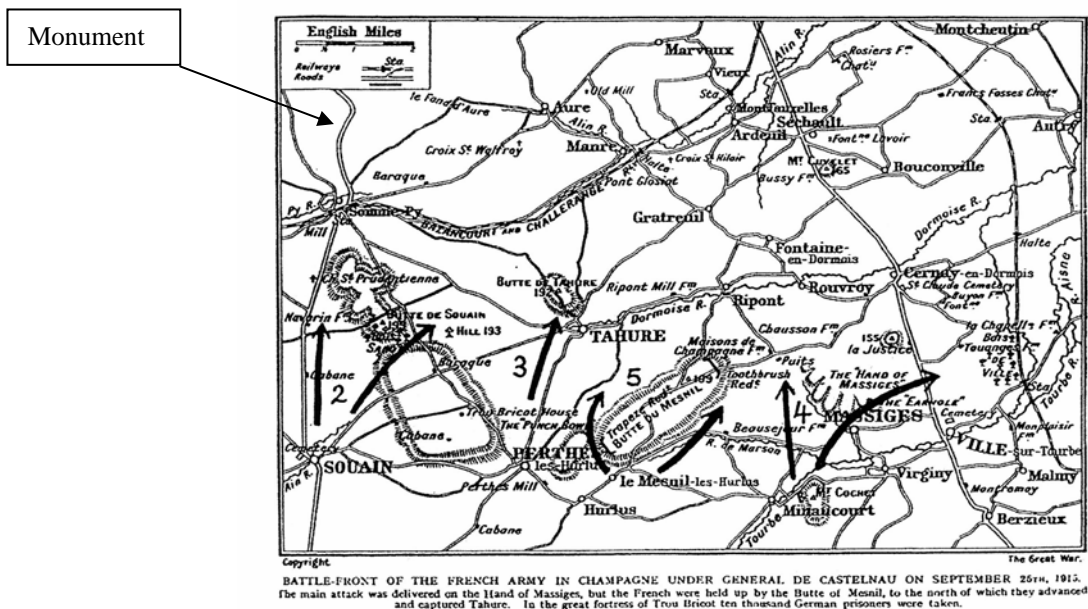


AUGUST 2006 – A Report from the Champagne Expeditionary Force

A Tour organised by George Bailey to the French battlefields of 1915

Report by George Bailey and Andy Grainger

The platform on top of the American Somme Monument¹ gave us a clear view of the German Armies' three lines of defence held by them for four years of the Great War. Furthest back is the Blanc-Mont ridges line which ran through Monthois towards the Moronvilliers Ridge, the second line ran through Manre and Sommepey-Tahure to the south whilst the first line lies along the Buttes of Mesnil, Tahure and Souain which dominate the ground before them. The first line was the scene of tremendous fighting in 1915. Much is now covered by a military training area and so has returned to nature rather than cropped grass downland.



It was the 22nd of August when the CEF left England for Reims and the start of the tour. Inspecting the destroyed Nauroy chapel before driving along the Moronvilliers ridge² showed us the destructive effect of French shellfire. Passing through Auberive it was difficult to believe this now quiet village was once one of the most ferociously defended points on the Western Front. Turning up the muddy track at les Wacques³ we paused at the French memorial to the 28th Brigade to see the series of ridges with their reverse slopes that made such an excellent position for the German defenders. Remarking on the almost Teutonic severity of the cross and the surrounding tablets, the speculation was that this brigade was from Alsace - that corner of France seized by the Prussians in 1871.

¹ Visited by the BCMH on the Battlefield Tour in, I think, 1997.

² The Moronvilliers Ridge is about 20 miles off the map to the west. It featured heavily in Nivelle's 1917 offensive. It lies to the left as you leave Reims for Suippes on the D931 and is a shallow slope devoid of cover.

³ Auberive and Les Wacques are off the map to west about 5 miles and 1 mile respectively. The 15 mile sector between Auberive and Massiges was the sector attacked by the French on 25 Sept 1915.

At 17.00 hrs the CEF's three cars were drawn up at the Navarin Farm Memorial topped by its magnificent statues of three poilus. The three carved faces are modeled on General Henri Gouraud, commander of the 4th Army, the American pilot Quentin Roosevelt, son of the US President, and the sculptor, Maxime Real Del Sarte.



Photo taken near Navarin Farm in 1915. The Monument that replaces it offers very similar vistas over the chalk downland today although the area covered by the Camp Militaire to the east is overgrown with scrubby woodland.

At 18.00 hrs, as planned, the CEF convoy swept into the Camp de Suippes. After bunking down in a block for French officers attending the range's live-firing exercises, we repaired to the canteen for the first of several excellent value for money meals. Thereafter we decided to sample the hostelrys of Suippes to find to our dismay that they were shut. After an abortive drive into the French countryside, on returning we found by chance one whose proprietor was a military fanatic. With beer, wine and coffee on our tables, we were able to pore over the maps needed for the next day's tour. Bill Philpott had obtained original maps from Palat's official history published in the 1920s to supplement the copies of the military map given to George in 2001.

Next morning was 5 years to the day since my reconnaissance of the Champagne Battlefield. The Camp's commander was still Major Verité and he asked Sergeant Eric Marchal to be our guide as Eric is also the historian of the ruined villages. We began by visiting the memorial to the Foreign Legion which had punched through the Sabot wood to almost seize the Souain ridge⁴ but at tremendous cost. Eric's knowledge of the ground allowed us to see the remnants of the German trench systems at the wood and later on the ridge.

