

Lest we forget

Visiting the battlefields of Flanders and the Somme, Jeremy Miles remembers the brave young soldiers of the Dorsetshire Regiment who lost their lives during a ferocious attack on the infamous Hill 60

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HATTIE MILES

In death, as in life, they are shoulder to shoulder. Thirteen First World War brothers in arms buried side by side in a wooded valley in Northern France. Brave young soldiers from the Dorsetshire Regiment, cut-down in a vicious hail of mud, blood and bullets on 8th May 1916 as a ferocious German bombardment gave way to an infantry raid.

The violence of the deaths of these men - Privates Stretton, Painter, Cotton, Barrow, Cavley, Haynes, Sargent and Matthews. Lance Corporals Keeping, Eaton, Wells and Greenway and 2nd Lieutenant Vere Talbot Bayley who led them, a teenage subaltern barely a year out of Sherborne School, was appalling. The Dorsetshire Regiment (it became the Devon and Dorsets in the 1950s) lost 4,500 men in the 1914-18 war.

As I stood silently by their graves at the Authuille Military Cemetery, I wondered about this daring dozen and their 19-year-old

commanding officer who had had willingly left their Dorset towns and villages and headed for the front.

Travelling with an expert guide, Hattie and I were on The Road of Remembrance Tour which follows in the footsteps of the British troops from the Channel Ports to the battlefields of Flanders and the Somme - the final journey of a generation lost to a war that many regard as sheer folly.

In a single day you can see thousands of carefully regimented rows of Portland stone headstones amid clipped lawns. Meticulously maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, some carry neat floral tributes, perhaps a wooden cross and a poppy, even a photograph and message from a descendant. The atmosphere at each cemetery is unfailingly quiet and reverential.

Our journey took us to museums and memorial sites across the region including the vast Tyne Cot cemetery with the graves of nearly 12,000 men and a memorial to 35,000 missing, and Essex Farm where the fallen lie near the bunkers of an old front line dressing station. We visited fascinating towns and villages like Ypres and Passchendaele, reclaimed from the rubble, and joined the crowds at the Menin Gate for the Last Post ceremony, which happens every evening at eight. Trenches that once bore names like Park Lane, Piccadilly Circus and Shaftesbury Avenue - were little reminders of home. The huge monuments at Vimy Ridge and Thiepval, the latter designed by Edwin Lutyens in memory of the 72,194 officers and men whose bodies were never recovered from the battlefields of the Somme.

Of all the battles of the First World War The Somme offensive was the bloodiest and, in terms of loss of human life, the costliest. On 1st July 1916, the first day of the battle, nearly 20,000 British soldiers were killed. Under orders from Commander Douglas Haig they fought on for three months before



Authuille Cemetery on the Somme. The graves of twelve Dorsetshire Regiment soldiers and their 19-year-old 2nd Lieutenant Vere Talbot Bayley

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declaring a victory of sorts. They had gained five miles...and lost a quarter of million men.

The Dorsets finally got their own memorial near the Somme battlefields in 2011 when an eight foot high Portland stone obelisk was sited outside Authuille. Bearing both regimental and county crests, it was carved by Dorset sculptors Alex Evans and Zoe Cull at their workshop in Bockhampton, near Dorchester. Appropriately it carries a quotation from Thomas Hardy: “Victory crowns the just.”

The Dorsetshire Regiment’s most intense loss was in May 1915, at the infamous Hill 60 - a vital man-made observation point above the flat Flanders’ landscape. Before the war it had been known as Lovers Knoll, a beauty spot frequented by courting couples. By the time the Dorsetshire Regiment fought there it was a desolate, broken and battle-scarred morass of mud and bodies, strafed by machine gun fire and infested with rats reputedly the size of rabbits.



Dorsetshire Regiment memorial erected in 2011 in fields close to the Lonsdale Cemetery



As the allies made plans to defeat the enemy by tunnelling under the hill and laying massive explosive charges, the Germans attacked with a new weapon - chlorine gas. It was only the second time that poisonous gas had been used in battle. The effects were devastating. In a moving diary entry Company Sergeant-Major Ernest Shepherd described the scene as “heartbreaking” saying: “Men were caught by fumes and in dreadful agony, coughing and vomiting and rolling on the ground...”

It was another 19-year-old former Sherborne boy who saved the day. Lieutenant Robin Vaughan Kestell-Cornish grabbed his gun, leapt onto the parapet of his trench and with the remaining four men from his 40 strong platoon delivered such a fierce volley of rifle fire into the oncoming gas cloud that it drove the German infantry back just long enough for the Dorset support units to cut off the enemy advance. Casualties were high with 85 Dorsets killed and another 200 suffering from gas inhalation. Nearly 60 of those would later die, many within hours, from the injuries they had suffered. Kestell-Cornish was temporarily invalidated out but insisted on returning to the front within days. He won the Military Cross for gallantry but died in 1918.

Today Hill 60 has been largely reclaimed by nature but it is a place of bizarre contrasts. An old bomb crater is now a beautiful pond with dragonflies that flit beneath a weeping willow. Just metres away an old machine-gun emplacement is covered with tributes to the Dorset dead. Never before has war poet Rupert Brooke’s words seemed so apposite: “If I should die, think only this of me: that there’s some corner of a foreign field. That is for ever England.” ■



A reconstruction of trenches at Vimy Ridge

Fact Box

Jeremy and Hattie Miles were guests on the Saga Road of Remembrance Tour to France & Belgium which costs from £699pp for seven nights based on two people. The itinerary starts in Folkestone, the embarkation point for millions of troops heading for the Western Front. Across the channel it visits Arras and the Wellington Quarry, The Somme and Amiens, Ypres and Bruges. To book call 0800 056 6099 or visit saga.co.uk/france.

To find out more about the Dorsetshire Regiment why not visit The Keep Military Museum in Dorchester? Regiments featured in its displays include The Devonshire Regiment, The Dorset Regiment, The Devonshire and Dorset Yeomanry, The Dorset Yeomanry, The Queen’s Own Dorset Yeomanry, The Dorset Militia, The Royal Devon Yeomanry and 94 Field Regiment RA. They also have an ongoing exhibition about the role played by The Dorsetshires during the First World War. Open Tuesday - Friday (Oct to March) and Monday - Saturday (April - Sept). More details keepmilitarymuseum.org or call 01305 264066.