# And This Was Ypres

*by John Gregory*

On July 20 1927 and over the following three days. *The Daily Express* published Henry Williamson's *And This Was Ypres,* to mark the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the third battle of Ypres in the summer of 1917. Usually known just as Third Ypres, it was the bitter fighting for one small village that October, over ground churned by shellfire to a sea of mud, which caught the imagination of the British people, and does so to this day: the Battle of Passchendaele, a name full of emotive connotations of suffering and sacrifice. In the four articles Henry recounted his return to the Salient with his companion 'Four Toes'; they were later incorporated into *The Wet Flanders Plain.*

On July 25/26 1992, almost exactly 65 years later, and on the 75th anniversary of Third Ypres, thirty-four members of The Henry Williamson Society made their own pilgrimage to the Salient, under the capable and friendly guidance of Paul Reed and Brian Fullagar.

*First Day.* We gather at Dover Priory Station; a smooth crossing, and we are on our way: first stop Poperinghe, just over an hour's drive.

Shortly before we reach 'Pop', Paul (Reed) draws our attention to a large cemetery on our right, Lijssenhoek Military Cemetery, the second largest in Flanders. This marks the site of the big field hospital, which received wounded and dying from the casualty clearing stations close behind the Front.

Poperinghe is a bright and cheerful town, with a large central square where our coach is parked. We walk a short distance down a narrow street leading off the square and stop before a three-storey house with grey-white front, ornate double doors and lower windows flanked by shutters. This is the legendary Talbot house, founded in 1915 by Philip 'Tubby' Clayton, an Army chaplain, and named by him after Gilbert Talbot, the youngest and most brilliant of the sons of the Bishop of Winchester, who was killed in a futile counter-attack at Hooge on July 30 1915. Toc H, as it quickly became known in Army parlance, was a club and rest-house for troops, with rooms where men could stay, a library, a garden: a veritable oasis in the waste-land of the trenches. Clayton converted the loft, where hops were formerly stored, into a chapel, and here thousands of men received the Sacrament before they went up the line. When Henry visited Toc H in the mid '20s, the house was privately owned, but it was bought in 1929 by the Talbot House Association, and many relics and mementoes, including the chapel furniture, were brought back. Now, one by one, we climb the steep narrow stairs and assemble in the Upper Room, as the chapel was known, for Brian Fullagar's first reading:

> *They stopped outside a tall grey house, on the door of which was a notice,* All rank abandon ye who enter here. *Inside on the wall was a painted hand pointing to the door, with the words* Pessimists Way Out. *They went up a wooden stairway, and then up another flight, and so along a bare wooden corridor. On the wall was another notice,* If you are in the habit of spitting on the carpet at home, please do so here.
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> *'Is this Corps Headquarters?' laughed Phillip. He wondered if he had said the wrong thing, for 'Spectre' West looked straight ahead as he climbed up some steep open treads, and so into a large loft with beams and posts holding up the roof.*
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> *Phillip saw that it was a chapel. From the king-post was suspended a chandelier*

*with a ring of candles. Beyond, against one wall, was a red altar cloth, with green borders. Another red cloth, with gilt tassels, hung from a beam above the altar. The space before the altar was flanked by two massive candles on wooden stands. Beside each was a bowl of flowers. A carpet covered the centre of the floor. There were a few plain wooden chairs and benches, and two shrines, one on either side of the altar, below semi-circular windows. There was a lectern painted white.* [1]

It is all just so: the notices, chandelier, tall wooden candle holders, the small white lectern, all as they were. Time stands still here, and 1917 is a heartbeat away. We linger awhile, before returning carefully down the stairs. The staff have prepared welcome cups of tea, which we drink in the sunshine of the beautiful rear garden.

