write of the battle that it,

'... was the black day of the German Army in this war. ... The 8th of August put the decline of that [German] fighting power beyond all doubt. ... The war must be ended.'

and indeed after the battle the Allies began an advance which only halted with the Armistice on 11th November 1918.



Whippet Mk A seen in 1918

This sculpture is one of four different tanks of the Great War that are an integral part of the Tank Memorial in Pozières

This map gives you an overview of the area where Arnold and his crew advanced and shows you the positions mentioned in the accounts used in my article



As mentioned the battle included the use of tanks on a massive scale. One of the newer versions of this weapon was the Whippet Mark A which was faster than the earlier, heavy tanks and was intended as a cavalry style weapon. It only carried four machine guns and had a crew of three, one commander, a driver and a gunner meaning that the commander acted as the second gunner. It weighed 14.2 tons, had 5-14 mm armour was powered by 2 x 45hp Tylor JB Petrol Engines with 318 litres of fuel and had a maximum speed of just over 8 m.p.h., which was extremely fast for WWI standards!

“Musical Box” was one of 72 Whippets sent into action that day and was crewed by Lieutenant Clement B. Arnold, Private Christopher Ribbans (Gunner) and Private William J Carnie (Driver) of the 6th Battalion Tank Corps. This last name is where I suggest virtually every account is at fault in spelling his name incorrectly as ‘Carney’. We will come onto why this was so later on in the article.

The story starts with the 6th Battalion advancing in support of the Australians at 04.20hrs, zero hour, when Arnold and his crew advanced to the south side of the railway at Villers Bretonneux and advanced past Australian infantry and Mark V tanks. Arnold takes up the story,

‘After 2000 yards in this direction I found myself to be the leading machine, owing to the others having become ditched, etc. To my immediate front I could see more Mark V tanks being followed very closely by Australian infantry. About this time we came under direct shellfire from a 4 field-gun field battery of which I could see the flashes between Abancourt and Bayonvillers. Two Mark V tanks, on my right front, were knocked out. I saw clouds of smoke coming out of these machines and the crews evacuated them. The infantry following the heavy machines were suffering casualties from this battery. I turned half-left and ran diagonally across the front of this battery at a distance of 600 yards. Both my guns were able to fire on the battery in spite of which they got off about eight rounds at me..’

Arnold and his crew were engaged here by elements of the 27th Foot Artillery and he ran level with a belt of trees, using them as cover, then turned right and took out the guns from the rear, Arnold stating that the gunners, numbered around thirty, were engaged and, ‘Gunner Ribbans and I accounted for the whole lot.’

After this initial action Arnold got back on track and caught up with the advancing tanks and infantry stopping at a railway siding NNW of Guillaucourt. [Square 8d on map] Here he offered assistance to an Australian Lieutenant who was promptly shot in the shoulder. After briefly reporting what he had done to Major Rycroft (Cavalry) and Captain Stachan OC B Coy 6/Battalion, he noticed that a number of tanks were bunching up so he opted to move onwards proceeding on a course parallel with the railway. He then came across forward elements of the



Author's Collection

‘I moved up out of sight and waited until he topped the bridge...’

This is the bridge across the railway situated between Harbonnieres and Rosieres en Santerre where Arnold ambushed the lorry.

2/Dragoons that were deploying patrols into the area. One of two patrols came under fire and he assisted with suppressing fire killing three or four Germans.

The second patrol was seen to pursue a number of the enemy and this group were fired upon by some of these men who turned and stood their ground. One rider and horse were felled and the rest deployed to the right and dismounted. Arnold stated,

‘...where they came under fire from the enemy, who had now taken up a position on the railway bridge, and were firing over the parapet, inflicting one or two casualties. I ran the machine up until we had a clear view of the bridge and killed four of the enemy with one long burst, the other two running across the bridge and on down the opposite slope out of sight.’



Having assisted the cavalry, and having witnessed a burning train being pulled away three quarters of a mile away, he continued eastwards still running parallel with the railway. They then came across a small valley between Bayonvillers and Harbonnieres with enemy hutments and the enemy troops preparing to leave. Arnold and Ribbans did not hesitate and opened fire on the poor hapless enemy. After this engagement Ribbans actually gets out of the tank to count how many Germans they have just killed.

Here I would like to add that of all the accounts I have read regaling Arnold's one tank battle none is better, to my mind, than the one written by G. Murray Wilson in his book "Fighting Tanks – An account of The Royal Tank Corps in action 1916-1919", published in 1929. It is a cross between a 'Boy's Own/Ripping Yarns' story that is scathing of the enemy, where I would suggest that the wounds were still pretty raw eleven years onwards! Here is an extract from the book recounting what happened next.

"There were probably about 600 Bosches, and yet Gunner Ribbans left the shelter of the Tank to do his little sum. "I turned left from the railway and cruised across country, where lines of enemy infantry could be seen retiring. We fired at these from 200 to 600 yards range. As our cruise lasted an hour, we inflicted much damage." Arnold was now absolutely in the blue—an island entirely surrounded by undiluted Huns. "I did not see any more of our troops or machines after leaving the cavalry patrols." Consequently he drew all the fire, from every kind of weapon that the harassed Bosches could bring to bear on "Musical Box," which kept on playing her own devil's tattoo in reply. The only thing to do was to keep on moving, like the stormy petrel in a typhoon.'

Stirring stuff indeed! Arnold continued onwards with his one tank battle and although he did not know it he had now become the forward element of the advance and was now well into enemy territory. By now the tank crew were also having to face problems from their own tank as they were carrying extra fuel on the roof of 'Musical Box'. They had been ordered to do this prior to the attack, but this was against all standing orders and for the same reasons that they would find out later. Their initial problems were from the petrol fumes from spilt fuel that was sloshing all over the floor. This forced the men to breath through the mouth piece

of their box respirators. They were also suffering from heat exhaustion as well as great fatigue, they had now been in action for ten hours, and finally wounds suffered from bullet splash. However, they continued onwards.

As the crew continued eastwards they noticed a large number of motor and horse transport moving in all directions and Arnold noticed the canopy of a truck heading their way. They then hid up and waited for the lorry to come over the rise of a bridge. [Square 23b on map.] Here Arnold shot the driver and the lorry crashed into a ditch on the right.



Author's collection

Guillaucourt and the siding where Arnold stopped, noted here as 'Arret' e.g. stop!

By now Arnold and his crew were deep in enemy territory and we again visit Murray Wilson's ripping yarn.

The railway was now quite close, and I could see long lines of men retiring along it at ranges of 400 to 500 yards. I fired at them and did much damage. Leaving these in a state of panic, 'Musical Box' looked round for more exciting quarry. Passing by a two horse canvassed wagon, I knocked that out, Gunner Ribbans (R.H. gun) did some good shooting on the motor and horse transport, whilst I fired many bursts at 600 to 800 yards on the transport blocking the roads on the left (L.H. gun). I turned quarter-left to a small copse. On the way we came under the most intense rifle and machine-gun fire (bullet splash). The L.H. revolver port-cover was shot away. I withdrew the forward gun, locked the mounting

and held the body of the gun against the hole.” This was pretty levelheaded after over ten hours’ delirious brainstorm. Arnold kept his balance, and if only the Fates had done the same it is conceivable that he would have overrun the German Army H.Q. His luck, however, ran out, like the petrol on the cab, and he describes it without bitterness: “Petrol was still running down the inside of the back door (of course ignited). As it was no longer possible to continue the action, I shouted to Driver Carney to turn about, when two heavy concussions closely followed each other and the cab burst into flames.’

