

The Great War Centenary Tour: Summer 2014

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Abstract

In addition to visiting Key WWI sites in Belgium and France, the 2014-2018 The Great War Centenary Tour included the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the victory of William the Conqueror in the Battle of Hastings of 1066; a visit to one of France's most iconic attractions: Mont Saint-Michel; Bruges, Belgium one of the best preserved medieval towns in all of Europe; as well as the beaches of the D-Day landings with visits at several German bunkers, the Pegasus Bridge, and the Arromanches landing site; and a visit the Omaha Beach site and museum before moving on to Pont du Hoc and St. Mere Eglise. For those who teach and study history, the tour included much that is relevant to the teaching of history. Also note that there was no attempt to visit any of the Eastern Front WWI sites.

Keywords: The Great War Centenary, Normandy, Flanders, Ypres, Menin Gate, Sergeant York Trail, Muesse-Argonne

Introduction

The author and Dr. James Shiveley, Professor at Miami University, Ohio have been friends and colleagues for three decades. Both professors received Ph.D.s from the Ohio State University.

Dr. James Shiveley is the Condit Endowed Professor and former chair of the Department of Teacher Education at Miami University where he teaches courses in social studies methods, American government and economic systems, and comparative education. He is a former social studies teacher at Beaver Creek and Wilmington, Ohio. Dr. Shiveley has been leading study tours to Europe for over a decade.

The author has taken the luxury of twelve months to read numerous WWI and WWII histories, articles, WWI archives, and to view hundreds of film clips, and other WWI resources.

The author's paternal grandfather was a U.S. Doughboy, and was a sergeant in the U.S. army with the American Expeditionary Forces who arrived in France in 1917. The author's grandfather seemed to have had more WWI stories than did his father, who was in the WWII Pacific Theater. On April 6, 1917, when the United States declared war against Germany, the U.S. had a standing army of 127,500 officers and soldiers. By the end of the war, four million men had served in the United States Army, with an additional 800,000 in other military service branches. The author's paternal grandfather greatly enjoyed his time in Paris following the WWI November 11, 1918 Armistice.

The Armistice was an agreement signed by representatives of France, Great Britain and Germany. It was an agreement to end fighting as a prelude to peace negotiations. The Treaty of Versailles signed six months later would act as the peace treaty between the nations. Although "armistice" is used as a term to describe any agreement to end fighting in wars, "The Armistice" commonly refers to the agreement to end the fighting of the First World War.

The Armistice began at on 11th November 1918 at 11am (French time) - the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. The Armistice itself was agreed 6 hours earlier at 5am with the first term of it being that fighting would end at 11am.

The Great War Centenary Tour is a fully customized educational tour, and perhaps readers might profit from the reviews of sights, restaurants, and hotels. There are several other tour operators who offer The Great War Centenary as well.

Note that the 2014-2018 The Great War Centenary Tour included the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the victory of William the Conqueror in the Battle of Hastings of 1066; a visit to one of France's most iconic attractions: Mont Saint-Michel; Bruges, Belgium one of the best preserved medieval towns in all of Europe; as well as the beaches of the D-Day landings with visits at several German bunkers, the Pegasus Bridge, and the Arranches landing site; and a visit the Omaha Beach site and museum before moving on to Pont du Hoc and St. Mere Eglise. For those who teach and study history, the tour included much that is relevant to the teaching of history. Also note that there was no attempt to visit any of the Eastern Front WWI sites.

Journal of the Great War Centenary Tour: Summer 2014

Tuesday July 7, 2015.

Depart Cincinnati Airport for Overnight Business Class Flight to Brussels, Belgium.

Wednesday July 8, 2015.

Arrive at Ibis Hotel, Central Brussels, Grasmart 100Rue du Marché aux Herbes 100.

The Ibis Hotel, Central Brussels, Grasmart 100Rue du Marché has an excellent location, and we know that this Ibis is served by a train connection to the airport. The location was our primary concern, and easy access to the "plane train" was valuable to our WWI and WWII tour.

We spent four hours touring central Brussels, and the Market Square clearly reminded the author of Munich, Germany. Of course, we did sample Belgium waffles, chocolate, and beer.

