

Create Your Own BATTLEFIELD TOUR

A visit to the battlefields of the Great War makes for a fascinating, sobering, educational and fulfilling experience, says **Chris Baker**, as he describes how to go about planning that battlefield trip of a lifetime

The many memorials, cemeteries and traces of bunkers and trenches – on ground often still riddled with shrapnel, shell fragments and even unexploded ammunition – create an evocative landscape.

Seeing these things for yourself will aid your own appreciation of the battles and the extraordinary feats of the soldiers, and no trip is likely to mean more to your own family history than following in the footsteps of a relative who was there. It is becoming ever easier to reach the famous battlefields of France and Flanders – Ypres, the Somme, Arras, Cambrai and

the rest – and many people find independent travelling the best way to go. There is plenty of accommodation to suit all tastes and you can choose your pace and things to see.

Where did your soldier serve?

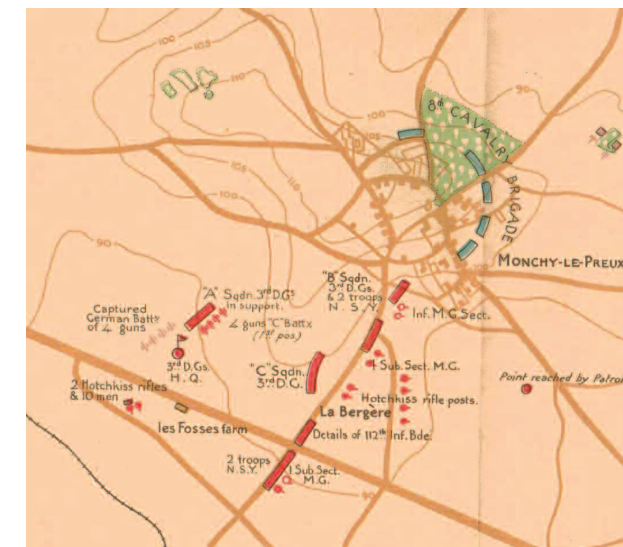
In some cases you will already have an idea of where to go: for example, if your soldier lies in one of the cemeteries of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission or is commemorated on a memorial, that is an obvious focal point for your trip. But how did he get there? Where did he go 'over the top'? What about the villages and towns in which he was billeted and trained? Was he perhaps wounded too, and where?

It should in most cases be possible to determine the unit with which he served from the soldier's army service record, if you can find it, or from details given in his entries in the medal rolls (see page 28). The best first step to assembling your trip is to build as clear a picture as you can of the geographical movements of his unit and to

pin down those places that are of importance to your soldier's story.

There is a wide variety of information available to you, and it is worth examining as much of it as you can: regimental, battalion and divisional histories are relatively easy to find these days, especially from publishers Pen & Sword (www.pen-and-sword.co.uk) and Naval & Military Press (www.naval-military-press.com). These will give you good narrative descriptions of where the unit went, and in many cases also provide useful maps of the main actions.

Let's take an example of a soldier who served with the 1st Battalion of the South Staffordshire Regiment, who was killed in action at the village of Bullecourt in May 1917. You will have found from the history of the 7th Division, under whose command the battalion came, that they had been at Ypres in 1914, Festubert and Loos in 1915 and the Somme in 1916. The story of his unit begins to sketch out a route for you, and in this instance the divisional history gives some

