

A Journey of Remembrance

Winter 2011 saw Maryann and I head off on a long anticipated 3 month holiday in Europe, to chase some sun and good weather, to take in the sights, culture and history of France, Spain and Portugal, and perhaps try one or two of the local wines. We also had an important mission to find the last resting places of two great uncles of Maryann who never made it home after World War I. Donald and Malcolm McKenzie were twin brothers who enlisted in Invercargill to do duty for King and country in what became known as “the great war”. Both died on the Western Front in Belgium within three months of each other in 1917. The loss of the brothers had long been talked about in the family and so we felt that our trip to Europe would provide the ideal opportunity to search out the history of their deaths and hopefully locate their graves or memorials so that we could pay our respects and honour their sacrifices.

Before we left New Zealand we researched the background to their deaths, with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website providing excellent information on where we might find their graves/memorials, and the personal files of the brothers were made available by New Zealand Defence Records to give us a background on their personal information and movements during their brief Army service. By the time we left we knew we would be looking for the grave of Donald and the name of Malcolm on a memorial — like countless thousands of other soldiers of that dreadful war Malcolm had no known resting place. Perhaps he was one of the many unknown soldiers lying under a headstone bearing the distinctive New Zealand fernleaf and the words “known unto God”?

Armed with this information, a bag full of poppies and some commemorative crosses, we headed for the Belgian city of Ypres, which is the focus for anyone visiting this part of the Western Front. Ypres is probably best remembered today for the horrors of Passchendaele, a small town just a few kilometres from Ypres, and the other great battles that were fought among the waterlogged trenches and desolate landscape of the area which was known as the Ypres Salient. The Salient was an arc of defensive lines centred on Ypres where the opposing sides squared off against each other for almost four years of unbelievable destruction, loss and suffering, with tens of thousands dying from the effects of war and the elements, with neither side gaining any real ascendancy until almost the end of the war itself. Today the area is home to more than 150 Commonwealth cemeteries and memorials commemorating the more than 185,000 Commonwealth lives lost in the Salient between 1914 and 1918.

Once we arrived in Ypres it quickly became apparent that the Western Front is a huge tourist destination for people like us trying to find long lost family members, or simply revisiting history and trying to make some sense out of a senseless period in our history for which we as a country paid so dearly. Ypres itself has a very interesting history as it was almost completely leveled during World War I and has been painstakingly rebuilt and restored so that it is now as it was during that period of time. Over a lovely Belgian beer in the market square we couldn't help think of the situation in earthquake damaged Christchurch and how bucket loads of pride, determination and time can work wonders to restore what once was. Hope springs eternal from the most desperate of times.

Ypres has an abundance of information centres, museums and other outlets providing everything we needed to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, which as we quickly discovered were pretty big. We soon had the necessary maps to plan our time there so we could see and experience as much of the area as possible as well as achieving our prime objective of spending some time with the twin brothers. Before we headed out into the area of the Salient we spent our first evening attending the daily Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres. One of the best known Commonwealth memorials anywhere in the world, it sits astride the road along which hundreds of thousands of troops passed on their way to the front. For many of our soldiers Ypres was probably the last sign of civilisation before they entered the hell of the Salient, many never to return. It is a fitting and and hugely impressive memorial to the 54,896 soldiers whose names are commemorated on the

vast granite walls.

The Last Post ceremony dates back to 1928 when a number of Ypres citizens, awed and inspired by the scale of the sacrifices made on their behalf, suggested that it would be appropriate to organise a daily ceremony as a token of gratitude for those who fought and fell on Belgian soil. Except for a break during World War 2 when Belgium was once again occupied by the Germans, the ceremony has been held every day since 1928 and draws hundreds of people from all around the world each day. For us it was the perfect start to our journey of remembrance. The ceremony (it was the 28,656th such ceremony) was a wonderfully moving and emotional experience – the sight and sound of the lone piper, followed by the buglers playing the Last Post, and then the deathly silence of the attending audience as they stood motionless in true gratitude while wreaths were laid to the fallen will long remain as a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice made by so many, but also to those who survived the horrors of the Salient and other great battles but had to live with their memories for the rest of their lives.

Having our own wheels made moving around the area simple and we soon found the cemetery where Donald is buried. Ridgewood Military Cemetery is only a few kilometres from Ypres and is quite small by comparison to many of the others in the area. It is tucked away down a quiet farm lane and overlooks pretty and obviously very productive farm land. Like all of the war cemeteries it is beautifully cared for and provides a quiet and peaceful setting to spend time with loved ones. Many of the cemeteries in this area were started during the battles and followed the front lines of the time, but from the tranquility of the cemetery it is almost impossible to imagine the dreadful conditions which greeted our soldiers day after day, wondering if this would be their last. We placed a small cross with a poppy beside Donald's headstone and the tears flowed freely as we spent some time with him and his mates. We wondered at the lives he and Malcolm and so many others were denied, of the loves they missed out on, of the distress and feeling of utter helplessness of the family when told the dreadful news of their loss. Not once but twice.

It was difficult dragging ourselves away from Ridgewood. After lying there for almost 94 years our few minutes with Donald seemed so brief but we felt we had been able to say thank you and restore a family link that war and distance had broken so long ago. But we were mission only half completed, so it was on to Messines to find Malcolm's name on the New Zealand Memorial there. New Zealand troops featured prominently in the Battle of Messines where, after months of relative stalemate, the allied forces mounted a major offensive which cleared the area of the resident German forces. But as with so many of the battles in the Salient the cost was huge and many of those who died, like Malcolm, have no known grave. We found the New Zealand Memorial and Malcolm's name thereon but it left us with a feeling of emptiness not having a grave upon which we could mourn his loss. Even after 94 years (to the day) we as representatives of his family could still not bring the loss of the twins to a satisfactory emotional conclusion. We wondered how difficult it must have been for all those families who lost loved ones and were never able to visit the site of their loss so far away on the other side of the world. At least we were able to be there, to see the lay of the land, to see and touch the names etched in stone, to honour their bravery and their sacrifice. We had briefly come together as one for the first time in 94 years. We had remembered them.

One of the things which made a big impression on us during our time on the Western Front was that almost everywhere we went the name New Zealand would be staring us in the face and it made us hugely proud to see that the deeds of our soldiers of yesteryear are still remembered by the locals of today. Everywhere we went the locals could not do enough for us, such is the level of their gratitude to "our boys". Perhaps their sacrifices were not in vain after all.