

A Phoenix of the Salient

by Brian Fullagar

Nine years after the end of the Great War, Henry Williamson wrote an account of his first nostalgic return to the old battlefields of the Western Front, *The Wet Flanders Plain* (London, 1929) where Williamson describes how he and a friend, an ex-officer of the Tank Corps set off from Calais maritime station to journey via St. Omer and Hazebroucke in order to reach their first objective of the pilgrimage; the small Belgian town of Poperinghe, on the threshold of the once dreaded Ypres Salient. After a short stay to explore the battered old town and renew painful memories of the area, they press on. As Henry Williamson comments,

We walked on, over the well worn pavé towards Ypres — and looked forward to arriving there for the first time in our lives. (The Wet Flanders Plain)

This remark from an old soldier comes as no surprise; the Ypres Salient was for four years the scene of continuous fierce and bitter fighting. The little historic market town of Ypres became a symbol of defiance as the allied armies desperately struggled to repel each fresh onslaught mounted by the German Divisions in their attempt to batter through the town's defences and gain access direct to the vital Channel Ports.

Although Ypres was occupied briefly by German troops in October 1914, the town was quickly recaptured by the British and French forces. Thus the Salient was held, but in this early costly battle of 'First Ypres' most of the seasoned pre-war regular soldiers on both sides were either killed or wounded. As the war dragged on from First Ypres 1914 to Third Ypres in 1917, and right through to Fourth Ypres in 1918, casualty lists became astronomical. In the dreadful carnage of attrition, Hill 60, Messines Ridge and the mud-caked hell of Passchendaele became a maelstrom of death and horror for the front-line soldier.

At the beginning of the war the Germans had been able to secure all of the low ridges to the south and east of Ypres, so that the British front line, which projected out into German held territory was thus encircled and lay open to attack on three sides at once. Every troop movement could be observed by German artillery spotters so that a heavy bombardment could be called down on British positions at will. In consequence, four years of constant shelling reduced the ancient town to a heap of rubble, with all of its beautiful medieval buildings destroyed. The surrounding countryside was turned into a lunar landscape, pitted with thousands of shell-holes and huge water-filled craters. Conditions in the trenches were beyond belief. No small wonder that the Ypres Salient was one of the most feared and hated of all battle fronts. It was with dread and a heavy heart that countless thousands of British and Empire troops marched through the ruined Menin Gate along the battered road which was the main route to the front line and always under attack by day or night.

The sacrifice and suffering on both sides was terrible and the slaughter and maiming never ceased. Every type of evil invention of destruction was employed here in the Salient; poison gas and liquid flame throwers were used for the first time. Constant shelling and wave after wave of attack and counter-attack gave little respite to the hollow-eyed defenders. The mud-clogged terrain made movement by men and vehicles a weary, agonising task. Vital surrounding ridges and high

ground was captured, lost and re-taken time and again during those four years. But, thanks to the courage and heroic determination of its defenders, Ypres and the Channel Ports were never surrendered to the Germans.

Nearly eighty years have passed since the guns fell silent at the end of that tragic conflict. Intensive agriculture and rebuilding of the old town have long since removed much of the debris and scars left by two world wars. But, in amongst the new trees that have sprung up on old woodland sites and secret places, shattered pillboxes crumble in decay. Dimpled depressions in the fields still show where lines of trenches and shell craters once covered the land. In these places, something of that ancient horror felt by men driven beyond endurance may be sensed here still.

The hundreds of beautiful green garden military cemeteries that can be found all over the Salient bear witness to the terrible cost paid for in human lives. These quiet, flower bedecked oases mark the last resting place of the fallen who were recovered from the battlefields. The massive white arches of the splendid Menin Gate memorial display on their many panels, the names of some 54,000 men who still lie unknown beneath the fields and woods of the Salient. On the walls of the huge Tyne Cot Military Cemetery, near passchendaele, there are inscribed the names of a further 34,888 men missing from the August 1917 fighting onwards. The countryside surrounding Ypres is therefore one vast sepulchre of the dead — of both sides. Old soldiers who served in the Salient and survived the war found it hard to erase from their minds the searing nightmare recollection of violent days and nights holding the line before Ypres.

Henry Williamson was one such survivor who could not escape from stark memories of that fearful time and place. In imagination he returned through the medium of his writing constantly to the flare-lit crater zone, and watery wastes of the old Salient. *The Wet Flanders Plain* was written when the experiences of war were only five years distant from its author, but twenty-eight years were to elapse before Williamson felt free at last to set down in full the record of those desperate years. This was to be the vast family saga, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*.

The five novels of the *Chronicle* which chart the progress of the Great War are quite unique in their astonishing realism and attention to detail. For the reader this can produce the strange sensation of actually having witnessed the dramatic events so graphically described; such is the power of the narrative. Williamson's story follows the war from its outbreak in August 1914 to the Armistice of November 1918, and deals with most of the major actions throughout the conflict. Williamson was, of course, not himself present at all of these events, but the exhaustive research he undertook as background to the period, gives life and substance to the action which enriches the novels. The author displays considerable skill in weaving his fictional characters into the drama of real life events of the time.

In the five wartime novels, the Ypres Salient figures as background to the story, and reading the books adds colour and interest as preparation for any modern day visit to the old scenes of battle in that area. For in following those stories, we are following Williamson and his comrades on a journey into the past;

I must return to my old comrades of the Great War — to the brown, the treeless, the flat and grave set plain of Flanders... for I am dead with them, and they live in me again. There in the beautiful desolation of rush willows in the forsaken tracts I will renew the truths which have quickened out of their deaths: that human virtues are superior... that the sun is universal, and that men are brothers, made for laughter with one another. (The Wet Flanders Plain)