

CADETS' REMEMBRANCE VISIT TO ACHIET LE GRAND, SOMME

At the invitation of the Somme Remembrance Association, 22 cadets and staff from Herts & Bucks and Thames Valley Wings visited the small town of Achiet le Grand from 9-11 Nov 07, taking part in 2 Remembrance ceremonies. The visit also included some historical visits within the busy itinerary.

After a slight delay at the port due to rough seas we finally set sail for Calais, landing and travelling to Achiet le Grand tired but in time for an enormous buffet in front of a log fire in a traditional farmhouse gite. Despite the tiredness the cadets still managed to spend time getting to know each other while polishing shoes ironing uniform, supervised by the WOs.

On the Saturday morning following a breakfast of jam and croissants in the Hotel de la Gare café, the party drove to the Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery at Arras where Cdt Alex Lawson, 2313 (Beaconsfield) DF and Cdt FS Rebecca Young 136(Chipping Norton) Sqn laid wreaths at the foot of the flying service memorial which commemorates the 1000 names of RNAS, RFC and RAF killed on the Western Front with no known grave. Memorials in the cemetery contains the names of almost 35 000 servicemen who gave their lives but have no known grave. We all spent a poignant period of reflection looking at graves of men who, in some cases were not much older than the cadets themselves, and inscriptions with one cadet finding his great grandfather.

The afternoon was spent in the Thiepval area where, after collecting one of Phoebe's famous packed lunches from the café/visitor shop at the Ulster memorial tower, we explored the Thiepval visitor centre and memorial. The memorial, which can be see from miles around, consists of several arches supported by 16, four-sided pillars bearing the names of 73 367 British Empire soldiers killed in battle but without a known grave. The names of those soldiers are engraved on the 16 pillars, the youngest of which was Reginald Giles of the Gloucester Regiment, killed on 20 Aug 1916 in Fourcaux Woods aged just 14 years old.

Later that afternoon we returned to the Ulster Memorial for a tour of the Thiepval Woods by Teddy (Phoebe's husband). Teddy dressed Cpl Josh Maye of 2532 (Milton Keynes) Sqn in WWI Battledress, complete with rifle and tin helmet and we set off for the trenches in the woods. Teddy give a fabulous educational tour in the woods, owned by the Somme Remembrance Association, where a variety of trenches are being excavated and preserved for future visitors. Teddy delivers his tours with such knowledge and passion that the cadets (and staff) were fascinated, especially with the story of Pte William McFadzean, a bombardier who gained a VC. On the morning of 1 Jul 1916, Pte McFadzean was issuing grenades when

the box slipped into the trench and 2 safety pins fell out. Knowing the trench was full of his comrades who would be killed, Pte McFadzean threw himself on top of the bombs killing him instantly but sparing his colleagues and earning him the VC. What makes it thought provoking for the cadets is that Pte McFadzean was little older than many of them.

On a cold, wet and windy final day (Sunday), we dined on a breakfast of ham and eggs generously paid for by the Mayor of Achiet before marching proudly into the cemetery with banners carried by Cdt Cpl Ben Woodman XXXXX (Bushey & Oxhey) Sqn and Cdt FS Catherine Woodberry 2419 (Didcot) Sqn fluttering in the wind. Padre Paul Wilcock began the Service of Remembrance, Cdt FS Rebecca Young gave a reading and Cdt Sgt Georgie Cathcart, 2313(Beaconsfield) DF read out the names of the airmen buried in the cemetery followed by a moving exhortation delivered by WO Rob Law, OIC 2313(Beaconsfield) DF. The Mayor of Achiet led the wreath laying followed by Cdt Sgt Kelly Loftus and Flt Lt Dave Smith, 2352(Milton Keynes) Sqn and Cdt Cpl Lawrence Edwards, 2410 (Didcot) Sqn and Flt Lt Richard Hogan, 136 (Chipping Norton) Sqn. Following the ceremony, we all marched into the town to take part in the French ceremony with wreaths laid by Cdt FS Rebecca Young and Cdt Laura Wealsby, 2410 (Didcot) Sqn under the guidance of WO Dean Middlemore, 2410 (Didcot) Sqn, before the rain finally took over. With the mayor cutting short the ceremony we were all invited back to the Salle des Fetes with the villagers for a Vin d'honneur where the cadets were warmly thanked for giving their time to commemorate and pay their respects to those who gave their lives for their country – translations were whispered to cadets and staff by Flt Lt Clare Law, Service Instructor with 2313 (Beaconsfield) DF! The morning's acts of Remembrance were completed with the cadets returning to the cemetery to lay remembrance poppy crosses on chosen graves.

Before departing for home we returned to the Hotel de la Gare for lunch where a special birthday surprise was waiting for Cdt Ben Bowthorpe-Weller, 2410 (Didcot) Sqn in the form of a birthday cake specially decorated by the café owners, complete with mini firework candles. Much to his embarrassment, he was made to stand on a chair while the entire café sang happy birthday and applauded!

During the return journey to Calais we stopped in the rain at Vimy Ridge where a battle took place on 9 Apr 1917 and a memorial to the 11 297 men of the Canadian Army who lost their lives stands. Here we were given a tour of the underground tunnels where a battalion of 1000 men waited prior to an attack, living underground with little light or sanitation before coming out into the trenches to advance on enemy lines which in some cases were little more than 25 metres away.

The visit was a thought-provoking and moving experience for both staff and cadets. Our thanks must go to Mr Philippe Drouin of the Somme Remembrance Association, the Mayor and people of Achiet le Grand for their kind invitation and warm welcome and Teddy and Phoebe from the Ulster Memorial Visitor Centre for their wonderful hospitality and tour. This has now become a regular visit and the cadets and staff are looking forward to visiting again next year.