

We Shall **NOT** Target

At the going down of the sun

By Mark Stevens

Photos by Sharon Matthews-Stevens

The sun is going down over the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium.

People have already started to gather to pay tribute to those who died in the 'War to End All Wars', to remember those whose names have been carved into the walls of this triumphal arch, a memorial built in the 1920s. More than 54,000 names here, each belonging to someone whose remains were never found.

As I wait in the crowd for the beginning of the evening Last Post Ceremony, I chat with three men who have journeyed here from Australia. "We are here for my great-uncle," says one. "He was my great-grandfather," says another. "We found his name on the walls this afternoon," says the third.

Now the crowd on this Tuesday evening grows silent; the space inside the arch reverberates with the rhythmic cadence of marching. Three buglers take their posts, United Kingdom legionnaires prepare to lay their wreaths. With the exception of the World War II Nazi occupation, this ceremony has played out every single night since November 11, 1928. It is a crucial rite of passage for anyone planning a First World War journey of remembrance.

The town of Ypres itself is a perfect starting point for a pilgrimage to those many places that populate Canada's history: Passchendaele, Zonnebeke, Arras, Vimy, Beaumont-Hamel. Seminal battlefield sites are a short drive from the town itself. One of the biggest Commonwealth Cemeteries holds court here. The Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917, replete with interactive displays, artifacts and recreated dugouts and trench systems, tells the tale of the Ypres Salient.

The emotional impact of visiting the cemetery itself - Tyne Cot - is overwhelming.

Farms and meadows surround the cemetery, stark contrast to the concrete German pillboxes that still squat inside the burial ground's walls, foreground for a procession of headstones that seem to march into the distance as if in futile crusade. Nearly 12,000 graves here. The remains of nearly 9,000 are unidentified; their headstones are emblazoned: "Known to God."

"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old."

Here at Tyne Cot we share those feelings with crowds who descend from a parade of buses.

Having gotten a very early start on the morning after the Menin ceremony, our remembrance at St. Julian, a poignant Canadian memorial, is an exercise in solitude, a lonely moment of tribute.

A granite statue 10-metres tall reaches skyward from a little grove of cedars imported from Canada.

The defining feature of this memorial is a carved representation called the "Brooding Soldier". It has been created in the "arms reversed" posture, the traditional military salute to the fallen.

I make note of both that posture and the orientation of the memorial itself.

When I align myself with the perspective of the "Brooding Soldier" I see a plowing tractor stirring up dust, orange-roofed barns.

Not quite such an idyllic vista greeted Canadian soldiers who were stationed here on April 22, 1915.

The orientation of the statue is significant.

From the very direction this statue faces, the Germans attacked with chlorine gas, history's first large-scale gas attack.

The "reverse arms" pose is equally significant.

By the 24th of April, 2000 Canadians had fallen here.



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co.ltd.

D. SCOTT CAMPBELL

55 Sinclair Ave., Unit #6
Georgetown, Ontario L7G 4x4

Telephone: (905) 877-0033
1-800-465-1575
Fax: (905) 877-2787

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