July 9, 10, and 11, 2015.

The Ibis Kortrijk Centrum

Thursday July 9, 2015.

Visit the Flanders Field Museum. We like to read the various international views on the WWI concerning the Flanders Field Museum. This museum is recommended as a prelude to any WWI visit and especially as a prelude to visiting the various Ypres Salient areas of WWI (2014-2018 The Great War Centenary.) There were five battles at Ypres and three battles are often listed in history. We have arranged limited museum visits, and are spending much time in the field with local guides. We know that Flanders Field Museum is recently renovated, and we like the various settings in the museum.

We always recommend reading various historians prior to a field visitation. If one has conceptualized the several views prior to historical visit, then one shall appreciate the field that much more. In addition to historian's books and articles, the WWI offers an excellent collection of relevant videos.

The Flanders Field museum is an absolute requirement prior to visiting the five battles of Ypres. In addition, the Flanders Field museum has a lovely "tap room," where Belgium beer and sandwiches are served.

Note that Ypres was totally destroyed during WWI, and the present day Ypres is a total recreation of the destroyed city.

We appreciate that King Albert I of Belgium played a powerful and dramatic roll in electing to prevent the Germans from fulfilling their WWI modified Schlieffen Plan. King Albert I also played a major roll in the Belgium postwar recovery.

Friday July 10, 2015.

Flanders Battlefield Tours.

Rain or sun, Flanders Battlefield Tours are a must. Knowing that we are on a WWI and WWII Tour (2014-2018 The Great War Centenary Tour) there is a high level of international tourist interest in the Flanders Battlefield Tours. A field guide (human) is really necessary to experience the Ypres Salient battles of WWI.

We found that talking with the numerous Brits, Canadians, Aussies, and Kiwis be very interesting. The British Commonwealth nations played a prominent role in many Flanders and French battles.

The author's paternal grandfather was a U.S. Doughboy, and was a sergeant in the U.S. army with the American Expeditionary Forces who arrived in France in 1917.

The author's grandfather seemed to have had more WWI stories than did his father, who was in the WWII Pacific Theater. On April 6, 1917, when the United States declared war against Germany, the U.S. had a standing army of 127,500 officers and soldiers. By the end of the war, four million men had served in the United States Army, with an additional 800,000 in other military service branches.

The Tyne Cot Cemetery is one of the most notable cemeteries of WWI. We recommend a visit because Tyne Cot Cemetery has been well maintained, and because the record keeping is advanced. Tyne Cot Cemetery is the resting place of 11,954 soldiers of the Commonwealth Forces.

This is the largest number of burials contained in any Commonwealth cemetery of either the First or Second World War. It is the largest Commonwealth military cemetery in the world. Tyne Cot' or 'Tyne Cottage' was the name given by the Northumberland Fusiliers to a barn which stood near the level crossing on the Passchendaele-Broodseinde road. The 3rd Australian Division captured the barn, which had become the center of five or six German blockhouses, or pillboxes, on 4 October 1917, in the advance on Passchendaele. We found that talking with the numerous Brits, Canadians, Aussies, and Kiwis be very interesting.

We learned that many Commonwealth visitors had family members buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery. We noted the Commonwealth headstones in Tyne Cot Cemetery are different from the distinct "markers" used by the U.S. The Germans used a variety of WWI headstones in the German Cemeteries.

Lt. Col. John McCrae, M.D., with the Canadian army, wrote a touching poem in memoriam to the brave soldiers who fought and died "In Flanders Fields.

Fittingly, Flanders Field American Cemetery takes its name from the poem. As a tribute, every year during the Memorial Day ceremony, John McCrae's renowned words are recited:

"In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below...."

On April 6, 1917, when the United States declared war against Germany, the nation had a standing army of 127,500 officers and soldiers. By the end of the war, four million men had served in the United States Army, with an additional 800,000 in other military service branches.

Our tour next took us to the Memorial Museum Passchendaele – Zonnebeke.

We noted that this museum offers visitors both German and Allies artifacts including viewing the reconstructed outdoor trenches of both sides.

