



Defending the Channel Ports
By
A Coalition of the Willing

A memoir of the 2003 BCMH Battlefield Tour

Itinerary		Directing Staff
Battle of the Dunes	1658	Michael Orr
Siege of Dunkirk	1793	Michael Orr
Lt Morris and King's Own at Meteren	1914	Michael Orr
Lt Montgomery's Wound, Meteren	1914	Laurie Milner
Neuve Chapelle	1915	Gordon Corrigan
Pilckem Ridge, Ypres	1915	Laurie Milner / IWM Team
The Iron Harvest at Varlet Farm, Ypres	1914-18	Mme Cardoen-Descamps
Middelkerke	1917	Michael Orr
Polygon Ridge & Celtic Wood	1917	Gordon Corrigan
Capt Crowe at Neuve Eglise	1918	Michael Orr
9 th Scottish Div at Meteren	1918	Michael Orr
34 th Div at Kemmel Hill and Wyteschaete	1918	Tony Cowan
Fort des Dunes	1880-1940	Michael Orr
Batterie Todt at Calais	1942-date	Jack Livesey
La Coupole, Rocket factory	1943-44	Jack Livesey
Menin Gate Ceremony, Ypres		All

Although advertised as an excursion to the Channel Ports, to be quite honest, the trip largely avoided them. In my view this was wise, since ports are usually grimy, overcrowded, aesthetically unappealing and offer the casual visitor only an array of grossly overpriced souvenirs. On the other hand, the tour was one of the most varied that I can remember, the company was small enough for everyone to get to know each other - and it never rained! And – unlike our sponsors to date – we unquestionably found sites of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Admittedly, we had to traverse our entire area of operations before finding said site on our last stand but, at the time of the visit, this was a greater achievement than that of the people doing the real thing. Jack Livesey led us to La Coupole, a German underground factory dug into the chalk cliffs near Calais. Huge tunnels, lined with concrete, permitted whole railway trains to steam into the complex and were preserved so well that one fully expected Anton Diffring to stalk towards us demanding sight of our papers. The Germans had intended the site to fire a V2 every hour towards London. Seeing these constructions on film suggests that they were merely propaganda devices from 1930's science fiction. On the ground, however, there was no question that these were the precursors of the Minuteman silos and war by ballistic missile. The site was demolished by Tallboy bombs before construction was completed but collateral damage extended to the total demolition of a village a mile away. The contemporary parallels spoke for themselves to members of the BCMH but one felt that a greater awareness of what had been would not go amiss in some quarters.

La Coupole complemented the very first stand on the tour when Jack had taken us to the Batterie Todt, one of the flagship batteries of the Atlantic Wall. Where La Coupole



introduced something brand new in warfare, the 38cm (15.2”) guns of Todt represented the apotheosis of conventional coastal artillery. We saw the wooden boards on which the German crews commemorated their firings at Dover, just as last August we had seen similar memorials adorning the turrets of USS Wisconsin in Norfolk Virginia. Batterie Todt also displayed a vast array of German WW2 militaria of all shapes, sizes and calibres from Luger pistols to a complete 28cm railway gun.

Whenever we visit a battlefield today we are always aware that ground will have presented a different picture to the combatants at the time. Sometimes the changes will be significant, as often in Normandy; at other times less so, such as Gettysburg. Generally, however, details of such changes will be sparse. By a series of coincidences our stop at Pilckem Ridge near Ypres offered us a tantalising glimpse of a particular spot in 1915. Readers may be aware that a planned motorway extension has stimulated an archaeological investigation by the Belgian Government in which our own Imperial War Museum has become involved. At one “Time Team” looking excavation we were treated to a presentation by Peter Barton about the exploits of Lt Skeggs who had served on that very spot in 1915. We heard about a patrol action from a letter to his father supported, remarkably, by a series of his own photographs. These had enabled the precise location to be pinpointed. The views of untended vegetation and lines of trees on the bare slopes where we were standing allowed us to see that his patrol was not the suicide mission that might be suggested simply by looking at the ground today. This was an intriguing glimpse of trench war 1915 and a reminder, if one were needed, of the value of detailed knowledge of the terrain.

Those who are not asleep by now and who have studied the itinerary will not be surprised to hear how, again, we saw the British Army fighting its way from the 19th century to the 21st between 1914 and 1918. Freshly disembarked from HMS Invincible, Gordon Corrigan described fighting with Lee-Enfield, bayonet and jam tin in the streets of Neuve Chapelle whilst Michael Orr illustrated what charismatic leaders were doing in the same circumstances four years later in Neuve Eglise. I do not know if there was a Military History Society in Meteren prior to the First World War. Had there been, then its members would surely have been thrilled to know that their town was to be at the epicentre of the “Revolution in Military Affairs”. Notwithstanding the local motorway we were able to stand behind the hedge where Lt Morris sited his machine gun to cover the advance of his battalion in 1914 and a Lt Montgomery of the Royal Warwicks was badly wounded. Four years later an entire battalion of Vickers machine-guns was in action, supporting precious few riflemen. Finally the 9th Scottish Division decided that the venue was an ideal one in which to “educate” their opponents with smoke, gas, a predicted barrage and an assault not launched at dawn.

Screens of machine gunners formed the main resistance to 34th Division’s advance from Kemmel in 1918. As usual Tony Cowan illustrated his discussion of the formation with vignettes of some of its more eccentric characters but on this occasion he had gone behind the hill to Bavaria. The records there put names and words, if not faces, to opponents who remained determined and skilful to the very end. More and more information is becoming available from continental archives and in conversation afterwards Tony explained that they were in surprisingly good order. A few days later I found myself sorting through books from the 1960’s and 1970’s about Great War battles and I wondered how relevant they would be once new generations of historians had got their hands on the data.