Arnold would not have realised this at this point but he had come across a large force of Germans which the Australian Official History bears witness.

‘The troops into whom Arnold ran were transport of two regiments (18th Res. and 373rd) of the 225th Divn, together with its instructional school. Early on Aug. 8 this division, being driven out of its line by the Canadians south of the Luce, had ordered up this force, about 500 in all, to protect its headquarters in some sunken huts in the open country south-east of Harbonnières. The force had just arrived there about 9 o’clock, says the history of the 217th RIR, “When the first tank appeared; it came up across country. A patrol of the instructional school under Res. Capt. Renner (O.C. school) with a light machinegun took it under fire and advanced within a few yards of it. A few shots with armour-piercing ammunition and the tank stopped and began to burn. Three men left it. A pigeon set free at the last moment was shot down but had no message on it. Prisoners and pigeon . . . were sent to D.H.Q.’

Arnold’s campaign was at an end and the demise of ‘Musical Box’ was swift. All three of the crew managed to evacuate from the doomed tank but the driver was shot in the stomach and died. Arnold and Ribbans narrowly escaped being bayoneted and bludgeoned to death by angry Germans but an officer intervened and they were eventually marched away into captivity.

The 6th Battalion Tank Corps reported ‘Musical Box’ missing although there are reports of it being found the next day. The story of Arnold and his crew was not told until 1919 when both of the surviving crew were repatriated and met each other in a camp near Canterbury. Arnold wrote a detailed account, as was required by the War Office for all officers to account for their capture, and the tale became one of legend.

And this is also how Carnie’s name became to be miss-spelt and how virtually all the accounts I have read have assumed that this is the correct spelling of his surname. If you search for the surname Carney on the CWGC website it will not come back with any matches for a man serving in the 6th Tank Corps and I have seen instances where people have assumed he must have survived. However, if you search under the correct spelling it comes back with a direct match.

William James Carnie was born in 1897 and was the son of William and Mary Carnie of Kintore in Scotland. Carnie has no known grave and is now commemorated on the Vis en Artois Memorial as well as being listed on the Kintore war memorial. Both he and Ribbans are also often reported as being Sergeants but I have not seen any evidence of this on any military documents, including Arnold’s report.

Arnold was awarded the DSO and Ribbans the DCM, Carnie received no such award even though Arnold had stated in his report, ‘*The conduct of Gunner Ribbans and Driver Carney was beyond all praise; throughout, Driver Carney drove from Villers-Bretonneux (4.20 P.M. 18th till 3.30 P.M. 19th).*’

Therefore, when you guide or visit this area, please spare a thought for William Carnie who still lies out on the battlefield of Amiens. Sources used:

Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 - Volume VI Chapter XIV “Der Schwarze Tag”.

From the book “Fighting Tanks – An account of The Royal Tank Corps in action 1916-1919”, published in 1929 and edited by G. Murray Wilson.

Amiens 1918 by James McWilliams and R James Steel.

To Win a War by John Terraine.

Steve started guiding in his spare time in 2002 and qualified as a badged guide in April 2004. He conducts private and organised tours and has worked as a guide for Holts and Galina in the past. He also assists other people in tracing their relative’s military history in both wars. He lives with his family in Norfolk where his day job is a police officer and he currently oversees the initial training and development of student officers. ■

Photography by Mike St Maur Sheil unless otherwise stated.

Tracks in the field where Music Box prepared to attack the lorry on the railway bridge



"ALL'S WELL WITH ENGLAND; POULTON'S ON HIS GAME"

RONALD POULTON PALMER – SPORTING LEGEND AND SOLDIER

By Jon Cooksey

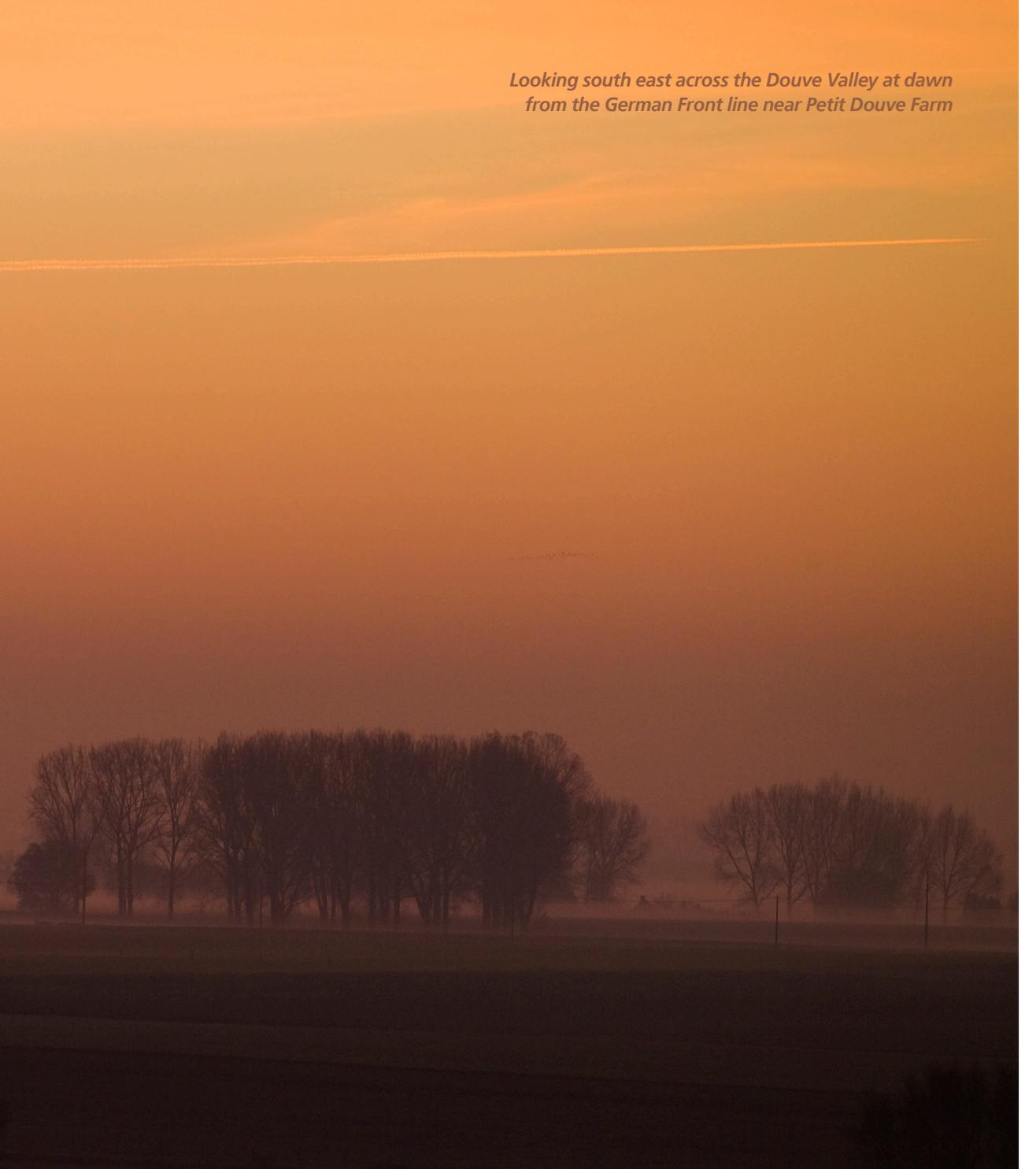
It was not, perhaps, how I had envisaged spending the first hour of my fiftieth birthday. Twenty minutes past midnight and there I was, standing on the bank of a deep ditch at the edge of a Flanders field in the valley of the River Douve, just north of the village of Ploegsteert, in the pitch darkness and literally ankle deep in cloying mud. ¹