During the Great War of 1914-1918 the villages of Passchendaele /Passchendaele, Zonnebeke, Beselare, Geluvelde and Zandvoorde became famous for the part they played on the battlefields of the Ypres Salient. The end of the war devastated the area in November 1918.

The Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 was opened in Zonnebeke Chateau on ANZAC Day 25 April 2004.

We next visited an impressive network of outdoor British and German trenches. The trenches have been constructed using the same materials and methods of construction to give an accurate example of a set of 1914-18 trenches on the Western Front.

Christmas Truce of 1914

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWF2JBb1bvM>

On December 7, 1914, Pope Benedict XV suggested a temporary hiatus of the war for the celebration of Christmas; however, the truce was not accepted.

Our take is that often the WWI soldiers on both sides exhibited better judgment than their commanding officers and “royal leaders.”

We spent several hours in the area of the “Christmas Truce,” and held interesting international conversations with many foreign visitors.

The “Christmas Truce of 1914” came only five months after the outbreak of war in Europe and was one of the last examples of the outdated notion of chivalry between enemies in warfare. It was never repeated; future attempts at holiday ceasefires were quashed by officers’ threats of disciplinary action, but it served as heartening proof, however brief, that beneath the brutal clash of weapons, the soldiers’ essential humanity endured.

Roughly 100,000 British and German troops were involved in the unofficial cessations of hostility along the Western Front. The first truce started on Christmas Eve 1914, when German troops decorated the area around their trenches in the region of Ypres, Belgium and particularly in Saint-Yvon (called Saint-Yves, in Plugstreet/Ploegsteert – Comines-Warneton

The Germans placed candles on their trenches and on Christmas trees, then continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols. The British responded by singing carols of their own. The two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other. Soon thereafter, there were excursions across No Man’s Land, where small gifts were exchanged, such as food, tobacco and alcohol, and souvenirs such as buttons and hats.

The Last Post, the traditional final salute to the fallen, is played by the buglers in honor of the memory of the soldiers of the former British Empire and its allies, who died in the Ypres Salient during the First World War.

Menin Gate or sometimes Menepoort is a large public square housing a gate-like building structure. In the summer expect that 8:00PM will be in daylight.

The actual Last Post may require between 10 – 30 minutes depending on the time of year. We recommend that assembly of international visitors be 20-30 minutes prior to the Last Post.

The Last Post may or may not involve a short military parade. The Last Post usually will feature a set of Bagpipes and from three to ten bugles. Of course, one can hear a pin drop preceding the Last Post.

Fortunately, there are a number of videos showing the Last Post at Menin Gate, and we recommend viewing several videos (WWW) prior to an actual visit. We noted that we visited the 30,001 tattoo, and the previous evening the Belgium Queen had attended the 30,000 tattoo.

Saturday July 11, 2015.

Historic Centre of Bruges, Belgium

We recommend the purchase of a guidebook for the town, either prior to departure or at the tourism information shop in town, be advised.

We spend the full day in the nearby town of Bruges, Belgium, best preserved medieval towns in all of Europe, with more canals than Venice.

"Bruges is the best-preserved medieval city in Belgium!"

At any rate our tour provides a full day in Bruges, Belgium. Bruges is often a day trip from Brussels; however, our WWI & WWII tour has determined that Bruges is a featured site, and we enjoy that.

If one set out to design a fairy-tale medieval town it would be hard to improve on central Bruges. Picturesque cobbled lanes and dreamy canals link exceptionally photogenic market squares lined with soaring towers, historic churches and old whitewashed almshouses. And there’s plenty of it. The only downside is that everyone knows. That means that there’s an almost constant crush of tourists, especially through the summer months.

The Ibis Hotel, Central Kortrijk has an excellent location, and we found this Ibis is near Ypres, and was valuable to our WWI & WWII tour.

Sunday July 12, 2015. Battle of Somme Tour

One hundred and twenty-five miles northwest of Verdun, the British and French armies joined at the Somme River. A Franco-British offensive was planned here for 1916 to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun.

Comprising the main Allied attack on the Western Front during 1916, the Battle of the Somme is famous chiefly on account of the loss of 58,000 British troops (one third of them killed) on the first day of the battle, 1 July 1916, which to this day remains a one-day record. The attack was launched upon a 30-kilometer front, from north of the Somme River between Arras and Albert, and ran from July 1 until November 18.