We leave 'Pop' for Ypres, along the same straight road which, Henry wrote,

*hundreds of thousands of men remember ... This country road was the main traffic artery to the Salient, and a perilous way when the enemy sat up on Kemmel Hill with his telescopes and telephones connected with his long-range batteries. It was more crowded at night than is the Strand today during the 'rush-hours' — marching men, guns, strings of pack mules, wagons, motor-cars, lorries — all congested in the darkness.*

*Whenever a lorry engine stopped, and failed to restart after a half dozen swings of the handle, it was pushed by scores of hands, and tipped over into the ditch. Shell-holes in the road were filled in with ruins of shattered wagons, and perhaps pieces of horse and mule, and hastily covered with earth. Then on again, thousands of tons of material, animate and inanimate, bumping, tramping, jolting forward towards the Salient.* [2]

On the outskirts of the village of Vlamertinghe we pass the mill house, one of the few buildings in the village to survive its closeness to the Front. By 1917 it had been converted into a casualty clearing station, 'its walls hung with white sheets, its inner spaces lit by electricity revealing white operating tables and equipment as in an operating theatre in a London hospital.' [3] In *Love and the Loveless*, Phillip meets Captain Douglas, wounded in the shoulder, outside this mill, a rather uncomfortable encounter. [4]

We enter Ypres through the Lille Gate and have our first glimpse of the Cloth Hall, the ruins of which so dominated the town. We drive through to Essex Farm Cemetery, just to the north. There are over 1,000 graves from the fighting of 1915-17, permanent reminder of the casualty clearing station once here. Behind it is the rising bank of the Yser Canal, in which some concrete dugouts still remain. During the second battle of Ypres in 1915, Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian doctor, worked in the dressing station, and wrote here perhaps the most famous poem of the war, *In Flanders Fields*. We wander around, looking at the names — here is Valentine Joe Strudwick, only fifteen years old.

We drive further into the Salient, to the German cemetery at Langemarck, an area much fought over in Second Ypres and again in September and October 1917. It is a dark and almost menacing place, with groups of three squat black maltese crosses dotted among the black name-plates set flat in the grass. There are nearly 45,000 dead buried here. Four giant figures, representing soldiers keeping watch over their fallen comrades, are set at the rear of the cemetery. Large oaks spread their shadows, adding to the gloom. No bright flowers, no shrubs here. Not far away is Vancouver Corner, where

*stands the most beautiful thing in the Salient. People call it the Canadian Memorial, but for me it is the memorial for all the soldiers in the War. It faces towards Ypres, not towards a vanquished enemy, as do so many of the war memorials to be seen in France today ... the colossal head and shoulders of the soldier with reversed arms emerging from the tall stone column has the gravity and strength of grief coming from full knowledge of old wrongs done to men by men. It mourns; but it mourns for all mankind. We are silent before it, as we are before the stone figures of the Greeks. The thoughtless one-sided babble about national righteousness or wrongness, the clichés of jingo patriotism, the abstract virtues parasitic on the human spirit, fade before the colossal figure of the common soldier by the wayside.*

*The genius of Man rises out of the stone, and our tears fall before it.* [5]

It was at this point, on April 22 1915, that the Germans first used gas successfully. Holding this part of the line were some French colonial troops, who fled before the new horror. On their right was the First Canadian Division, which was mainly composed of British emigrants, many ex-regular army. Their determined resistance on the flank of the four-mile gap in the line thus created saved the situation, but only at a cost of 60% casualties.

We drive further up into the Passchendaele battle area pull up outside the New British Cemetery. The village of Passchendaele is close by, and stretching out before us is a gently sloping shallow valley of fields, then known as Marsh Bottom and Waterfields. My grandfather, a private in the Patricias (the regiment's full name was, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry), fought at this very place at the end of October 1917, in most appalling conditions. The Patricias attacked on October 30:

*Detailed instructions as at Vimy could not be given: 'it was useless to lay down any mode of attack to troops going over unknown and swamped lands, pitted with shell-holes filled with water.' ... The equipment to be carried was various and heavy: 170 rounds of ammunition, a muzzle-protector for every rifle, a printed 1/10,000 message map (for every officer and N.C.O.), an aeroplane flare, two iron rations, one day's fresh rations, a tin of solidified alcohol, three sand-bags, two rifle grenades and a shovel. The order to leave greatcoats in the jumping-off trench was very welcome in spite of the biting wind and driving rain in which the action was fought... The British guns played for eight minutes on the cross-road and then began to lift at the rate of fifty yards every four minutes. A speed of 750 yards an hour must surely be the low record for a charge in all the history of war. Yet it was 'about right, for the heavy going over ground that beggared description.' The infantry had to traverse the mud of the Ravebeek, where a waste of mud had been churned and churned again for a week by constant artillery 'shoots' on enemy pill-boxes, battalion headquarters, roads and counter-attacking concentrations. Beyond doubt the Passchendaele terrain was the worst ground fought over in the war. There was no cover whatever for the attacking troops wading through a sea of slime, and the pill-boxes, although their weaknesses appeared later, were probably the most effective defence the enemy could have devised to meet such an advance.* [6]

The New British Cemetery lies on their final objective line, and is the resting place of some of the dead of the Patricias and other Canadian regiments. Many of the headstones bear just the inscription 'A Canadian Soldier of the Great War. Known unto God.' I am lost in memories of Grandpa.