But, even confirmed sceptic that I am, I felt I was not alone. Granted I had one earthly companion - Graham McKechnie, sports journalist and producer with BBC Radio Berkshire – who stood with me in silence as the mist enveloped

the farm buildings seventy metres away to our right and swirled amongst the hop poles and wires behind appearing to make them move and sway towards us. But I sensed something more. Could it have been the combined presence of

all those who fought and fell in this sector of the Western Front? Could it, perhaps, have been the singular presence of the very man whose journey to war in 1915 we had followed across the English Channel and whose brimming cup of life was

*Looking south east across the Douve Valley at dawn
from the German Front line near Petit Douve Farm*



drained in an instant by a sniper's bullet on this spot at this time. That man was Ronald Poulton Palmer, an upper-middle class, Edwardian gentleman with a social conscience who won three Oxford rugby blues (1909-1911), played for Harlequins

from 1908-1913 and finally turned out for Liverpool Rugby Club (1913-1914). More importantly, however, Ronald Poulton Palmer was capped seventeen times for the England Rugby Union team between 1909 and 1914 and went

on to captain his country four times in victories against the Home Nations in the 1914 season. In doing so the dashing three-quarter back became a national sporting icon and pre-war sporting celebrity in the same league as a Jonny



Ronald Poulton Palmer

Wilkinson or a Jason Robinson and as such he entered the pantheon of English rugby greats.²

But Ronald Poulton Palmer was so much more than a rugby player, he was a scholar, a keen student of engineering and one of the new breed of industrialists who understood the interconnections between every aspect of a successful business. He was also a social worker, a fact demonstrated by his tireless efforts to enthuse and engage boys and young men in the Boys' Clubs of Romney and Reading.

He was a man whom, had he lived, would have assumed high office in the famous biscuit making business of Huntley and Palmers in Reading, Berkshire; a key industry employing some 5,000 workers. The smell of baking biscuits pervaded Reading as did the influence of the Palmer family in Reading society. Indeed the biscuit business had raised the Palmers to such a position that they dominated life in Reading in the late Victorian /Edwardian era. George Palmer, one of the founders of the firm, contributed to the foundation of the museum, was Mayor of

Reading, became an MP and had a park and schools named after him, names which still exist on modern maps of the Thames Valley town. George Palmer senior's son, also named George, was Ronald's uncle. He followed his father as a partner in the business and also became an MP. Had he lived Ronald would undoubtedly have followed in the footsteps of his uncle George and become a leading light in Reading society.

Ronald William Poulton, as he was christened, was born in Oxford into a very comfortable upper-middle class family on 12 September 1889.³ His father, Edward, was Hope Professor of Zoology at Jesus College Oxford, whilst his mother, Emily (nee Palmer), furnished the connection with the Palmer biscuit manufacturing dynasty.

Always active and a lover of life, 'Ronnie', as he was known affectionately to his family and friends, really began to shine in all manner of team and individual sports at Oxford Preparatory school where it is thought that he became, 'the best all round sportsman that the school has ever produced'.⁴ His education continued at the famous Rugby School between 1903 -1908, where one of his schoolmates was the ill-fated poet Rupert Brooke, best remembered perhaps, for his poem *The Soldier* with its sentiments of English war dead lying forever in 'some corner of a foreign field', a fate which beckoned both Old Rugbeians amongst many others.

For his university education Ronald moved back to Oxford and took up a place at Balliol College in 1908 to study engineering. By that time he was developing into a lithe and skilful rugby three quarter; quick of mind and fleet of foot. Running

hard with a sudden jink here and a deceptive swerve there which left opponents grasping air, he often wove his way through opposing back lines as he racked up his points tally. Flying in the face of convention Poulton Palmer began to re-write the coaching manuals of the day for back play; popping up all over the pitch and even having the temerity to score on the opposite side of the field from the one he was supposed to be playing on. Such was his unorthodox style of three-quarter play he was even known to bamboozle his own team-mates as well as his opponents: one team-mate recalling that he was, 'hanged if I ever knew where he was going'.⁵

With others of his ilk he was one of the trail blazers of the style of open, attacking, running rugby that we now appreciate in the modern era. His devastating attacking abilities were spotted first by the famous Harlequins rugby club, which invited him for trails and he subsequently caught the eye of the England selectors who recognised his unpredictable brilliance even before he had won his first 'blue'. Capped for the first time against France at Welford Road, Leicester in 1909, by 1913, and again in 1914, he had become the outstanding individual in what became the first England team to secure back-to-back 'Five Nations' 'Grand Slams' in consecutive seasons.⁶

It was whilst at Oxford University that Ronald had also joined the Officer Training Corps and so, after moving to Reading on the completion of his degree to take an active role in his uncle George Palmer's biscuit empire, it seemed natural that he would join the local Territorial Force (TF) unit, the 4th Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment (which later became the 1/4 Royal Berks with

the designation of first reserve units as second line TF units in January 1915).

Joining with a commission and the rank of Second Lieutenant, Ronald was not particularly enamoured by the mores of 'part time' soldiering initially but he served with the battalion from April 1912 - earning positive comments from his superiors regarding his leadership

4 August 1914 and mobilisation was ordered that same evening. By 11.00pm on 5 August, 930 officers and men, including Ronald, now a lieutenant, and his 35lb pack, were on their way to their war station Portsmouth.

Fifteen days and several moves later and Ronald's battalion - most of the men by now, after a less than enthusiastic start, having signed

'... and amid great enthusiasm from the populace entrained for the unknown port. The train ran to Liverpool Street, and then backed out to cross under the Thames... This confirmed our suspicions of Dover or Folkestone.'⁷ Folkestone it was and from there the battalion would be shipped to France.

Ronald Poulton Palmer (often known to his friends as RPP) and his battalion were part of a vast deployment of TF manpower to the Western Front in that early spring of 1915. More than twenty battalions of Territorials had been sent to France by the end of 1914 to plug the gaps left in regular units after the fierce fighting of the first five months of war and by the end of January 1915 it had already been decided to send six further TF Divisions across to France in the order: North Midland, 2nd London, South Midland, West Lancashire, West Riding and Northumbrian. As part of the 48th (South Midland) Division the 1/4/Royal Berks were in the first tranche to leave along with the North Midland and 2nd London.⁸



The final international - Ronald swerving away from Andre

- until his death in action in May 1915. It is because Ronald kept such a detailed personal journal of his time on active service which, along with his many informative letters to his mother, father and sisters, was published by his grieving father in 1919, we are able to follow his war service in minute detail. Ronald's battalion had only just arrived at its Annual Camp on a hill above Marlow in Buckinghamshire with the rest of the South Midland Infantry Brigade on 2 August, when the battalion was shunted back to Reading early next morning to organise. War was declared on

the Imperial Service Obligation for active service overseas - eventually found its way to Chelmsford where it spent over seven months in training and on guard duties. Towards the end of March, 1915 it was clear that the battalion was being readied to send overseas and on the evening of 30 March crowds thronged the streets to watch the Royal Berkshire 'Terriers' march to the station for the train to Folkestone with the England Rugby Union captain at the head of 13 Platoon of D Company. 'We paraded in Moulsham Street at 6pm', Ronnie recorded in his journal

Boarding the cross-channel packet boat Onward, Ronald felt it vaguely familiar; 'I believe I crossed in it for the French match this time last year.' Docking at Boulogne in the early hours, the Royal Berks spent a cold night under canvas at a rest camp above the docks where they awoke to driving snow. From there they marched the short distance south to the train station at Pont de Briques. There the men were shoehorned into trucks for the overnight journey to Cassel, a town perched on top of one of the highest points of the Heuveland, the rash of eight hills which rise incongruously from the flat, Flanders Plain below and dominate the ground for miles around. Cassel's location

behind the front line, along with its lofty perch, bestowed obvious advantages of observation for both artillery and General Staff and ensured that the town was used throughout the war as the Headquarters of various Allied units from Army down to division.

