

Pilgrimage to Fromelles.

The Battlefields tour was organized to coincide with the dedication of the new Fromelles [Pheasant Wood] cemetery and departed Paris in mid July for the Western Front.

Amongst the four touring buses of Australians were a number of ex-service men, mainly “grunts” but as usual “gunners” are “Ubique”, and it was great to see another locater, well known and liked Kev Salter, aboard bus 3. He was there for No 762 Alexander Salter 28th Battalion, a Gallipoli veteran, KIA Pozeires Heights 6th August 1916 and commemorated at Villers -Bretonneux and No 5919 Thomas Salter 27th Battalion WIA Broodsiende Ridge 4th October 1917, DOW the next day and buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery Belgium

The dedication day, symbolically held on the 19th July, was very hot and many suffered from the heat. A special Eurostar train brought relatives from London for service, into the beautiful provincial French countryside, to join the many others gathered at Fromelles. The dedication and burial service, telecast live and widely reported by the media, was well organized and our participating diggers did us proud!

It was a very emotional day, particularly for those relatives who were now able to place wreaths on the graves of the 96 Australians so far indentified. Several of the tour group spoke during the dedication service, in particular Andrew Guest, there for his great uncle Lieutenant Eric Chinner now buried in the new cemetery. Andrew was a section commander with 12th Field Regiment and 1st Field Regiment Vietnam 68/69 and knew John Lohore and Andrew Overall, fellow locaters Vietnam 68/69.

For most, such as myself, my relatives have n't been found and indentified. No 2639 Cecil Woods Giblett 59th Battalion and No 3458 Ralph Sinclair Allen 58th Battalion died on the 19th July 1916 at Fromelles, part of that first action by the 15th Brigade, 5th Division AIF in France. Their names, along with the other 1,299 killed at Fromelles, are commemorated at VC Corner and Villiers-Bretonneux.

During the tour, many well known battlefields were visited as well as the Australian Corp and Divisional memorials and some of the numerous cemeteries for the 46,000 Australians who died on the Western Front during WW1. It was difficult to reconcile the now beautiful peaceful French countryside with devastation and hell depicted in old WW1 photos, although it did give a small insight into the terrible conditions our soldiers endured. Although the tour was very emotional, all were glad to have made the long overdue pilgrimage for lost family!

At the end of the tour, in a small Australian cemetery, fellow bus traveler Peter Collas Vietnam 70/71, conducted a short remembrance service for the fallen. Afterwards there was a traditional tot or two of “Pusser’s Rum” with a special toast offered to our tour’s military historian, Peter Smith, for the safe return of his son from a 2nd tour of Afghanistan.

As postscript, earlier on tour Peter explained the evolution and huge impact of artillery during WW1, including the development of “sound ranging”. I added to his history lesson, of Captain Lawrence Bragg being lifted off the toilet seat by a 6 inch gun firing nearby and the subsequent development a better microphone! The latest Wartime magazine Issue 51 contains Captain Lawrence Bragg’s story.