And so to Tyne Cot, the largest British military cemetery in the world, and perhaps the best known. Nearly 12,000 dead were brought here from the

surrounding battlefields after the war, and reburied in their serried ranks. Behind the Cross of Sacrifice, standing tall on its pyramid of white stone, lie the original graves of Tyne Cot, rather more haphazardly; and behind them a long, gracefully curved wall, carved with the names of nearly 38,000 missing. Domed pavilions rise at each end. It is a place of great peace and beauty. Originally it was a fortified stronghold in the German line: two blockhouses still remain within the cemetery grounds, while the Cross is built atop a third, a small part of its concrete purposely left exposed. The cover of the Society's tour brochure shows a photograph of a gaunt, hollow-cheeked Henry, here in the mid-'twenties, standing among the wooden crosses, holding an old British steel helmet holed by splinters or shrapnel, and gazing out over the graves. It is a striking image, the *soldat retourné*, which symbolises why many of us are here.

The low ridges that we cross on our short journey back to Ypres, seemingly insignificant, emphasise once again the superiority enjoyed by the Germans, for from them the flat country to the west spreads out for miles before us.

We register at our hotel, but time is pressing. Leaving our bags we make the short walk to the Menin Gate, a majestic stone and brick archway astride the Menin road. Like the wall at Tyne Cot, this too is lined with panels bearing the names of yet more soldiers whose bodies disappeared into the mire of the Salient ... 55,000 of them, listed regiment by regiment. At eight o'clock every night The Last Post is sounded here by the Ypres Fire Brigade. Tonight each side of the roadway underneath the arch is crowded with visitors waiting expectantly. We join them. A policeman stops the traffic, five buglers step forward into the road, and the clear notes ring out. As they die away, three old men step out of the crowd: veterans, in their mid-nineties at least, with medals gleaming on their breasts. They walk forward, place a wreath, step back and salute. In a clear voice the tallest of them proclaims Laurence Binyon's familiar and always moving *For the Fallen*, and many join in the reaffirmation of the last line, *We will remember them*. We all feel privileged to have been here, perhaps the last time that veterans will return.

Afterwards I walk on the massive ramparts, 25 feet high, faced with brick, and sloping down to a wide moat.

> *Once there were hundreds of dugouts in these ramparts, lit by electric light from a power station near the Menin Gate ... I heard in my mind, further away than my mind, the marching of the feet of Menin sweat and fear, men hopeless and enslaved, the clatter of wheels, and the hoofs of animals not knowing why they were there in the roar and flash and appalling terror of bursting shells ... I am a wraith again in the darkness rushing by, yet stagnant amid the soundless cries, the viewless white flashes of field guns lighting the broken walls and the scattered rubble; the misery of men marching, laden and sweating, out of the sinister ruin of the Menin Gate.* [7]

We walk back to our hotel through the Grand' Place, the mass of the faithfully recreated Cloth Hall and the cathedral behind is silhouetted against the setting sun.

*Second Day*. Our first visit today is to Hill 62 Sanctuary Wood Trench Museum, which is just beyond Sanctuary Wood Cemetery, where Gilbert Talbot is buried. The museum is privately owned, and part of the wood has been preserved as it was at the end of the war, the sides of the trenches supported by more recent corrugated iron, and shell holes (some clearly bearing the marks of fresh spadework) visible in the uneven undergrowth.

The Patricias fought here also, in early June 1916, a time when Sanctuary Wood

had become the apex of the whole Ypres Salient, and as such a key position. Throughout that May the Germans had tried to weaken the position by bombardment and harassing operations. On June 2 there was a full scale bombardment, and by mid-morning Sanctuary Wood had been cut off from the rear, the last telephone line cut, and the Patricias isolated.