British General Douglas Haig ordered a massive bombardment of the German lines that would last a week and could be heard across the Channel in England.

But the German troops were deeply dug in and the bombardment did not reach them. Once the shelling was over, of the 100,000 British troops who attacked the German lines July 1, 1916, and 20,000 were killed and over 40,000 were wounded.

It was the single worst day in deaths and casualties in British military history. Eventually this battle, which did not change the front line trenches much at all, involved over 2 million men along a 30 mile front. British and French losses numbered nearly three-quarters of a million men.

July 12 and 13, 2015 Chateau in French village of Chatel-Chehery.

The village of Chatel-Chéhéry is a small village located north east of France. The town of Chatel-Chéhéry is located in the department of Ardennes of the French region Champagne-Ardenne. The village of Chatel-Chéhéry is located in the township of Grandpré part of the district of Vouziers.

We hiked the Sergeant York Trail and the WWI Battlefield where Sergeant Alvin C. York earned his Medal of Honor during the Meuse-Argonne Campaign. We enjoyed the catered picnic that The Chateau Chatel-Chehery arranged.

The Chateau Chatel-Chehery is similar to a small French hotel; we had connectivity in The Chateau Chatel-Chehery rooms, and the WIFI is complimentary.

Monday July 13, 2015.

Sergeant York Trail

The idea for the Sergeant York Historic Trail came from a desire to allow visitors to the area a chance to "follow the footsteps" of the brave men who fought for freedom.

The actual location where Sergeant York earned the Medal of Honor had never been accurately documented and, with the passage of time, had been lost. With years of research in the American and German archives complete, The Sergeant York Discovery Expedition was formed to locate and mark the "York Spot" so that it would never again be lost in time.

The trail and monument are designed to preserve the Sergeant York legacy in the Argonne and honor all those who sacrificed for the cause of freedom in the "Great War."

It would take the help and coordination of the Boy Scouts, Volunteers, Military Liaisons, Political Leaders, Government Officials, and people willing to donate funds and time to make this dream a reality.

Battle of Verdun (1916)

We find that the long Battle of Verdun is very complicated. The science and technologies of the German and French forces are a major step in modern warfare. It is highly interesting to walk the battlefield where thousands of Germans and French fought and died.

The Battle of Verdun is considered the greatest and lengthiest in world history. Never before or since has there been such a lengthy battle, involving so many men, situated on such a tiny piece of land. The battle, which lasted from February 19, 1916 until December 21, 1916 caused over an estimated 700,000 casualties (dead, wounded and missing). The battlefield was not even a square ten kilometers. From a strategic point of view there can be no justification for these atrocious losses.

We recommend that one visit the Verdun site with an expert guide. A skilled guide leader accompanied our tour group through The Ossuary, Fort Douaumont, the Bayonet Trench, and the destroyed village of Fleury devant Douaumont.

The attack on Verdun (the Germans code-named it 'Judgment') came about because of a plan by the German Chief of General Staff, von Falkenhayn. He wanted to "bleed France white" by launching a massive German attack on a narrow stretch of land that had historic sentiment for the French: Verdun.

The area around Verdun contained twenty major forts and forty smaller ones that had historically protected the eastern border of France and had been modernized in the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Tuesday July 14, 2015.

Visit the cliffs of Étretat en route.

Visit village town of Étretat on the Normandy coast

July 14th (Bastille Day)

Honfleur is so utterly enchanting; it is difficult to remember that Honfleur was built essentially for commerce. Honfleur's harbor sits in a great location, tucked away on the southern side of the Seine's estuary. During the Hundred Years War, the French king had this strategic spot fortified, but that did not stop the English occupation for several decades.

Wednesday July 15, 2015.

German bunkers, Normandy.

The Pegasus Bridge.