Following his 'Jeep', the two Vauxhall Omegas driven by Bill Cox and Simon House carried the seven of us along the pebble and clay tracks to inspect the ruined villages of Tahure, Perthes-les-Hurlus, Hurlus and le Mesnil-les-Hurlus⁵. Since 2001 a path to one of the great mines blown under the German lines had been cleared so we were able to compare it with those seen at les Eparges, the Somme, Messines, and elsewhere.

⁴ The right-hand arrow '2' on the Map. Whilst becoming overgrown this area still has a resemblance to its March 1915 existence. Being 1915 this was very much trench warfare and we were able to see remains of the "crenellated" signature of the German trenchlines quite clearly in several places.

⁵ Arrows 3 and 5 on the Map. What was open chalk downland in 1915 is now seriously wooded albeit carpeted with wildflowers giving off clouds of insects including lots of brightly coloured butterflies. I am bound to say that after two ruined villages I found the flora and fauna rather more appealing! Nevertheless, one could appreciate that the high ground marked on the map dominated the ground and offered serious difficulties for the attacker.

After lunch we inspected the very few remaining stones of the heavily fought-over Beausejour Farm. On to the Mesnil ridge with its scattering of mud-caked shells, trench-mortar bombs and wire cutters. Earlier, on the Tahure ridge, we had seen lying on the ground unexploded grenades and clips with live ammunition. When showing Brenda Binge a cartridge she rapidly handed it back on being told it was still live. And one mystery was partially cleared up. How did the soldiers fix the barbed wire to the metal stakes, especially when wiring at night? Separating lengths of wire were small flat plates with holes the diameter of the stakes to which the wire was clamped. So the plates could be slotted on to the stakes and slid down to where required. But this was German wire and George had not seen such plates on British and French barbed wire.



Bill Philpott, George Bailey and the Editor enjoying an evening's R&R in Suippes (in common, it seems) with every NATO unit that has ever existed. The redeye afflicting Bill is not due to technical difficulties amongst the photographic staff but reflects the eyestrain of locating the gains made by the French in their March 1915 offensive on the maps which he had brought. His condition was not improved by the requirement of an enthusiastic customer to inspect the war's worth of GQG Communiqués which the gentleman was storing in his loft. Photo by Bill Cox

At the ruined village of Ripont we saw the two family graves for descendents of the Ripont villagers and the memorial to the German defenders. But as it was late in the afternoon we did not carry on along the ridged track to inspect the stone bridge over the Dormoise stream that survived the artillery fire completely intact. Returning to the offices to thank the French Military, there was still time to squeeze in the local bar before supper. Brenda ordering a round of drinks caused consternation because the bar keeper and the French men there could not comprehend a woman buying drinks.

Once the culture clash had been resolved we said goodbye to Andy Grainger and John Badley who were returning to consume the local product at their *gite*.

That evening we chatted too long over supper to find ourselves locked in behind the high fences. Deciding we were too old to do what comes naturally to undergraduates re-entering their halls of residence, we rang Security to come and unlock the gate!

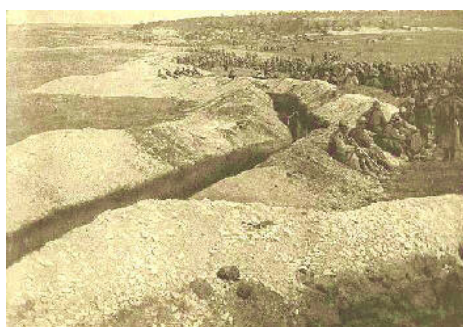
Next day the first stop was at the sombre Minaucourt cemetery where the long lines of French crosses and the numbers of large burial pits brought home the human cost of the two battles of Champagne. Climbing the Hand of Massiges⁶ and looking down to where the French assault lines had been between the ‘fingers’ made us realise why Pétain had to move his Alpine 75s from the Vosges mountains to land shells on the German trenches. Unlike the ridges to the west, the French cleared the ridge and held it against ferocious counter-attacks. On to the land north of the camp we stopped at the tiny village of Rouvrois that had added the name Ripont to keep the memory of that ruined village alive (as has been done with the names of the other ruined villages).

Our new understanding of the topography let us see how critical the failure was to drive the Germans off the Souain and Tahure ridges. It took until General Gouraud weakened the German forces there in 1918 by a clever trick that the French with the American forces were able to surge over these ridges, use tanks to overwhelm the second line and then break through the third and final line.

After lunch at the Reims civilian airfield, we went to the Pompelle fort to see the amazing Friese collection of German helmets. The CEF then split up, Bill Philpott and Simon leaving to tour the Battle of the Frontier battlefield in the Ardennes. Bill Cox, Brenda and George headed for Calais through heavy rain that at one stage reduced visibility to nothing.

Each of us took away our own memories of the Champagne battlefield but all now understand better the military problems the French commanders under Joffre faced in trying to link the assaults with those in Artois and at Loos. The topography was too tricky to assault with the weaponry then available but the two offensives had to be attempted if the French and British were to drive the German Armies back to the Rhine. Nevertheless the French learned from Champagne and were able to withstand the enormous pressure exerted at Verdun before spectacularly breaking through the German lines on the Somme on the First of July 1916. Unfortunately British military learning was not so far advanced and the French success was allowed to congeal into the months of attritional trench warfare.

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The troops had to construct their own cover on the open terrain. Contemporary photographs show a bleak landscape interspersed with large woods which gradually acquire the typical Great War character.

⁶ Arrow 4 on the map

⁷ This photo and that Navarin Farm come from <http://www.worldwar1.com/france/champ1.htm>, a website with an extract from the book by the US War Reporter E. Alexander Powell, “Vive la France” published in 1916. It offers a vivid description of the author’s visit to the Front.