Of course, it is not just soldiers and historians who have had to deal with the Revolution in Military Affairs. Ordinary people must do so too. Most visitors to Great War battlefields will have seen the produce of the 'Iron Harvest' stacked at the corners of fields awaiting the Bomb Disposal teams. Michael Orr arranged for us to visit Varlet Farm near Poelcapelle and hear a talk by its owner, Madame Charlotte Cardoen-Descamps, who entertained us to coffee and delicious apple cake in her brand-new B&B converted barn. We heard how her family had moved to the area in 1920 following the provision of financial incentives to move to devastated areas. In English that was probably superior to that of some members of the BCMH party, Charlotte described the characteristics of the various weapons and munitions excavated on the site of the former moated farm, set off some sticks of cordite for us and explained what happened when the plough sets off the cartridge of a live 18pdr round under the sod.

Not to be outdone, Michael Orr then described the capture of the Farm by Hood Battalion of the Royal Naval Division in October 1917 with the aid of copies of Herbert Asquith's mud-stained patrol map. From the description of the conditions at the time it became eminently clear why the Royal Naval Division had been tasked with Varlet Farm – who said GHQ were all bunglers? Although the modern farms largely stand on the sites of their predecessors it is still impossible to imagine the state of the battlefield at the time – my personal view is that the closest picture is provided by Edmund Campion-Vaughan's "Some Desperate Glory" but no doubt others have their own favourites.

Varlet Farm is ideally located if you want to stay near Ypres. Look at <http://www.varletfarm.com/> for more information.

More successful than the October battles in the mud was the Australian advance from Polygon Wood to Broodseinde Ridge in Sept / Oct 1917. Gordon Corrigan led the approx 1 km advance, on foot, from the Start Line on a happily sunny afternoon. A particularly bloody engagement ensued when both sides decided to attack each other at the same time and met in No Man's Land. The forces of Oz prevailed over those of the Wicked Witch of the East, however, and from the final objective we were able to look down the slight slope to Celtic Wood where two Australian raids had taken place.

Our investigations at Ypres concluded with a visit to the Menin Gate ceremony. Some of those who had not attended before were surprised at the large numbers of people attending this very moving occasion. We followed up by dining together at La Trompette in the Grande Place – a fitting end to a long but fascinating and varied day.

Perhaps to head-off court action under the Trade Descriptions Act, the Directing Staff had organised some stands at ports or, as at Middelkerke, port-like venues. Apart from those disadvantages possessed by ports listed at the start of this article there are others. Being close to the sea they tend, when not actually wet, to be windy and cold. Such was the case at Middelkerke, which, to add insult to injury, had not even seen a battle! It had, however, been the subject of a great deal of planning for one in 1917 when the 1st Division was placed in sealed camps to train for an amphibious landing on the beaches there. We are all used to a plethora of visual aids and extensive briefing material on Michael Orr's stands (one day there will surely be the cinema, the wall-map, the billiard cue pointer etc) but for this non-event he had exceeded even his normal high standards. It is not easy in a force 6 being steadily chilled



to the marrow to handle cutaway diagrams of the sea-wall, photographs of monitors, pontoons, diagrams of the effect of the tide on the boats, loading tables, the use of “funny” tanks, or take in the memoirs of the naval officer whose brainchild the assault was. But BCMH tours are nothing if not character-forming and the desertion rate stuck at a resolute 0%. Once we had returned to our transport the GOC restored morale by issuing a rum ration.

Would the assault have been successful? I think we felt that barring disaster from tide or weather the troops would probably have got ashore successfully. The problem would have been maintaining the beachhead. This was recognised at the time and the attack would only have been launched if it could have been relieved by the main body advancing along the coast within a couple of days.

Dunkirk, on the other hand, has seen a good deal of real fighting. We looked at three battles, in 1658, 1793 and 1940. Following our picnic we were granted access to the Fort des Dunes, a Seré de Rivières fortification of around 1880 vintage. Constructed after the Franco-Prussian war in the dunes about five miles to the east of Dunkirk, the fort was in good condition – apart from the four hits by a single Dornier in May 1940. It was quite possible to appreciate the intricacies of the design although I am always surprised at how few guns are actually mounted on these huge investments in stone. One noticed that considerably more attention had been paid to the provision of cooking rather than washing facilities but this is France. Steps are being taken to restore the fort and it will certainly be an impressive attraction.

From the roof of the fort Michael Orr described the nearby battle of the Dunes in 1658 between Spanish and French armies, the latter under the great Turenne. By circumstances so complicated that they fuddled my brain more effectively than some of the dodgier tax avoidance schemes that have crossed my desk, English, Irish and Scottish troops were fighting on both sides. Broadly speaking, Cromwell’s troops (wearing red for the first time in war) supported the French whilst former cavaliers – true to their tradition of backing losers – fought on the Spanish side. The battle proved to be the decisive engagement in the struggle between France and Spain that had resulted from Spanish intervention in the Fronde rebellion and, following his victory, Turenne was able to take Dunkirk. One hundred and fifty years later English troops under the Duke of York were less successful in the face of the French revolutionary armies, having to dump their siege guns in the canals in a manner that was regrettably to become traditional.

Following our trip to Dunkirk, it remained only to conduct our own evacuation. During this phase the traditional award was made for the quote of the trip. There were two final contenders:

“Dunes Make You Freeze More Easily”

Dr J Peaty

“One woman’s vice is another man’s good fortune”

Laurie Milner

The effects of Middelkerke were clearly felt more vividly than vice of any sort and John Peaty was pronounced the winner by acclamation.



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We had a very high ratio of leaders to led on this trip and I would like to thank all the DS for their efforts in providing one of the most memorable and varied tours that I can remember.

Andy Grainger