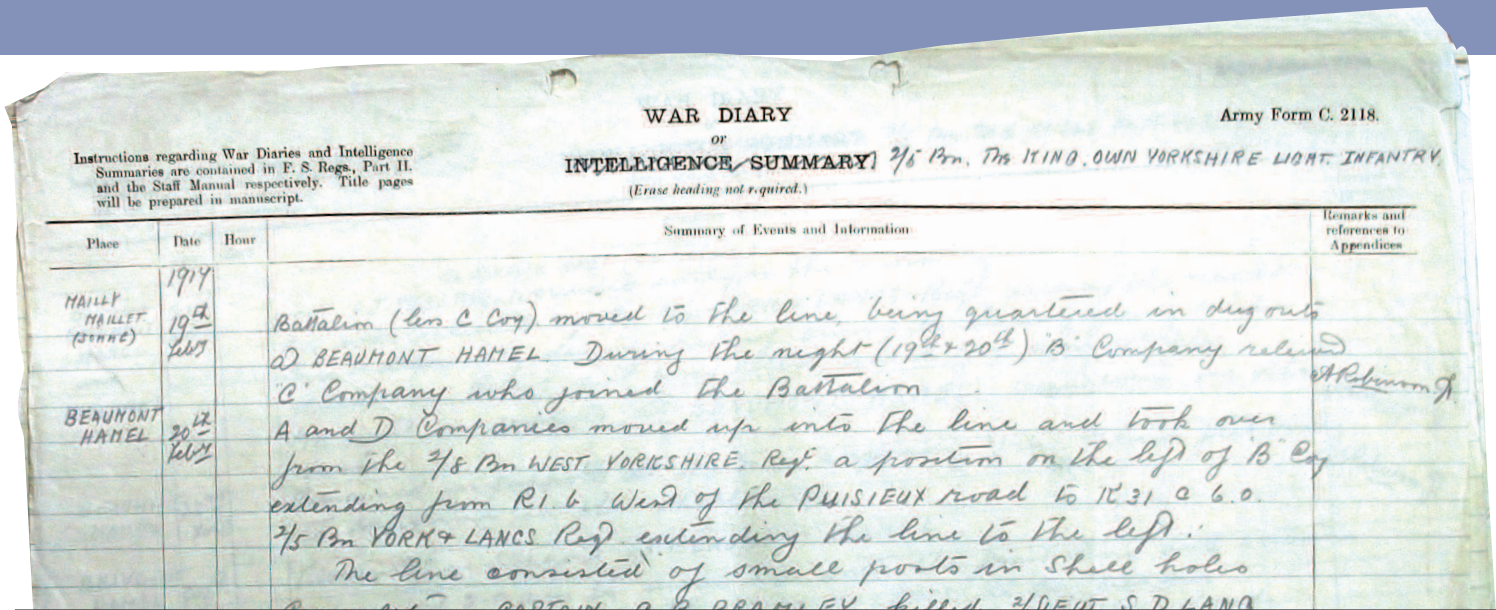


A TYPICAL MAP from a regimental history, showing positions of units at a given time.

maps of the main actions so you know the villages of interest within those battlefields.

For real detail, and vital if you are to understand the places and events if your soldier was wounded or died, it is worth seeing the war diaries. These are detailed day-to-day accounts recorded at the time, and they exist for all but the most obscure units. Some have been transcribed and can be found online, for example as downloadable documents from The National Archives' Discovery service via



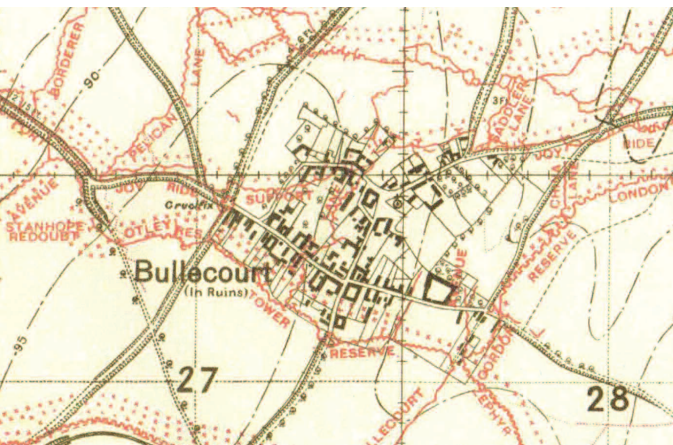


WAR DIARIES often provide place names and map references. TNA

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/war-diaries-ww1.htm. Others must be consulted as original documents at The National Archives in Kew (see www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/british-army-war-diaries-1914-1918.htm), although some regimental museums also have copies for their units. If you are struggling with this or just need a day or two looking up, you could always ask at the Great War Forum (<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums>) and are likely to get the details from the members there. For our soldier who died at Bullecourt, the war diary gives very specific locations to the extent that once you map it out you can walk in his very footsteps – well, approximately, as these fields are once again farmland!

Through consulting these sources you should be able to construct a timetable of the unit's movements and can now shift your attention to turning that into a tour plan.