Standing near the memorial at the highest point of Cassel today, looking down on the Grand Place and the chequered billiard table of the Flanders Plain stretching out to the east beyond, it is easy to imagine Ronald following in the footsteps of the Grand Old Duke of York of well-loved nursery rhyme fame, urging his weary and footsore charges to the top of the hill and marching them down the other side. 'It soon got very hot' he wrote, 'and the first three miles were steadily uphill, so the men felt it a good deal, as they are not yet used to their packs. The men too were very silent. Apparently being a bit strange in the new country. The view up the hill at Cassel was very lovely.'⁹ As they marched, feet slipping, sliding and throbbing on the vicious cobbles which made up the French pavé roads, the men could hear the pulsing of the guns of the Ypres Salient just over eighteen miles away to the east. The silence in the ranks was understandable. They were, after all, 'Saturday Night Soldiers' - part-timers- but from this point on they must have known they were in for some serious soldiering. Every step, slip, trip and curse took them closer to a war of which they had heard a great deal but of the reality knew nothing.

The battalion pushed on, breaking its journey for a few days at the knot of cottages, farms and barns huddled around the crossroads of Drogland east of Winnezele. Ronald found a billet in an estaminet overlooking the

crossroads and, on 2 April, wrote to Dick Dugdale, one of his closest friends: 'How I wish you were here with me in this rather dirty little French pub... It's not so clean and the cooking is not good, and the bed pretty flea ridden.'¹⁰

Ronald left Drogland on 4 April - Easter Sunday - and at Caestre the battalion, '...struck the great main road to Armentières... broad pavé... lined with ammunition parks of different divisions in motor buses', and went into billets at Flêtre. The Germans had pushed as far west as Flêtre in the helter-skelter battles of October 1914 and it was whilst strolling around with a fellow officer that Ronald saw the first tangible sign of war - the graves of men of 1/ Royal Warwickshire Regiment - killed in the bitter fighting for Meteren in order to stem the German rush towards the channel ports. The men must have seen the graves and at that point would have been aware that they were finally entering a battle zone.

Another march along the same unforgiving pavé avenue, lined with trees, then through Bailleul and Meteren until a final sharp left at Rabot before the outskirts of Armentières brought the battalion to Romarin, a hamlet perched on the Franco- Belgian border, just three miles behind the front line to the east of Ploegsteert. This frontier village became known universally as 'Plugstreet' to the British Tommy: a location which became famous for its wood of the same name and for the number of British artists, writers and statesmen - including Winston Churchill - who fought in its trenches. It was a place Ronald would become familiar with. On arrival Ronald remarked that, 'there was any amount of mud and water about', although he had 'a nice little house, but the woman was a shrew.

And so to bed.'

Now that Ronald and the 1/4 Royal Berks were just a few miles from the firing line it was only a matter of time before they were called upon to move closer to the front trenches. It was not the policy of the High Command to pitch inexperienced TF units straight into action against German battalions which had been in situ for almost six months, without a certain amount of 'induction'. Up and down the line, in the sector north and south of Armentières, 'raw' battalions were attached to Regular Army units to serve a forty-eight hour 'apprenticeship' - platoons of 'new boys' intermingling with relatively experienced men - so that the 'Terriers' could at least pick up a few tips, gain from the regulars' experience and hopefully learn to stay alive for more than just a few days. The sectors selected for the induction period were, like that around Ploegsteert and 'Plug Wood', deemed to be relatively 'quiet' - 'nursery' areas if you will.

Ronald's D Company was not one of the first to be selected to undergo its induction into the vagaries of trench warfare. That honour belonged to A and B Companies which moved up with battalions of the 4th Division on the evening of 8 April for a forty-eight hour stint. C and D Companies were not allowed to relax, however, and Ronald's platoon was called upon to do that most ubiquitous and detested of tasks assigned to the 'poor bloody infantry' in 'rest' - the working or digging party. And so, on the night of 8 April, RPP led his men off with picks and shovels to dig all-round defences at La Plus Douve Farm a little way behind the front trenches in the British support line. It was there, in the sector opposite a German

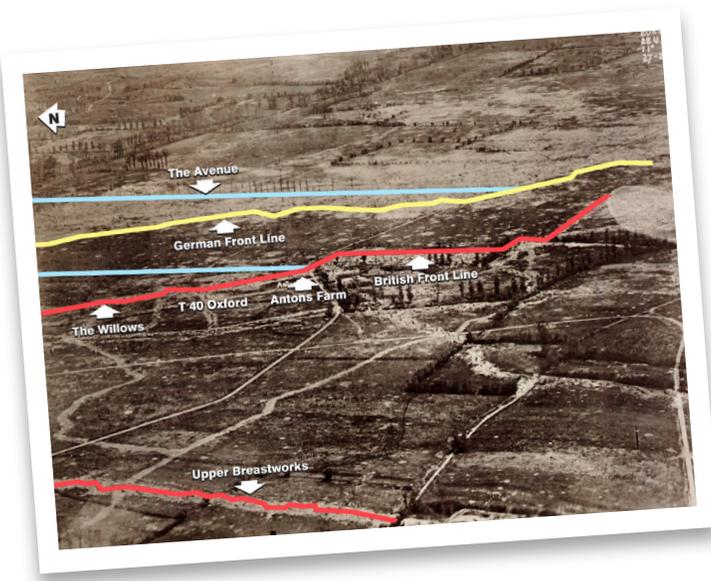
held strongpoint which would become known as Ontario Farm, that Ronald first came under fire. 'About 9.30 pm my company paraded for night digging. We marched to a point about 1,000 yards from the German lines, and as we came over the hill, and down the avenue, we heard several stray bullets flying overhead... We got back safely about 3.0 am.' ¹¹

decided not to send out a party which was a considerable relief to us.'