The taking of Pegasus Bridge in the early hours of D-Day was a major triumph for the Allies. The control of Pegasus Bridge gave the Allies the opportunity to disrupt the Germans ability to bring in re-enforcements to the Normandy beaches, especially those that the British and Canadians were landing at Gold, Juno, and Sword. Even the most basic of delays in getting German troops to the beaches would have been important and the capture of the bridge that guarded the main road to Ouistreham, and then on to the beaches further west was of great importance to the Allies. Control of the road, also meant that the 6th Airborne Division, that had been dropped to the east of Caen, could be supplied by Allied troops that had landed at Sword Beach. Without any control of this road, the 6th Airborne would have been starved of vital equipment.

The Arromanches landing site.

Arromanches is remembered as a historic site of the Normandy landings and in particular as the location where an artificial port was installed. This artificial port allowed the disembarkation of 9,000 tons of material per day.

Pont du Hoc.

Pont du Hoc was a nearly 100-meter-high cliff, with perpendicular sides jutting out into the Channel. It looked down on Utah Beach to the left and Omaha Beach to the right. There were six 155mm cannon in heavily reinforced concrete bunkers that were capable of hitting either beach with their big shells. On the outermost edge of the cliff, the Germans had an elaborate, well-protected outpost, where the spotters had a perfect view and could call back coordinates to the gunners at the 155mm cannons.

Those 155mm cannons had to be neutralized. The Allied bombardment of Pointe-du-Hoc had begun weeks before D-Day. Heavy bombers from the U.S. Eighth Air Force and British Bomber Command had repeatedly plastered the area, with a climax coming before dawn on June 6. Then the battleship Texas took up the action, sending dozens of 14-inch shells into the position. Altogether, Pointe-du-Hoc was hit by more than ten kilotons of high explosives, the equivalent of the explosive power of the atomic bomb used at Hiroshima.

St Mere Eglise.

Despite all set-backs, by 04:30 on the morning of 6th June the Stars and Stripes flag was flying proudly over Sainte Mère Église which became the first town in France to be liberated.

During the first few months of 1944 there were quite a number of allied air raids on and around this small town; the night of June 5 was initially thought by the enemy garrison not to be any different. As it happens a prominent house in the town square caught fire, most likely the result of one or more flares dropped by the Pathfinder squadron.

July 15 and 16, 2015

Thursday July 16, 2015

Mont Saint-Michel has been on our to do list for nearly 50 years. We were very pleased that the 2014-2018 The Great War Centenary Tour included a visit.

Perched on a rocky islet in the midst of vast sandbanks exposed to powerful tides between Normandy and Brittany stand the 'Wonder of the West', a Gothic-style Benedictine abbey dedicated to the archangel St Michael, and the village that grew up in the shadow of its great walls. Built between the 11th and 16th centuries, the abbey is a technical and artistic *tour de force*, having had to adapt to the problems posed by this unique natural site.

Actually the Mont Saint-Michel web site is very professionally done, and several other review sites offer some important advice for the 2015 visit.

We also visited the walled citadel town of St. Malo on the Brittany coast for dinner.

Friday July 17, 2015.

Visit the nearby town of Bayeux and Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the victory of William the Conqueror in the Battle of Hastings of 1066.

The Bayeux Tapestry

The Bayeux Tapestry (actually an embroidery measuring over 230 feet long and 20 inches wide) describes the Norman invasion of England and the events that led up to it. It is believed that the Tapestry was commissioned by Bishop Odo, bishop of Bayeux and the half-brother of William the Conqueror. The Tapestry contains hundreds of images divided into scenes each describing a particular event. The scenes are joined into a linear sequence allowing the viewer to "read" the entire story starting with the first scene and progressing to the last. The Tapestry would probably have been displayed in a church for public view.

"History is written by the victors" and the Tapestry is above all a Norman document. In a time when the vast majority of the population was illiterate, the Tapestry's images were designed to tell the story of the conquest of England from the Norman perspective.

When Monet and his family settled in Giverny in 1883, the parcel of land sloping gently down from the house to the road was planted with an orchard and enclosed by high stone walls. A central alley bordered with pines separated it into two parts. Monet had the pines cut down, keeping only the two yews closest to the house to please Alice.

The central alley is covered over by iron arches on which climbing roses grow. Other rose trees cover the balustrade along the house. At the end of the summer nasturtiums invade the soil in the central alley.

July 17, 18, and 19, 2015

Paris to explore on our own.

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