

Barry McLoughlin

Notes for visit to France and Belgium, May 2016

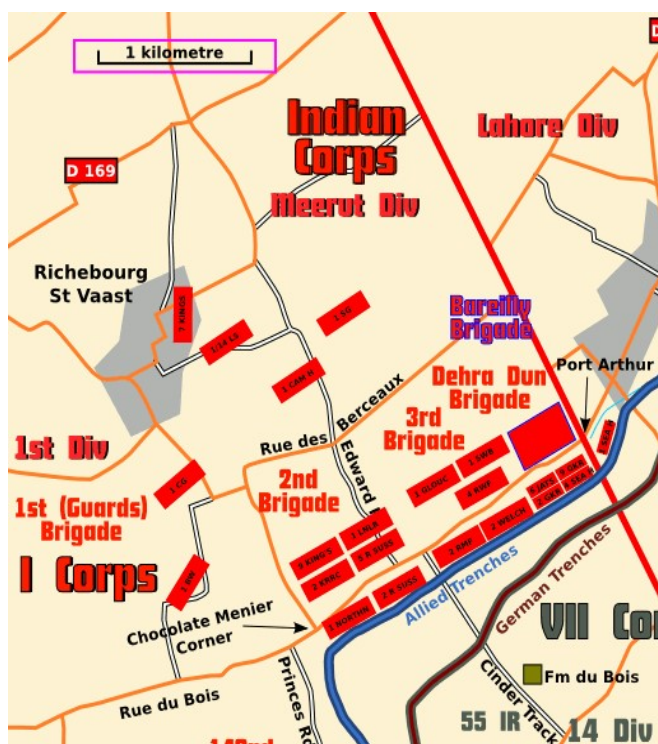
Our tour covers the northern part of the Western Front occupied by British and Belgian forces from 1914 and the most infamous battles in the Ypres Salient (Messines June 1917, Passchendaele July-November 1917). Once the war of movement in northern France and Belgium stopped in September 1914, armies began to dig in. It was soon discovered around Ypres that surface water was reached when one dug down about 2 feet. That meant that most British trench walls were really mounds of sandbags. And as the British generals believed in the offensive, they did not put the same effort, initially at least, into building reinforced defensive posts by using concrete and steel as the Germans did. Generally, around Ypres it was the British who did the attacking and the Germans the defending. Persistent shell fire destroyed the dyke system evolved over centuries by Flemish farmers which drained what was essentially a swamp. This is another reason why the area around Ypres became a sea of mud in 1917.

Messines (Mesen) in the south of the salient was in German hands from November 1914 to June 1917 and was lost to the Germans again in April 1918. This is the smallest statutory city in Belgium and has a small public museum. Visitors view the New Zealand memorial in the town or walk out to the **Irish Peace Park**, opened by President Mary McAleese, Queen Elisabeth and King Albert of Belgium on 11 November 1998. Its most prominent feature is the Round Tower and the memorial tablets with quotes from Irish soldiers. Irish losses at the Battle of Messines in Jun 1917 were relatively light: 16th (Irish) Division: 1,183, ca. 280 killed; 36th (Ulster Division) 1,119, ca. 200 dead. Some of the casualties suffered by the 16th were caused by “friendly fire”, when on the evening of the 7th June 1917 a British artillery barrage ordered to break up weak German counter-attacks “fell short”.

Adolf Hitler was a regimental runner in the Bavarian List Regiment in the town from November 1914 to March 1915. He was based in vault of the town church where Matilda, the mother-in-law of William the Conqueror was buried. A painting of Hitler’s of the sunken road at **Cronaert** (near **Bayernwald trenches**) is probably still on display in Messines museum.

Our first bus tour takes us to **Fromelles**, the scene of a battle on 19-20 July 1916, a diversionary attack during the Somme offensive planned to draw German reserves out of the mid-battle area. It was a disaster, the first blooding in France of Australian forces. As you know, they had been severely mauled at Gallipoli the previous year. Badly thought out and executed (the Germans were well entrenched), the Fromelles attack cost British and Imperial forces 8,500 casualties and contributed greatly to dissatisfaction on the part of Australian soldiers and politicians with British generals. 250 bodies were discovered on the site in 2009, the starting point of a redesign of the cemetery, the erection of a “Digger” memorial” and the opening of a museum which we shall visit. The fiasco cost the Australians 5,533 casualties, with two battalions wiped out. Our next stop is at **Rue du Bois** in the commune of Richebourg, the site of the **Battle of Aubers Ridge**, where the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers suffered appalling losses on 9 May 1915.