Before his second stint of digging duty on 9 April, however, he had found time that morning to ride up to the crest of a spur of high ground called Hill 63, about a mile behind the British front line, with Captain Burt Marshall of

the German and English trenches for about three miles. It was a wonderful sight, absolutely still and calm, and not a sign of life.' Ronald's father added that his son had been greatly impressed by the sight of German soldiers walking about in Messines on the hill to his left and the distant view of Lille with its tall chimneys smoking for the benefit of the Germans. ¹²

Ronald's turn as an apprentice front line officer came at 6.00pm the following day, 10 April. His platoon was to be intermingled with the regulars of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Dublin Fusiliers which held a breastwork over the crest of the rise above La Plus Douve Farm on the left of the 4th Division's line. Even by April 1915, the British trenches in this sector were not as sophisticated as they later became. All notions of a continuous front line trench system, complete with traverses and adequately supplied with deep, splinter proof dugouts, the whole fully wired, were for the future. At the time Ronald made his first foray towards the zone of bullets and shells, the British trench system left a lot to be desired. Ronald recalled his impressions of his first journey 'up the line' proper. 'We had a long, slow march down an avenue road. The Dublins were very humorous all the time and quite cheerful. We were a bit apprehensive!... We passed several ruined cottages, which are full of dead, and the whole atmosphere was tainted by the smell of death... we moved diagonally up to the brow of the hill and just over the top came to the first of the breastworks where we were to live. The ground behind was riddled with shell holes, and



Anton's Farm

D Company were warned off for more hard graft the next night and Ronald was remarkably candid about his feelings of going further forward, this time to complete a breastwork between two fire trenches about 150 yards from the German line. The Royal Engineers (RE) officer in charge told Ronald that the Germans had been shelling and firing on working parties and Ronald remarked that his party, '...proceeded down the road towards our object in fear and trembling... On arrival I got my men into a communication trench and awaited orders. There was a lot of firing and shelling going on and [the RE officer]

the Seaforth Highlanders. From that vantage point Ronald's eyes could survey the scene spread out below him; from the dark mass of Plug Wood on his right, up and over the shell tortured ruins of what had once been the beautiful Chateau de la Hutte, over the fields of rotten turnips and overgrown crops and across the red-tiled and battered roofs of farms and barns in the valley of the River Douve and then up to the village of Messines high on the hill above him to his left. This ground was the stage upon which Ronald would play out the final act of his life and it had a profound effect on him. 'I rode up to a hill...and saw a fine view of

broken with communication trenches full of water. The breastworks were dug about one foot into the ground and were made of sandbags and earth. There were frequent traverses but the works were not continuous, there being three separate works for the one company. They had parados, but not all of them were sufficiently high to be much good.¹³ Later that evening Ronald went out on a patrol of no man's land with the Dublins second in command. Taking a rifle and fifteen round Ronald recorded that he, '...climbed through the wire and went a few yards forward and lay down, in the formation - Corporal and Officer together, and two men in rear, interval ten yards, distance from Officer about ten yards. They watched the rear and flank. I was lying for a quarter of an hour by a very decomposed cow! After listening hard we moved forward, and again lay doggo. This went on for about an hour, during which time we were perhaps 100-150 yards out. Then we returned, each pair covering the other two.'¹⁴

The following morning Ronald's platoon suffered under the German guns for the first time in retaliation for a British salvo. High explosive was mixed with shrapnel as Ronald crouched under the parapet and saw eight feet of it blown down during which time five Dublins were wounded and one of his own men suffered a dislocated shoulder, all within three yards of his position. 'The shelling is very frightening - the report, the nearing whistle and the burst, and then you wonder if you are alive... The men - the Dublins - were quite as frightened as we were as a rule, but some don't care a damn. Some were praying, some eating

breakfast, one was counting his rosary, and another next door was smoking a cigarette and cheering up our fellows...but it unnerved me for a bit.' After the shelling died away Ronald picked up a souvenir - the brass head of a shell which shot through the parapet, missed a man by an inch and went into a dugout.¹⁵

With their period of instruction over it was time for the 1/4 Royal Berks to pull their weight proper. The 4th Division was being readied to move out of the

captain. Ronald's side triumphed 17-0 and he was cheered 'to see so many rigger players about.' He was less impressed by the accommodation of the 4th Division Staff, in which place he got changed. 'They live in great style, quite unnecessary I thought. In fact they rather bored me. They ought to do a turn in the trenches with us all.'

Next day 15 April Ronald's Company moved back into the line in Plugstreet Wood itself, pushing up to reserve breastworks



Courtesy Graham McKechnie

The line of the tyre tracks in the muddy field approximates the line of Oxford [Trench 40]

sector to be replaced by the 48th (South Midland). Now Ronald and his battalion would learn the endless routine of 'churning' between front line duty, support, reserve and rest in billets in rear areas. Before that, however, he played the last competitive rugby match of his life at Nieppe on Wednesday 14 April, turning out for a 48th Division side, consisting of several Gloucester club players against the 4th Division which included several Irish rugby internationals including W. J Tyrell, the Irish

called 'The Tourist Lines', so called as reporters and other dignitaries were taken into them to observe the German lines through the trees beyond the edge of the wood itself. During that tour Ronald had to go out to the very limits of the British line to advanced listening posts at locations known as 'First German House' and 'Second German House'. It was whilst visiting these outposts that Ronald came across a Lance Corporal fast asleep. Much as he sympathised with the man as

‘his nerves were quite smashed’ Ronald did his duty and had him arrested. The man was Court Martialled and eventually sent home to hospital. On Monday 19 April, his company moved into a sector north of Plugstreet Wood to hold two stretches of front line called ‘Sutherland (Trench 34) and Oxford (Trench 40), astride a track on which was situated a collection of shell battered buildings called Anton’s Farm. Ronald’s 13 Platoon held the farm - ‘...fortified (badly) as a supporting point – a bit of a shell trap I thought’ – itself. It is from this point in his journal, with the 1/4 Royal Berks now established in its system of rotation between front line duty and periods in support and rest, that Ronald appears to become more and more pre-occupied with recording the work and effects of German snipers in his journal. He even names one German sniper – ‘Sir Charles’ – who was active on 20 April and ‘made very good shooting but did no damage. We had no loopholes in his direction so could not find him.’ The following day Ronald mentioned him again; ‘The sniper was active and we haven’t got him yet. He knocked a hole in three periscopes, and one shot glanced off and wounded one man in 14 Platoon – Bennett.’ In a letter to his father the same day he wrote, ‘Sniping is all that goes on and in this they have absolute superiority. We have constructed steel loopholes but cannot find the brutes. When we do we shall have them, as we have some wonderful shots. They got one of our men in the throat last night.’¹⁶

In addition to organising his own platoon Ronald took a great interest in the construction

and strengthening of the front line. His company commander, Captain Thorne, gave him responsibility for ‘all repairs and improvements to the Trench and works’ effectively raising him to company Second-in-Command. As with all things Ronald embraced his new responsibility with gusto, drawing up plans for ‘wire, parapets, parados, with

It was only a matter of time before the German snipers took their first victim. In letter to his father dated 29 April, Ronald wrote, ‘As you say they [snipers] must come out at dawn and go back at dusk if they are in front of their trench but that is not certain. The ground is getting very thick with long grass, and will soon be very good cover. It is quite absurd to see the



Line of ditch known to RPP as ‘The Willows’

dugouts inside and spaces behind, with communicating passage, carefully screened from front and flank...etc.’ He often oversaw the work himself with terrific enthusiasm and wrote home telling how it was curious to hear that at ‘stand to’, at about 8.00pm the sniping died down ‘and then suddenly the ‘tap’ ‘tap’ of the German party stating. Then we know we are safe, as there is a kind of mutual agreement not to fire on each other’s working or ration parties. So out we go and hardly a shot is fired... The men betray the usual good humour at it all...they have grown quite callous, and you hear them whistling and shouting while working on the parapet, in the full moonlight.’

quite immovable landscape, with no movement of any kind on it, and yet to hear the most accurate shots on our parapet, shots which have killed two men dead in the last two days, who foolishly put their heads up carelessly in a low part of the parapet to look back.’ He went on, ‘Don’t worry about me in this respect.. I am in charge of the work and the parapet is being raised and immensely strengthened and thickened...I am always thinking of it and keeping my head down.’¹⁷

Ronald had good cause to remember one of the men sniped on 28 April for it was the safe hands of the ex-England Rugby Captain which caught the stricken



LIEUTENANT
R. W. POULTON PALMER
ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGIMENT
5TH MAY 1915



"HIS WAS THE JOY
THAT MADE PEOPLE SMILE
WHEN THEY MET HIM"
L. S. L. REISS



body of Private Frederick William Giles, a 17 year-old from Reading, as he fell back into the trench. He died of his wound a short time later and was the first man of 1/4 Royal Berks to be buried in the Berkshire Cemetery plot near Hyde Park Corner. Little did he know it but the man who broke his fall would be the second.