> *Under a rain of high-explosive shells of all calibres, of trench-mortar shells, aerial torpedoes and rifle grenades, the front line was soon blotted out. Trees were uprooted, parapets demolished, whole bays of trench obliterated. Soon isolated heaps of sand-bags were all that remained, but to these the companies held, though their losses were enormous* [8]

The German assault included flame-throwers, and the most savage fighting ensued. Although sections of trench were overrun, they were retaken by counter-attack. Twenty-four hours later the exhausted Patricias were still in the line; though still 'perfectly cheerful', they were becoming physically and nervously exhausted from constant bombardment and fighting. 'The shell-fire continued to claim victims, and although there was enough ammunition, food was running low. Water was the most serious problem, for it was impossible to bring it up from the rear.' In the event, they were not relieved until

> *the night of June 4/5 when the 43rd Battalion came into position on their right and ... relieved the Regiment, which marched to the Ypres Asylum and was transported by motor lorries to the Poperinghe camp. Once again the Patricias suffered more heavily than any other battalion of their Brigade. They had over 400 casualties in the action and came out with a total strength of 210, exclusive of transport details.* [9]

That August they learned that after twenty months at the Front, the Regiment was to exchange defence for attack, and the next few weeks were spent in hard training for a new 'drive' in the Somme valley. On September 7 they left the Salient and were moved south.

The museum at Sanctuary Wood is something of a hotch-potch, a miscellany of *pickelhaben*, bayonets, rifles, helmets, machine-guns and other rusted *matériel* from the battleground. On a table are a number of 3-D viewers with binocular eyepieces. The sepia photographs viewed thus are of a startling clarity, giving a vivid, almost living, picture of the conditions of trench warfare: water-filled shell-holes overlapping one another, churned mud everywhere, abandoned stretchers, tented encampments in back areas, and, suddenly shocking, skulls and bones scattered in the mud, and the dead, men and horses, shown in all their obscene detail, gruesomely mutilated and shattered by gunfire, and in various stages of decomposition. Sickened, I quickly stop looking, as do others. And there is the thought that we have that choice. For the young soldiers of not so long ago, such scenes were a part of their everyday lives.

Back in the welcome warm sunlight, we leave for Hill 60 — which is not really a hill at all, but a spoil heap, waste from the building of the railway close by, before the war. It was the scene of much mining activity from 1915 onwards. The small craters from 1915 and '16 are still visible, looking like large shell holes; while the entire side of the hill was blown away by an enormous mine, one of nineteen exploded in the early hours of June 7 1917, the prelude to the successful assault on Messines Ridge. When Henry visited it after the war, Hill 60 was

*one of the show-places of the Salient. Every morning about a dozen peasants go there to dig. You see the 'souvenirs' they have dug up lying on sacks or lengths of cloth at the edge of the pits in which they are working... All day long charabancs stop in the road opposite Hill 60, and tourists file past the melancholy little group of men and children standing, collecting-box in hand, by the footpath entrance, and hoping to take half a franc off each visitor. By their sad faces they do not own the heap of earth, originally piled there when the railway cutting was made; yet by the occasional gleams of hate in those eyes we deduce that they have stood there with their box long enough to believe that they ought to own it.*

*Along the footpath the pitches of the souvenir-sellers begin. Prices range from 50 centimes for a brass button to 20 francs for a Smith and Wesson revolver.* [10]

Today the commercial opportunism has gone: presumably they ran out of souvenirs in the end. The hillock — which is all it is, only 60 feet above sea level (hence its name), but with a commanding view from its crest — is topped by the memorial to the Queen Victoria's Rifles. Broken pieces of reinforced concrete, shattered remnants of German pill-boxes, break through the sward, mute testament to the power of ammonal. The ground is pitted too with smaller shell craters, though they are softened by grasses and wild flowers. On the reverse side of the hill is an unusual sight: a British bunker, concrete bearing the pattern of corrugated iron formers, triple slit mouths darkly pointing to the east. Brian has brought a small cassette player with him, and the tape begins with the scratchy hiss familiar to those used to the old 78 records. A high voice speaks, and we have to concentrate to make out what it is saying. This is Private Edwin Dwyer V.C., of the East Surreys, speaking in 1916. He modestly recounts his experiences, expressing a desire to go back to the Front, and finishes, a little shakily at first, with that perennial favourite of the troops, *We're here because we're here, because we're here, because we're here...* The short recording finishes, and the spell is broken. Even as I wonder what ever became of him, Paul tells us that he was killed later that year, when he was returned to the Somme.