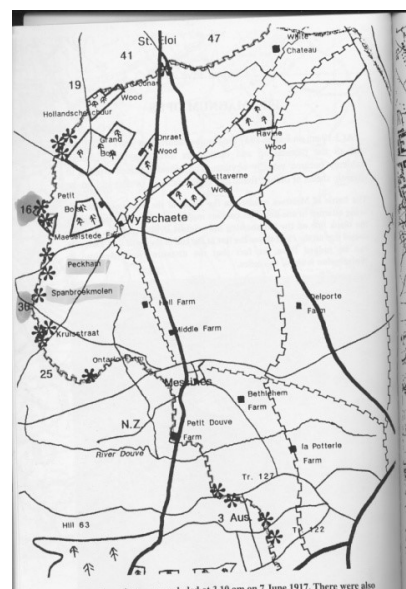
The **Aubers Ridge** battle was one in a series of unsuccessful operations launched by the British in 1915 and failing because of lack of artillery, shells and guns, which meant that German defensive positions were not destroyed, especially machine-gun nests. The 2nd Munsters (1st Brigade, 1st Division) were to take place in the southern sector of the attack facing the German-held village of Lorgies. The battalion left billets after 7PM on 8 May and reached the front line just before midnight. As we shall see, the Munsters stopped on the way, receiving general absolution from their chaplain, Fr. Francis Gleeson from Tipperary. This is the subject of the famous painting by Fortunino Matania. The men went over the top at 5.35AM, the right wing advancing where the **cinder track** now is. (See map)



One company of Munsters managed to reach the German trenches, taking the first and second lines. Most of the Munsters were killed in a German counter-attack and eleven survivors became POWs. They were the only battalion in the brigade to reach the German breastworks. The losses of the Munsters totalled 400, and the CO, Colonel Rickard, was killed. A second attack was launched (without the Munsters) in the afternoon, but was soon called off because the men were mown down crossing no-man's land or killed by German shells while waiting in their own trench system. British forces had a total casualty list of 15,000, and Aubers Ridge (really a crease in the ground) was not captured by the Allies until October 1918. We shall look at the **Munsters' memorial** (a miniature depiction of Matania's painting) on the roadside which was opened on the centenary of the battle last May. It is in a gravel pit which is the original site of the grotto (destroyed) in front of which Fr. Gleeson on horseback blessed the regiment.

On 10th May we stay in the vicinity of **Messines**, the scene of the famous battle (7-14 June 1917) in the south of the Ypres Salient. The attack was a great success, preceded by the detonation of 19 mines (shaded on the map) which blew up German trenches.

It was the first time that the 36th (Ulster) Division fought side-by-side with their nationalist fellow countrymen of the 16th (Irish) Division. Here you see the deployment of British forces, the numbers denoting divisions, the large asterisks mines. The battle, beginning on 7 June 1917 was a morale-booster, advance was rapid at first and Irish troops entered Wytchaete during the morning. Further south, however, along the river Douve German resistance was stronger, and



the offensive was called off on 14 June. The Germans did not understand why the British did not make much more of their advance, not knowing that it was part of a general offensive which would begin in the north and east over a month later. The Messines battle was planned in great detail by General Herbert Plumer, commander of the 2nd Army. On the first day of the 1917 Battle of Messines **Major Willie Redmond MP**, a brother of John Redmond and a major in the Royal Irish Regiment (depot: Clonmel), was wounded. At the time he was 56 years of age and assigned to stay behind with the staff, but he beseeched General Hickie, CO of the 16th Division, to allow him to join the advance with his men. Redmond had two minor wounds, in the arm and the calf but he died a few hours later, possibly from shock and a weak heart. **(The walkers will cover his path.)**