On the night of 4/5 May 1915, Lieutenant Ronald Poulton Palmer was out as usual in charge of a working party strengthening dugouts in Trench 40 just north of Anton's Farm. It was exceptionally dark, the moon had not risen and a slight fog brushed its back against the British breastworks and rolled in no man's land. Distant flares would have risen into the air bursting bright before falling back to earth. Ronald, moving along the trench, had a word with Sergeant Perrin and then moved along to supervise another small party working on a new officers' mess dugout. Why he did what he did next we will never know. Perhaps, in spite of the fatal sniping, Ronald really did believe that he was safe and that a 'live and let live' philosophy operated for working parties. Whatever was in his mind, at twenty minutes past midnight Ronald heaved himself up onto the roof of Captain Thorne's dugout to better oversee the work on another in front of the officers' mess. At that moment a single rifle shot pierced the silence in the valley of the River Douve, struck and entered Ronald's body on his right side at the level of the third rib and knocked the air out of him. He was heard to say 'Oh!', as he fell backwards into the arms of Sergeant Brant. He was dead before the Sergeant could put him on the ground; the first officer of 1 /4 Royal Berks to fall.

His body was taken down by stretcher party through the lines of the 1/7 Royal Warwickshire Regiment to the Field Ambulance in the Convent in Ploegsteert. Sergeant A C. Tomlinson of that battalion later wrote to his family of what he had seen. 'You have no doubt learned of the death of Captain (sic) Poulton Palmer. I can tell you it has cast a gloom over the whole Division... One night a party approached the post and was challenged. It proved to be a stretcher party. One of our officers inquired who they were carrying and the reply was Capt. Poulton. 'Oh' he said, 'I will go and speak to him, 'but when the man told him he was dead it upset him frightfully as he knew Ronald well.'¹⁸ The men of the 1/4 Royal Berks also took it very badly.

"I cannot tell you how us fellows... felt it. He was a real gentleman and to each one of us not only our leader but our friend... He was always first over and last back, and when he met his death he was still hard at work."

Private Norman Hambridge 13 Platoon, D Company

"We would have followed him into the jaws of death if need be for he was a brave soldier and a gentleman and would ask no man to do a job that he dared not do himself."

Private W. G. Atkins, C Company

"He was the finest and best loved officer in the whole brigade."

Sergeant J. Watson.

"I can see him now in my mind cheering his men up on the awful marches we had when first in

France, upon the endless cobbled roads of Flanders, carrying a man's rifle because he was done up...running about looking after their comfort before thinking of his own. Such a man and officer was Lieut. R. Poulton Palmer."

Private Sydney Bourton¹⁹

Ronald was buried in the Berkshire Cemetery at Hyde Park Corner at 6.30 pm on the evening of 6 May 1915, with the Bishop of Pretoria officiating. Just eighteen minutes earlier a telegram had been delivered to his parents' house in Oxford; 'Regret your son killed last night. Death instantaneous. Colonel Serocold.'²⁰

Ronald's was the second grave in the plot. A few yards to his left lay Private Frederick Giles, the young man who had, just a few days earlier, fallen dead into his arms. The 25 year-old, Oxford educated, England rugby captain and heir to a food manufacturing empire, just feet away from a 17 year-old boy from the terraces off the Oxford Road in Reading. Both at rest; equality in sacrifice, equality in remembrance. They lie there still, just feet apart, red roses - like the embroidered roses Ronald wore with pride on his England rugby jerseys - blooming against white Portland stone; even in November.

Such was the impact of Ronald's death both on his father and on the nation at large, that Edward Poulton felt it had been no mere 'accident of war'. Surely the Germans had deliberately executed his son to destroy British morale? But, over ninety three years later, having stood on the very spot at the hour of his death, I have to conclude that it

was just that; the act of a highly skilled, patient and determined German who perhaps saw the fleeting trace of a moving shadow in the sudden light of a distant flare and tightened his finger on the trigger. That one shot extinguished the short, yet active life of a real English sporting hero and a true gentleman.

RWPP

(Killed in the Trenches)

Ronald is dead: and we shall watch no more

His swerving swallow-flight adown the field

Amid eluded enemies, who yield

Room for his easy passage, to the roar

Of multitudes enraptured, who acclaim

Their country's captain slipping towards his goal

Instant of foot, deliberate of soul –

'All's well with England; Poulton's on his game.'

Aye all is well: our orchard smiling fair;

Our Oxford not a wilderness that weeps;

Our boys tumultuously merry where

Amongst old elms his comrade spirit keeps

Vigil of love. All's well. And over there,

Amid his peers, a happy warrior sleeps.

Alfred Ollivant

The Spectator.

22 May, 1915 ■

Jon Cooksey's first book was about the men of his home town, the Barnsley Pals., and led to numerous other titles for Pen & Sword.

He is the editor of the WFA magazine "Stand-To" and is frequently to be heard and seen on both radio and TV and this article grew out of a BBC radio programme.

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Lead photograph by Mike St Maur Sheil, remainder are from the author's collection if not stated otherwise.

- 1 *Ronald Poulton Palmer – Documentary produced by Graham McKechnie for BBC Radio Berkshire, broadcast 11 November, 2008. http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/content/articles/2008/11/10/ronald_poulton_palmer_feature.shtml*
- 2 *Huw Richards, Poulton, Ronald William (1889–1915), Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (Oxford: OUP, 2004). Online version*
- 3 *Ronald did not adopt the second surname 'Palmer' until the spring of 1914 after the death of his uncle, George Palmer in 1913. George Palmer left Ronald a considerable inheritance in his will and had promised him a major role on the Board of Huntley and Palmer after a period of three years employment with the firm*
- 4 *Clive Harris and Julian Whippy, The Greater Game – Sporting Icons who Fell in the*

Great War (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2008) p.2. Along with Ronald Poulton Palmer, the book features a further eleven international sporting icons and further members of sports teams all killed in the Great War

- 5 *Huw Richards, op.cit*
- 6 *The term 'Grand Slam's applied to Rugby Union is relatively modern. The concept was not in vogue at the time, the most important games for England being against the 'Auld Enemy', Scotland and against Wales*
- 7 *Edward Bagnall Poulton, The Life of Ronald Poulton (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1919) p.336*
- 8 *Charles Messenger, A Call to Arms – The British Army 1914-18 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005) pp.82-3*
- 9 *Edward Bagnall Poulton, op.cit. p.337*
- 10 *Ibid. p.338. Chaplain 4th Class, the Reverend Richard William Dugdale, attached 1st Battalion The Norfolk Regiment, was killed on 24 October 1918 and is buried in Caudry British Cemetery, eight miles east of Cambrai*
- 11 *Ibid p.342*
- 12 *Ibid p.343*
- 13 *Ibid p.344*
- 14 *Ibid*
- 15 *Ibid p.345*
- 16 *Ibid p354-5*
- 17 *Ibid p360*
- 18 *Ibid p366*
- 18 *Ibid p373-4*
- 20 *Ibid p365*

DEBORAH

By Mike St Maur Sheil

Enthusiastic is a dangerous word to use about somebody: after all the OED defines an enthusiast as someone given to spiritual visions and all too often describing someone as being 'over-enthusiastic' is really a snide put-down about somebody who is determinedly getting on with something which fascinates them.