A TRENCH MAP of Bullecourt. Crown Copyright



Sketching out your trip

Now you know where your soldier went and the battlefields in which he was in action, it's time to lay it all out on a map. Depending on the time you have for your tour and the length and complexity of your soldier's movements, you may need to discard some of it to concentrate on what you can practically see in the time. It's useful to have a decent road atlas of France and Belgium to do this, but there are excellent maps online at www.viamichelin.com and www.geoportail.fr (the latter is a French language site but has excellent IGN maps, the equivalent of the UK's Ordnance Survey, that you can zoom in, overlay satellite images, and so on). Google Maps and Google Earth at <https://maps.google.co.uk> and www.google.com/earth are also great resources for this planning. Bear in mind that some place names have changed since 1918 especially in Flanders, so if you cannot find the place mentioned in a war diary, think laterally or ask for help. By the time you have done all of this, you'll have a basic sketch of your travel route.

If you are getting down to real detail, you may also need to consult trench maps. These were produced during the war and show the precise position of the British and German trenches and strongpoints, and are essential if you are tracing as accurately as you can the place where a man became a casualty

or where he won a gallantry award.

You can buy reprinted maps from the Imperial War Museum and a few other places in the UK, and at the main museum shops in France and Belgium. The National Archives has many original maps (find its First World War trench maps and battlefield guides at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/bookshop). There are excellent collections of maps on CD and DVD, available from the



Tyne Cot Cemetery. David Blaikie

'TYNE COT CEMETERY was the first stop on our tour,' said Carolyn Mills. 'I remember the shock of seeing all those names for the first time, it stayed with me for months.' To find out more about visiting the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world, where 12,000 men were buried close to the surrounding battlefields and a further 35,000 are commemorated on a Memorial to the Missing, go to www.passchendaele.be, website of the nearby Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917, or tel: 0032 51 770441. Tyne Cot Cemetery Vijfwegenstraat 1 8980 Zonnebeke Belgium

Western Front Association (www.westernfrontassociation.com), Naval & Military Press and Great War Digital (www.greatwardigital.com), but they are expensive. Again, if all you need is one or two parts of maps, ask around.

Producing a detailed itinerary

Armed with your sketched-out route, you can now produce an itinerary for your trip. The trick is to turn the unit movements you have drawn onto your map into a practical travel route that you can take, identifying places to stop and see; places you might walk to spend some good time and go walking; and places to stay. To some extent this will be defined by your route to get to the right areas from the UK and your mode of transport. You will find that units moved very often, going repeatedly between rest billets in a village and the nearby front line. It may be very wasteful to follow the unit literally day by day, but you should be able to produce a logical route to follow.

While you are in a particular area, you will also wish to see important battlefield highlights as well as those features that are specific to your own soldier. In our example of the man who died at Bullecourt, there are several memorials and a museum within the village itself and military cemeteries a mere stone's throw away. This is not untypical. You would probably wish to see them all, in addition to the area where the battalion attacked and perhaps the very spot where the man died. Again there are splendid resources for understanding what is in each area and how to find them.

The best guidebooks continue to be Rose Coombs' *Before Endeavours Fade* (After the

Battle, 2006) and Major Tonie and Mrs Valmai Holt's guides to the Western Front North and South (published by Pen & Sword). They are packed with information and will inspire you to see many sites of interest. This will no doubt include some of the WW1 museums as well as the battlefield features. The Battleground Europe series of handy-sized paperback battlefield guides published by Pen & Sword are also very popular and it would be worth reading those relevant to the areas you wish to see.

Having done all of that, you'll have a wonderful, detailed tour plan to follow. Unless you go in the depths of winter, you are also bound to bump into other fellow battlefield tourists as you visit the fields, cemeteries and museums. Do stop and chat – you never know, you may have a shared interest. You will also often find the hoteliers and owners of the bed and breakfast accommodation to be informed and to give good local advice.

Very often there are exhibitions going on, or short-lived archaeological digs or even reburials of recently discovered soldiers' remains, that are hard to discover before you go. Finally do say hello to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission gardeners you may meet: they appreciate knowing their work is admired and also often can offer great local tips.