We shall visit **Locre Churchyard** (first “shot at dawn” men) and nearby **Redmond’s grave near Locre**, where he was buried in the garden of the nuns’ convent, which was destroyed in the 1918 fighting. The British War Graves Commission wished to re-inter Redmond in the adjoining Locre Hospice Cemetery but the locals and Redmond’s family protested and were successful. Travelling uphill to **Mount Kemmel**, we see the land taken by the Germans in a second attempt on 25th April 1918 (Battle of the Lys), when they drove a vastly outnumbered French division off this prominently elevated ground in an otherwise flat landscape. On the hill there is an impressive French ossuary with the remains of 5,000 unidentified soldiers, most of whom had perished in a ferocious German artillery bombardment. The area was re-taken by the Allies in August-September 1918. During our stay around Wytschaete we stop at **Kemmel Chateau Military Cemetery**. It contains the graves of many Irishmen, not least **Capt. James Patrick Roche**, whose headstone has an Irish inscription. Beside Croonart Wood Cemetery is the

Bayernwald trench complex. Excavated by the initiative of a local schoolteacher, the trenches were not damaged by the mines exploded on 7 June 1917 and indeed they were empty when troops from an English division entered them. More or less untouched by time are German shelter bunkers, which were designed to protect soldiers during a bombardment but were too small for use as a permanent dugout. The 1st Battalion of the Munsters took part in the battle, probably as “moppers up”. Other stops are the **16th Division Celtic Cross** outside Wytschate and the **marker stones** nearby where the 16th and 36th Divisions “jumped off” on 7 June 1917.



In the afternoon our journey takes us into **Ypres** itself. Between the restored buildings of St. Martins Cathedral and the Cloth Hall one finds the **monument to the Royal Munster Fusiliers** unveiled in 1926. Its inscribed panels are in Irish and English. **In Flanders Fields Museum** is an impressive exhibition which has recently been revamped. After a leisurely meal we attend the **Last Post** ceremony at the Menin Gate. There are inscribed panels with the names of soldiers on the walls of the **Menin Gate**, commemorating 55,000 soldiers with no known graves and who were killed in the salient up to 15 August 1917. This is where the moving “Last Post” ceremony takes place daily (8pm in the summer). The buglers are from the local fire brigade, and the wreath bearers are often British service personnel. Once could

spend a whole day walking around the ramparts of Ypres, visiting churches and museums or feeding the swans in the moat.

Our third and last full day takes us over the battlefield of “Third Wipers” (July-November 1917) to the north and east of the town. Beforehand we make a detour to the north to **Vladslo German Cemetery**, where we can see the contrast between German and British burial grounds. The site is famous for the haunting sculpture of grieving parents by **Käthe Kollwitz**, whose only son was killed in the area in 1914. Our next halt is at **Essex Farm Bunkers** in Ypres itself. Here the Canadian military doctor **Col. John McCrae** wrote his famous “In Flanders Fields the poppies blow” poem. We then visit the memorial to **Francis Ledwidge**, the Irish poet who had served in Gallipoli and Salonika before being transferred to Ypres with the 1st Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. He was killed by a shell on 31 July 1917 when laying duckboards for troops attacking Pilckem Ridge. The monument was a Belgian initiative. Ledwidge and his comrades lie nearby in **Artillery Wood Cemetery**. The road to Zonnebeke (**Passchendaele Memorial Museum**) takes us across the battleground of Third Ypres, which ended on 10 November 1917 when Canadian troops captured Passchendaele. Total British casualties were 300,000, i.e. 35 men for every meter of ground gained from July to November. The tactical gains of the months of slaughter were insignificant for the Germans still held some high ground north of Passchendaele in the north-east and around Gheluvelt in the south-east. No breakthrough was ever likely and Field Marshall Douglas Haig should have stopped the attacks in October when the bog-like conditions on the battlefield had made movement impossibly slow. We make a brief pause at **Tyne Cot Cemetery**. This is the largest British military graveyard in the world, with 12,000 single graves (8,000 identified) and 35,000 names on panels on the north wall of the grounds of men whose bodies were never recovered and who died before 16 August 1917. The **new museum** at the entrance is excellent not least because it concentrates on individual soldiers, their possessions and letters. As regards the history of the 3rd Battle of Ypres salient, the Munsters’ 2nd battalion took part in the latter stages of “Third Wipers” with billets at Irish Farm west of St. Juliaan. Their attack was to capture German strongholds in ruined farms and concrete bunkers. The battle swayed to and fro on 10 November: rifles or machine-guns were inoperative because of the mud, men advanced too far and were subsequently taken prisoner; others captured, lost and re-captured German posts. On the morning the heavily laden Munsters had left their trenches with a total strength of 650 officers and men. A roll call 27 hours later mustered only 247 all ranks remaining. The double irony was that this was the last day of a senseless battle.

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