After lunch in Ypres we motor out to Messines Ridge again to Spanbroekmolen or Lone Tree Crater, another of those blown by huge mines on June 7.

*'In the crater-area not one green blade of grass was visible. Everywhere brown earth was overturned and pocked. Broken fragments of concrete lay about. Rusty steel wires clawed the air above split and shattered* Mebus, *called pill-boxes. Barbed-wire belts were buried among corpses in torn* feldgrau *with blackened faces, flopped about in all positions. Some of them wore white armbands. They had stayed in the unbroken pill-boxes and been bayoneted. There was hardly a dead man in khaki to be seen. Already the pockets of the dead Germans had been slit or pulled out, and rings cut off fingers.*

*They passed by the ragged mine crater at Spanbroekmolen. It was about a hundred and fifty yards from lip to lip, and deeper than the German dugouts, for one was exposed at the edge, with its occupants. Looking through his field-glasses, Phillip saw what looked like something at Madame Tussaud's: a boarded room with one side open, revealing four German officers seated at a table, with waxen faces. They looked as though they had been playing cards. Glasses and bottles on the table were still upright. Apparently they had been killed by concussion. In the pit below were ragged lumps of blue clay each big enough to fill a G.S. wagon.* [11]

The crater is the property of the Toc H Foundation now, circled by trees, and filled

with water, still and dark, ringed with water-lillies. Toc H call this the Pool of Peace, and it is indeed a serene place. Hard to imagine the instant terrible violence of its creation. Lone Tree Cemetery is only a short walk away; the soldiers of the Royal Irish Rifles who lie here were killed by falling débris from this mine when they vacated their trench for the assault just 15 seconds early; some of the remarkably few British casualties on this day of rare success.

On the Wytschaete Road outside Messines we stop at the London Scottish Memorial, erected on the spot where, in October 1914, they first came into the line, the first territorials to do so. On Hallowe'en they had to withstand a German attack, and engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting, which is so vividly described in *How Dear is Life.* [12]

Our final visit is to Ploegsteert Wood, better known as 'Plugstreet' Wood. We take a leisurely stroll through the trees on this warm summer day. It is divided by a long ride, newly gravelled. In the war Hunters Avenue was a corduroy path dividing skeleton tree-trunks standing stark. Now the sunshine filters down through thickly leafed branches, its rays brightening and dappling the two cemeteries within, Plugstreet Wood and Rifle House Cemeteries. They are quiet and beautiful places, with many graves from the fighting in December 1914, men who died just before the Christmas truce which occurred here. One young soldier wrote of this to his old headmaster,

> *The Xmas truce of 1914 was a curious one. The saxons opposite to use wanted a truce and we exchanged souvenirs and gifts. They promised not to fire until we did. This was kept up for a day or so when we sent over a note to the Germans saying our artillery was going to begin and would they please get under cover! So ended the truce.* [13]

So ends also our tour. The two days have passed all too quickly, and it is time for us to enter the present again.

Notes

1 *Love and the Loveless* (1958), chapter 12, p.214.
2 And This Was Ypres, Part I. *The Daily Express,* July 20 1927.
3 *Love and the Loveless,* Chapter 13, p.220.
4 Ibid., Chapter 16, pp. 281-283
5 *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929), pp.97, 98.
6 R. Hodder Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry* 1914-1919 (1923), Chapter 8, pp. 254-257.
7 And This Was Ypres, Part IV. *The Daily Express,* July 23 1927.
8 *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry,* Chapter 5, p.114.
9 Ibid., Chapter 5, p.135.
10 *The Wet Flanders Plain,* pp.93, 94.
11 *Love and the Loveless,* Chapter 8, p.143.
12 *How Dear is Life* (1954), Chapters 22 and 23.
13 H.W. Williamson to Mr Lucas, quoted in L.L. Duncan's *Colfe's Grammar School and The Great War* 1914-1919 (1920), p.3.

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