

A VERY LASALLIAN JOURNEY

There are school trips and then there is the De La Salle Battlefields History Field trip. This is not just a trip to some old battlefields it is a pilgrimage back into the not too distant past that ancestors of our students made in very different circumstances as well as being Lasallian journey.

The journey began on a Monday evening in June for some twenty seven students three teachers and two school chaplains. At eleven o'clock the coach left followed by the chaplain in her own vehicle who making first solo visit to the continent because of the need for an early return. The crossing of the channel was made just as dawn was breaking and we were following the same course some ninety-six years later than those poor souls whose final resting places we were to visit in the next few days.

Our first stop in Belgium was Essex Farm Cemetery which was at the clearing station where John McCrea worked and is famous for the war poem in 'Flanders Field'. In this cemetery the students found the grave of a British soldier whose age was fourteen; one year younger than them. On next to Brandhoek Military Cemetery to visit the grave of the son of the Bishop of Liverpool, Noel Chevasse. He was a doctor who won the Victoria Cross twice but lost his life on the Ypres Salient.

Our base for the week, Poperinge, was reached next via the Poperinge Military Cemetery. Contained within this are again British fallen along with French and a small number of Germans. Religious emblems on the graves were the Cross; the star of David and the Cresent. Also buried here were some 'shot at dawn' soldiers. In Poperinge Talbot House was visited. This was a centre set up for all troops by an Anglican chaplain 'Tubby' Clayton in memory of his friend who was killed in the Ypres salient and whose grave we later found. It was to be a rest centre for all and where your rank was left at the door. We were to return here on our final evening in Belgium.

Earlier I spoke about the graves of the shot at dawn soldiers; we now visited their execution place and post which is reputed to have been behind Poperinge town hall along with the cells where these poor unfortunates spent their last night on earth. After a swim; a good meal and a review of the day it was to a welcome bed.

The second day was spent around the Ypres area starting with a visit to St. Georges chapel where there are hundreds of different memorials to the fallen of the Ypres salient. This includes a plate in commemoration of those students of West Park Grammar School St. Helens who lost their lives in the conflict. Moving on we visited the Flanders Field exhibition in the Cloth Hall Ypres. This is a very moving tribute to all involved in the fighting

in the Ypres Salient.

Later in the morning we moved on to Langemark German Cemetery. In this are buried 44,324 German dead including two British soldiers. At the entrance is a large communal grave with the remains of 25,000 unknown German soldiers. In this Cemetery are the fallen of the 1st Battle of Ypres in October 1914 which is known the Massacre of the Innocents. The Germans were students from Heildburg and Munich Universities who were put into battle after short training and were literally mowed down by the professional British army that they were attacking. At this grave the chaplain, Ann Marie Harrison and the students held a short Remembrance Service for these fallen and laid a memento of our visit. This was a candle and plant holder made by the technician in Technology, Maurice Wright. The plant was a rose sadly called Remember Me. This was a very moving moment; the first of many on this journey.

Next came the visit to Tyne Cot Cemetery. Walking round a brick and local pebble wall the students were taken aback with what faced them on the other side. In front of them were row upon row of white headstones, around 11,000 in number of British and commonwealth war dead. It looked as if the dead were on parade. Behind them on the walls were engraved the names of around another 56,000 dead who have no known resting place. The students were awestruck by what the cemetery contained.

Our next stop was at Sanctuary Wood where the original trenches have been preserved. The Military Cemetery was also visited and the grave of 'Tubby' Clayton's friend in whose memory Talbot House and later Toc H was founded, was discovered.

A quick evening meal and then on to the Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres. This was very moving and is something the local fire brigade perform every day of the year in memory of the dead of the Ypres Salient. On the walls of the gate are the names of 54,900 British and Commonwealth soldiers who fell and have no known grave.

Thursday found us heading to the Somme and our first call was at the Peronne Road Cemetery in which lie the dead of the St. Helens Pals. These were young men who joined up from the St. Helens area and fought and died together, many in the first hours or day of the battle of the Somme. A short Service of Remembrance was held and a poppy wreath laid on the altar. Individual poppy crosses were laid by the students on many graves and it was ironic that the anniversary of the start of the Battle of the Somme was ninety four years ago the following week.

The front line of the Somme Battle was followed north and Delville Wood, a South African Cemetery was visited. It was in this cemetery that the grave of Lt. Frodsham, an old boy of West Park Grammar School was visited. His name is commemorated on a memorial in the present school chapel.

We moved on to Lochnagar Crater and Blighty Valley Cemetery. The crater was created when the British exploded a giant mine under the German front line on the 1st July 1916. Memorials can be found here to both the British and the German war dead. Blighty Valley Cemetery is a small cemetery holding British dead from the first day of the battle and they are buried where they fell.

Thiepval Memorial was our next stop. On this giant monument are engraved the names of those killed in the battle of the Somme who have no known graves. Some of the students thought they recognised the names of distant relatives in some of the local regiments. I found the name of my great uncles engraved on the monument. Our final visit on the Somme was to Beaumont Hammel where there is a memorial to the Newfoundland Regiment who were virtually wiped out in this sector. The trenches they fought in remain as does their graves.

The final act of our Lasallian journey was back to Talbot house in Poperinge to the chapel in the attic. The students and the chaplain, Ann Marie, put together a Eucharistic service with the key feature being palm crosses on which the students put the names on of some of the dead they had come across at the places visited. These names included British, German, French, African, Canadian, Australian, South Africans, New Zealanders and even Chinese. This moving service was dedicated to those fallen soldiers.

Our students were excellent throughout the trip and gained many positive compliments from different people. Tour guides from other coaches; some Canadians in the Flanders Field Museum; some older visitors in the Beaumont Hammel Cemetery on the Somme; even the coach driver he thought they were marvellous. In a period where your people are often pilloried by the national press because of their attitudes and behaviour they were a wonderful ambassadors for De La Salle; to themselves; their families and I thank them for making it a wonderful experience that I will never forget. They went not knowing what was ahead of them but came back as fine young people who had probably just grown up a little. Such a trip would not have flourished without the planning, organisation and continual commentaries without Mr. Blackburne and Mrs. Ellis and the

company of Ann-Marie and Helen from the Chaplaincy team. Thank you.

There were many moments on this trip that I will remember but perhaps the most poignant one was in Blighty Cemetery on the Somme. Most of the named headstones had engravings chosen by their families but the one that stood out just had: 'Goodnight Daddy'. Oh, the futility of war.

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