There are sizeable and pleasant towns within easy reach of the British battlefields and hotel, bed and breakfast and self-catering accommodation is easy to find. There is a list of these for Ypres, the Somme and Arras at my own website www.1914-1918.net and you will be able to find much more information at tourist office websites, Tripadvisor (www.tripadvisor.co.uk) and elsewhere. Once again, ask at

MEMORABLE VISITS



Sanctuary Wood Trenches: wearing wellies is advisable. David Holt

'A WANDER THROUGH an extant trench system behind the privately-run museum at Sanctuary Wood left a marked impression on me when I visited the Ypres Salient,' said Laura Berry. Still a family business, the museum was set up by a farmer forced to abandon the land in 1914 when he reclaimed it after the armistice. It is a vestige of the post-war tourism industry that sprang up in the 1920s as thousands made the pilgrimage to Flanders. The farmer's grandson now owns the museum. 'It's crammed full of relics from the war. Most startling were the series of contemporary stereoviews capturing random moments of the conflict. Gruesome and upsetting though they are, those graphic 3D images really brought home just how horrific the scene was there nearly a century ago.' Some 10km away the recently reconstructed 'Bayernwald' ('Bavarian Wood') trenches in Wijtschate are said to be a good example of the German lines.

Hill 62 – Sanctuary Wood Trench Museum
Canadalaan 26
8900 Zillebeke
leper
Belgium
Tel: 0032 57 466373

Tickets for Bayernwald Trenches must be obtained from Kemmel Tourist Office:
Sint-Laurentiusplein 1
8950 Heuvelland
Kemmel
Belgium
Tel: 0032 57 450455
Web: www.heuvelland.be

the Great War Forum for people's ideas and comments on staying in a particular place (<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums>).

Final points of advice

Try not to take on too much. It is better to tackle a part of your soldier's story in depth and take

MEMORABLE VISITS

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'VIMY RIDGE IS one of the eeriest places I've visited', says Nick Barratt of his trip to the mourning statue of Mother Canada looking out over the Douai Plains from the Vimy Memorial in France. The Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 saw the Canadian forces take this strategic crest of land from the Germans for the first time since they had captured it in October 1914. During the four days of the battle, over 3,500 men from the Canadian Corps were killed in action and 7,000 more seriously injured. The magnificent monument here stands as a tribute to all those from Canada who served during the war and lost their lives in France. Sections of the Allied and German trenches from the time of the Battle of Arras (of which the Vimy Ridge operation formed a part), with some areas of No-Mans-Land in between them, were preserved using sandbags filled with concrete during the landscaping of the memorial park here.

Vimy Ridge National Historic Site of Canada

Route départementale 55

62580 Vimy

France

Tel: 0033 321 506868



The preserved Canadian front line as it was prior to the assault on Vimy Ridge. Asenkat

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM LONDON

International Day of Peace

The Imperial War Museum London (IWM) is celebrating International Day of Peace with a special events programme on Saturday 22 September. Take part in a day of free talks, activities, tours and film screenings between 10.30am and 5pm. Talks will involve, among others, co-curator of the Museum's Build the Truce display, Dr Tim Jacoby, and aid organisations Médecins Sans Frontières and the Red Cross.

Last Chance to See

Over the next two years leading up to the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War in 2014, the IWM will be creating dynamic new First World War Galleries. For this work to happen, IWM London will be closed temporarily from January to June 2013. The First and Second World War Galleries and the Trench Experience will close on 10 September 2012 in preparation for the transformation, and other exhibitions will follow suit throughout the autumn, so catch them while you can!

time to absorb the atmosphere of the battlefield than rush around trying to see everything. There is so much to see, particularly at the main battlefield areas, that you simply would not see it all in one visit.

Try to get out of the car and walk, even if it is only around the edge of a field or wood, or along a sunken lane, for a few minutes. Go off the beaten track to the less frequently visited places. You will see much more, get a better feel for the landscape – and even spot some of those many pieces of battlefield debris that remind us that the war was a real event and not something confined to the pages of the books and maps you have used in planning. Have a great trip – perhaps I'll see you there!

CHRIS BAKER is a freelance military historian. A former Chairman of the Western Front Association, founder of the Great War Forum and author of the renowned website The Long, Long Trail (www.1914-1918.net), he carries out research of soldiers through his business fourteeneighteen (www.fourteeneighteen.co.uk). Chris reports that increasing numbers of his clients are moving beyond the basic research to going to see the battlefields where their ancestors were in action. He is happy to advise on planning such trips but even happier to guide his clients around the sites of memory.



A machine gun emplacement on the crest of Vimy Ridge and the men who drove the Germans from it during the Battle of Vimy Ridge, April 1917. LAC/William Ivor Castle