D51



Looking WSW from the Tank Memorial on Flesquieres Ridge along the sunken lane up which 'Deborah' would have attacked, passing the obvious German bunker in the field to the left of shot



But enthusiasts are essential - they tend to get things done and organise events which, if left to the non-enthusiasts, would never ever happen. Enthusiasts tend to make their own luck as well.

And Philippe Gorczynski is both enthusiastic and by his own admission, the luckiest man in France. And you can see his point - he runs a successful hotel, has a beautiful wife and an adored mistress on whom he lavishes huge amounts of time and energy.

Hopefully Mme. Gorczynski will forgive me for ignoring her in favour of the 'mistress' because what Philippe admits is 'a true love story' is none other than Deborah, the British Mark IV tank that he recovered from the mud of Cambrai and which thanks to his enthusiastic efforts is surely one of the most extraordinary relics of the First World War to be seen anywhere.

There are some who mark the decline of the British Empire with the disappearance of Meccano and Airfix kits but in this case it was Airfix which helped create a bit of history. As a young boy spending his holidays on the Somme, Philippe could not help but be conscious of the battles that had taken place there. Everywhere there were shells and in the field at the back of the family hotel in Cambrai there were the traces of a German battery

position so the gift of an Airfix model kit of a British WWI tank was the start of a love story which today is as passionate as ever.

The detail of Deborah's recovery is now a book so I will not repeat it but the plain truth is that Philippe persisted for almost 10 years with literally no more than old wives tales to guide him and his own enthusiasm to keep him going as he plodded through the mud trying to locate a tank. Finally dragged from the mud in 1998 Deborah now sits in a somewhat dusty barn in Flesquieres, her battered hulk a potent memorial to the four men who died inside her body as well as the countless others who met a similar fate.

The barn may be dusty but it's symbolic: it was standing here in 1917 and behind Deborah, the walls bear the scars of machine gun bullets. "Maybe they were her guns", muses Phillippe.

Rusty and battered she may be but for Philippe she is not just a relic; "she is still on a mission. She may have died here in Flesquieres as a soldier but now she is reborn as an ambassador of the past and now her mission is to tell the story of the tanks".

The passion is quite unequivocal when he declares, "I do



not feel her owner - she belongs to the men who died in her. I am the voice - only if something goes wrong do I "own" her. I am her guardian".

And Philippe is determined that Deborah does fulfill her latest mission: she is now listed as a French National Monument and plans are afoot to build a proper museum for the centenary of the Battle of Cambrai in 2017 which will incorporate the extensive battlefield collection given by the family of the late M. Louis Carniau. As Phillippe explains, "all the men of the war are now dead. But these things are a connection to those men. They speak for themselves and they will support what we want to say with the tank". Together with his own collection of over 2,000 original photographs of both British and German tanks this will be a truly unique collection and it would be good to think that maybe the UK will make some practical support to what is, after all, a truly unique part of British history and one which would have been totally lost had it not been for Phillippe's extraordinary determination and passion.

To visit Deborah is to have one of those neck-prickling moments that one gets at especial moments on a battlefield: you need to give require prior notice of your visit as Phillippe has to come and unlock the barn himself but he makes no standard charge. All he asks is that you

make an appropriate contribution - unlike the coach party which had been shortly before my last visit and had gone, leaving nothing. When I chided Phillippe about this, he shrugged. "It is my pleasure. I am the only man in France whose wife allows him to have a mistress".

But you know in that instant that Deborah is more than a joke - this is serious passion. As Phillippe says, Deborah has a mission and still lives on: for those who care to visit her she is the embodiment of why we visit battlefields and seek to take others with us. In her dusty barn she is unique and remarkable tribute to the men of 14-18 and no series of visits to the Western front can be considered as comprehensive until one has visited Deborah. So if you have not been, then make it a priority to visit Flesquieres at the earliest possible opportunity.

And prepare to be amazed at this extraordinary relic and reflect that all it takes is an Airfix kit, an enthusiast Frenchman and an understanding wife! ■

Website: www.tank-cambrai.com/english/home.php
www.beatus-cambrai.com

To arrange a visit call + 33 3 27 81 45 70

Story and photography by Mike St Maur Sheil

GOING TO THE PAST

Nicky Bird looks at guiding then and now; how guides can counter myths and avoid own goals

We have been going to (mostly) French and Belgian battlefields for over 30 years, and sometimes get it right. Guided tours needn't be didactic, joyless exercises; they should offer access to corners of battlefields often overlooked, and convey something of what the soldier saw and underwent. You should '...go to the past, not looking for messages or warnings', as Pat Barker wrote in *Another World* [1998], 'but simply to be humbled by the weight of human experience that has preceded the brief flicker of your own few days...' My idea of hell is the sort of tour where you get lectured to death, and where 'a complimentary glass of wine is served' at dinner and that's your lot. There are other things to fear. I met a man once who was still shell-shocked from a dreadful experience he had suffered years before. A distinguished tour guide wanted his guests to 'feel' the reality of trench experience, specifically of attacking at dawn. So he woke them at 4 a.m. in their modest Arras hotel, fed them some sweet tea and rum, drove them to Beaumont Hamel and at 5.10 a.m. handed them heavy packs, blew a whistle and told them to charge over the parapet and across no-man's land. I think he might have thrown things at them to simulate shrapnel. Anyway, this was too much reality for my friend who buggered off to bed when he got back, to get some shuteye and recover from the rum and sweet tea.

I first heard the Last Post sounded at the Menin Gate at Ypres forty-five years ago. I was alone, apart from the buglers and a local drunk sheltering from the rain. This year I went with the England cricket team and there were over three hundred spectators at the same spot, mostly English schoolchildren unmoved by the ceremony, but happily twittering away at the sight of Flintoff, KP etc. It is a tourist attraction, sometimes treated as part of a theme park, to be 'done' between pit-stops for chocs in the Grote Markt. The museum on the first floor of the Cloth Hall used to boast a higgledy-piggledy collection of guns, trench signs, minenwerfer, posters, uniforms, Mills bombs, photos...crammed clumsily into cases and on walls, a marvellous array from which you could sense the atmosphere and experience of those years. In recent years the revamped museum, In Flanders Fields, now being revamped again, has been hi-jacked by

curators who preach the current line, and visitors are force-fed videos and inter-active stuff about war poets, and 'women's role' and the sterling contribution of colonial troops. You are told how to feel. The museum used to be gloriously empty, like the equally chaotic one at Cassel in French Flanders, with Foch's room preserved, now gone. Only Tyne Cot Cemetery attracted coaches in the 70s. Lijssenthoek Cemetery, outside 'Pop', with its beautiful cedars and flawless layout, with Remi Farm next door where wounded and dying Tommies scratched their names into its beams, was always empty. It was a place of contemplation. If you go today to the nearby grave of the only double VC of the Great War, Capt. Noël Chavasse RAMC, you will not be alone. Recently, I found a queue of guides waiting with their flocks while each in turn banged on about the great man. You need solitude on these occasions and too often you get bustle and the clicking of cameras.

