



Tyne Cot Cemetery in Ypres, Belgium (Picture: iStock) and, below, Cross of Sacrifice (Picture: Linda Botting)

SILENT VIGIL

A hundred years after the war to end wars, a journey through the WWI battlefields of the Western Front is a reminder of the cost of conflict

WORDS LINDA BOTTING

All was silent as I looked across the lavender covered fields from my vantage point on the Cross of Sacrifice. The sun warmed me against the breeze, but the monument's stone was cold as I sat trying to imagine what the Western Front of Flanders Fields must have been like for those who lay around me for eternity.

This was Tyne Cot Cemetery, one of the many sites around Ypres (Ieper in Flemish) of a ferocious battle which ended more than 100 years before. It is the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world, and the final resting place for almost 12,000 World War I soldiers.

It seemed to me the Cross loomed protectively over the dead – of whom 8300 remain, as their gravestones remind us, “known only unto God”.

In this year marking the centennial of the end of WWI, in which up to 19 million people are estimated to have died, I had begun my journey from Brussels to visit several memorial sites, seeking a deeper understanding and sense of the conditions the soldiers had to endure.

I imagined a scene of ferocious fighting on an open plain. Gunfire and explosions echoing. My colleagues huddled in a narrow, sandbag lined trench. The rats. The mud. The fear. It was a scene soldiers faced daily on the Western Front.

VLADSLO GERMAN WAR GRAVES

My journey began at Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof Vladslo one of four major collective German cemeteries in Belgium and the final resting place of 25,644 war dead. It is here we see a human side to war in the impressive sculpture *Parents In Mourning*. It was created by a German woman whose own son and comrades forever rest in Vladslo. In 1918, there were



134,000 German soldiers who fought and died on the battlefields.

CATERPILLAR CRATER

Caterpillar mine crater was known as Hill 60 and one of the most strategic positions for German and Allied forces throughout the war. The high ground began under German control, but changed ownership over three years of fighting. It was here that Australian soldiers contributed their tunnelling expertise and built a 500m-long tunnel underneath the German bunkers. On June 7, 1917, bombs were detonated by Allied forces which resulted in an explosion so powerful it transformed the landscape into a sea of mud craters littered with casualties and shattered trees. After the war, Hill 60 was purchased by a British family but left untouched. Now it is the best preserved battlefield in Ypres.

ST JULIEN

The British were joined by the Canadians at St Julien where the Germans first experimented with poisonous gas in April 1915. Approximately 2000 soldiers still lay unknown today beneath a memorial dedicated to the Canadian army. The sculpture known as the *Brooding Soldier* was cast in distinctive eyes downcast position.

The haunting position became a regular sight at remembrance ceremonies globally.

ESSEX FARM

Many of the wounded from St Julien were taken to Essex Farm, an advanced dressing station on the front line. However, in reality it was a patch and go service where soldiers were assessed who would survive transportation to the main military hospital. Military doctors and nurses worked on a dirt floor covered only by wooden planks and straw as fighting surrounded them. Essex Farm was perhaps best known as the place where Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae wrote his famous poem, *In Flanders Field*. Today, you can walk through the tiny medical bunkers no more than 25sq m behind the graves of the soldiers who fought there, including that of a 15-year-old boy.

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

During the 1960s, Ypres rebuilt itself after being flattened by the war. Visiting the battle sites will give you a deeper perspective of the stories told inside the museum as re-enactments are played out on TV screens between wartime displays. An emotional and moving tribute to the men and women who lived on and off the battlefields.

THE LAST POST

The most moving part of a journey to Flanders Fields is the Last Post ceremony in central Ypres. Locals and visitors gather beneath the memorial for a ceremony created by volunteers of the Ypres fire brigade in 1928. At 8pm sharp, a hush falls over the crowd, buglers step forward, and a haunting Last Post fills the air. ●