

**The Commemoration of the Battle of the Somme at Thiepval, 1st July,
2016
By Liz Walton**

The UK's national commemorative event to mark the Centenary of the Battle of the Somme was held at the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the 1st July, 2016. A public ballot for tickets to attend the event had been held in the autumn of 2015 and two members of the group were fortunate enough to have won pairs of tickets which enabled four of us, Alan Cross, Russell Doherty, Roger Frisby and myself, to attend.

We had to fill in numerous forms beforehand, and received large amounts of information about what we could and could not be able to do on the day, and more especially about travel as the area around Thiepval was in total lock-down. The reason for this was the high state of alert in France as result of recent terrorist activities, and the fact that it was a high profile event with members of the British Royal Family, many Heads of State and military personnel in attendance as well as a large number of members of the public.

It was a damp, grey morning when we set out for Albert airport where we had to park and take the coaches which were the only transport allowed within the exclusion zone. We had to go through security checks and searches and were wrist-banded before being allowed to board the coaches. These left in small convoys and travelled through roads where all the signs were blacked out. Armed personnel guarded every junction and closed the roads after the coaches passed through. Even farm tracks had an armed guard at the junction with the roads.

We were given a bag containing a programme of events and a number of souvenir items. In addition, we were also issued with a refillable water bottle as we were not allowed to take in any drinks, and a plastic rain cape since no umbrellas were allowed. On arrival at Thiepval we walked through displays of tanks and a WW1 plane and were taken to our seats. These were in the main area in front of the memorial itself, just over half way back and to the right.

The overnight military vigil under the main arch of the memorial was still in place.





The military vigil party pictured above included senior NCOs from Ireland, Germany, Australia and France.

Before the main ceremony started a specially edited version of the Imperial War Museum's film 'The Battle of the Somme' was shown on the big screens on either side of the memorial. This was accompanied by specially commissioned music played live by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.



Then the VIP guests began to arrive. They included the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince Harry, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, a former President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Horst Köhler, and the French President, François Hollande. During this period, we were entertained by music from the Band of the Welsh Guards and *La Musique Principale de L'Armée de Terre*. It was all very stirring stuff with each band seemingly trying to outplay the other.

Throughout the ceremony itself we were asked not to take photographs but sadly some people (albeit a very small number) were waving cameras, iPads and mobile phones in the air. However, it was fortunately not enough to detract from the solemnity and emotion of the event. Despite the fact that thousands of people were present it was so quiet that you could hear birds singing in the trees alongside the Memorial. At one stage, when the King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery rode into the park with their WW1 gun carriages and you could hear the hooves and the wheels long before the Troop arrived. It sounded eery as they came up out of the mist and drizzle to take their place near the Memorial.

The narrators, Charles Dance, Joely Richardson and Jason Isaacs linked the readings and music seamlessly and every word could be heard clearly. Extracts from letters written by soldiers who fought on the Somme were read by relatives or by men and women from the same units who had the same regional accents. Extracts from accounts of the battle and poems of the period were read by the Prince of Wales, Prime Minister David Cameron, President François Hollande and the narrators.

One of the most moving moments was a performance in Gaelic of 'The White Swan', a love song by Donald MacDonald who served with the Cameron Highlanders and who wrote it during the Battle of the Somme for his sweetheart Maggie Macleod. The lone singer stood under the arch at Thiepval, accompanied only by a viola, guitar and harmonium. Other pieces of music included 'Keep The Home Fires burning' by the Morrision Male Voice Choir, accompanied by the Band of the Welsh Guards and a French popular song of the period, 'Le Madelon' performed by Le Choeur de l'Armée Française

The service itself began with a solo tenor singing the first verse of 'Abide with Me'. He was then joined by the entire assembly for the remainder of the hymn. The Archbishop of Canterbury then said prayers and Vice Admiral Sir Tim Laurence of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission read the poem 'For the Fallen' by Laurence Binyon. The Last Post and La Sonnerie aux Morts were sounded before a two minute silence, during which time thousands of poppies and cornflowers fell from the roof of Memorial. The Royal Horse Artillery's guns fired to mark the end of the Silence, and the Reveille was sounded.

While the BBC Symphony Orchestra played 'The Banks of Green Willow' (its composer, George Sinton Kaye Butterworth was killed on the Somme and is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial) wreaths were laid at the Cross of Sacrifice by the various dignitaries and representatives of nations that had fought in the battle. A lone piper played a lament, 'The Battle of the Somme' while French, English and Irish schoolchildren laid wreaths on each grave in the cemetery beyond the Memorial. Following the British National Anthem and La Marseillaise guests were able to file through and lay wreaths at the Cross. I laid one in memory of all Channel Islanders who fell on the Somme.

By this time the rain was pouring down and the rain capes were much appreciated. We collected packed lunches and ate them in marquees erected between the memorial and the museum. The huge crowds were such that conditions were not ideal to try to visit the museum and by then the sun had come out again so we exchanged experiences with other visitors and sat on the hilly areas awaiting our coaches back to Albert. Unfortunately, the journey back was somewhat delayed by people turning up at the wrong times for coaches, then again at Albert where everything went into lock-down while we awaited the delayed arrival of the Prince of Wales and the other members of the Royal Family who were flying back to the UK.

Apart from that everything went like clockwork and the organisers should be congratulated on creating such an impressive and moving event. Beforehand I had been rather concerned that creating such a huge event in times of high security would mean that the ordinary guests would feel as if they were on the fringes watching a performance but the atmosphere was such that it was a very emotional experience and I and many others shed a few tears during the ceremony. (Editor: Some of us did so too, watching it on TV.)

Finally, from Thiepval...

A New Zealand officer reading and reflecting upon the inscriptions on the headstones with, in the rear to the right, the BBC's outside broadcasting chalet.



Below, the departure of members of the military vigil party, heading back to their beds to enjoy a sleep in a few cases.



A view of the Thiépval Memorial rarely seen. I forget where it was exhibited, but I recently saw the inauguration ceremony's programme dated the 18th May, 1932. But as Group members know, the Memorial was actually inaugurated on the 1st August, 1932 by the then Prince of Wales and President Albert Le Brun of France. A rather unfortunate typo one may think? No, a rather more serious event occurred with President Le Brun's predecessor, Paul Doumer, being assassinated on the 7th May! Now, that was unfortunate, and in due deference to the French nation, the inauguration ceremony was postponed.



© Associated Press Photo

Wreath Laying



Liz Walton lays a wreath at Thiepval, to all Channel Islanders who died during the Battle of the Somme, following the Commemoration on the 1st July, while Russell Doherty also lays a wreath at the 16th (Irish) Division Memorial at Guillemont on the Somme, in memory of Guernsey volunteers in 'D' Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.