Paradoxically of course, it is the popularity of these rites and sites that gives the guided tour its *raison d'être*. The enthusiast wants to avoid wasting time at preachy museums, needs to know the unspoilt places, the preserved trench system, how to dodge coach parties, where to eat and where to stay. The gullible tourist might spend a vexing afternoon touring the Citadel at Verdun, a puerile trip in a miniature railway around moronic waxworks, a sub-Disney waste of time. Above all, the competent tour leader can balance what is all too evident – hills pitted with shell holes, row on row of young men's graves – with historical background explaining the story behind the battle.

Different nationalities tend to go to sites associated with their country (and their relatives), but often with Hollywood in mind – so Americans prefer Omaha [*'Saving Private Ryan'*] to Utah, and rarely venture to Falaise, although older Americans go to St. Mère Église, inspired by *The Longest Day*. Younger Americans don't know the film because it was in black and white and thus US networks don't show it. But they do go to the field near Ste. Marie-du-Mont where Lieut. Winters' Screaming Eagles destroyed the guns ranged on Utah – as seen in *Band of Brothers*.

A Soldier of the Great War: Known Unto God. The inscription carved on countless headstones leaves a haunting impression of sacrifice and destruction. The battlefield tourist often has entrenched prejudices, fostered by family tales and images of

'Scarlet Majors at the Base'. Three things – Sassoon and Owen apart – have led to the popular attitude that the Great War was unremitting incompetence and frightfulness, and nothing else: Sebastian Faulks' novel about love and tunnelling, *Birdsong*; Alan Clark's 1961 rant against château generals, *The Donkeys*; and the film it inspired – *Oh What a Lovely War!*

We always seek to counter this impression by stressing that soldiers actually spent far more time training, in support, in reserve or on leave than being shot at in the front line. They had concert parties, enough to eat (often for the first time in their lives), drank themselves silly in estaminets, and enjoyed mademoiselles. I met an old soldier at Hooge forty years ago who told me that the war years were his best. And that, interestingly, the natural order of things for him and his mates upon being relieved after front line duty was – 'wash, eat, sleep, drink, fuck, find an Australian to fight...' Perhaps these priorities say something about the human condition. My own priorities omit the Australian.

'War is hell', Sherman wrote. But it is not the complete picture. War is also thrilling, boring and ridiculous. For every Sassoon or Owen traumatised by his ordeal, there is a Capt. Greenwell, of the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, who wrote home during the First Battle of the Somme: 'It is an extraordinary sort of battle and I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I think we shall soon enter upon another violent phase. I hope so...' He wanted to beat the enemy, a far more common sentiment among the men than the pacifist ambivalence of war poets. Bomb school he found 'ripping' fun, and in the depths of the wretched winter of 1915, while struggling to fulfil new duties as Transport Officer, Greenwell confided: 'My mind is deeply engaged with a grand dinner party I am giving...'

Capt. Sidney Rogerson of the West Yorks thought the Great War 'the happiest period' of his life, despite terror and discomfort, because 'though it may have let loose the worst it also brought out the finest qualities in men.' On the other hand he was far from blind to the horrors of war, particularly of mud: 'Terrible in its clinging consistency, it was the...supreme enemy, paralysing and mocking English and German alike. Distances were measured not in yards but in mud.' One November we trudged through a field near Martinpuich on the Somme and could not move after a few yards, and this without 60 lbs. on our backs. It

was illuminating. As illuminating as seeing for oneself the perceptible ridge at Waterloo, behind which Wellington concealed his troops. There is no substitute for standing on ground a soldier stood on, and seeing the limit of his horizon.

We make several promises to our clients (we might get you lost but that is not a promise). You won't be lectured to death, there will be a minimum of driving, you will not stay in a Holiday Inn. Your travelling companions will mostly be affable – professional bores having been banished over the years. There will be hiccups of course – I was assaulted by a Lancastrian during a Champagne tour because he found my George Formby impressions puerile, but champagne had something to do with it. Nowadays we like to offer something the punter couldn't do by himself: touring the newly excavated tunnels at Vauquois near Verdun, or going inside the château of La Haye Sainte at Waterloo, noting the bullet holes preserved in the wooden skirting and doors, and seeing where Baring and his KGL survivors escaped out the back (now the downstairs lavatory). When we go to Venice (where I can indulge my arty side) we can admire the interiors of private palazzi, shamelessly exploiting connections, and borrow a boat to put-put around the canals.

People nowadays want pre-tour notes on what they're going to visit, detailed historical background. You need trench maps and important things like a corkscrew. And, most importantly, you shouldn't be without a compass. I was standing on top of Vimy Ridge on a foggy day, pointing to the slope up which the heroic Canadians had struggled, when someone asked why the heroic Canadians had attacked from the German side. The bugger was right, I had got the Canadians attacking their own men, a compass would have helped. Sometimes you can bluff your way out of these mishaps but this wasn't one of them. ■

Nicky Bird, and his brother Antony run Bird Battlefield Tours. Their interest in military came from their father, a much decorated veteran of North Africa and meeting with French veterans on family holidays in France. Together they co-edited Voices from the Front Line and Nicky is a member of RUSI, was elected to Council of SAHR and reviews for International Affairs, the RIIA journal. He also plays cricket as it should be played – for fun.

JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS

By the Editor

The deadline for the next issue is Monday 28th February 2011 so your suggestions and contributions are invited. To avoid possible duplication and resultant disappointment, please discuss your idea first with the Editor before you put finger to keyboard.

Any battlefield description should enable readers to understand the topography so maps are of real importance: considerations should also be given to details useful to the visitor such as especial access and accommodation.

Personal memoirs are always welcome but please try and relate them to specific battlefields or significant events and illustrate wherever possible with visual material.

Photographs: hackneyed saying it may be, but “a good photograph is worth a thousand words”, so please, wherever possible, provide photographs and maps: the latter are essential in our work as guides and enable the reader to relate the article to specific ground.

Please note that a photograph which looks good on your computer screen, does not mean it will reproduce on the printed page. Almost certainly any picture which you have downloaded off the internet will not reproduce well and anyhow, is it your copyright? Photographs taken using mobile phones will work provided they are shot using the largest possible picture size and set to “Superfine” or its equivalent.

If you are using a camera then please ensure that it is also set to produce the highest quality images: **submitted images should be at least 8” [20cms.] longest dimension and set at 240 pixels per inch.** When these are saved as Jpg files they will be about 1Mb in size: merely send them as a Jpg attached to an email. If you have any doubts then please consult the editor for advice. Please do not embed any pictures within your article but submit them separately: pictures submitted as part of a

Powerpoint file will be rejected.

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Please note that articles which have already been published in similar journals such as the WFA Bulletin are unlikely to be considered for publication unless of exceptional significance.

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The beauty of the winter snow at Le Linge combined with its history is a reminder as to how fortunate we are as battlefield guides to visit these places and tell their story. And as we will shortly be hearing, what is for many, the greatest story ever told, a Happy Christmas to you all and may 2011 be a happy and peaceful year for us all.

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