

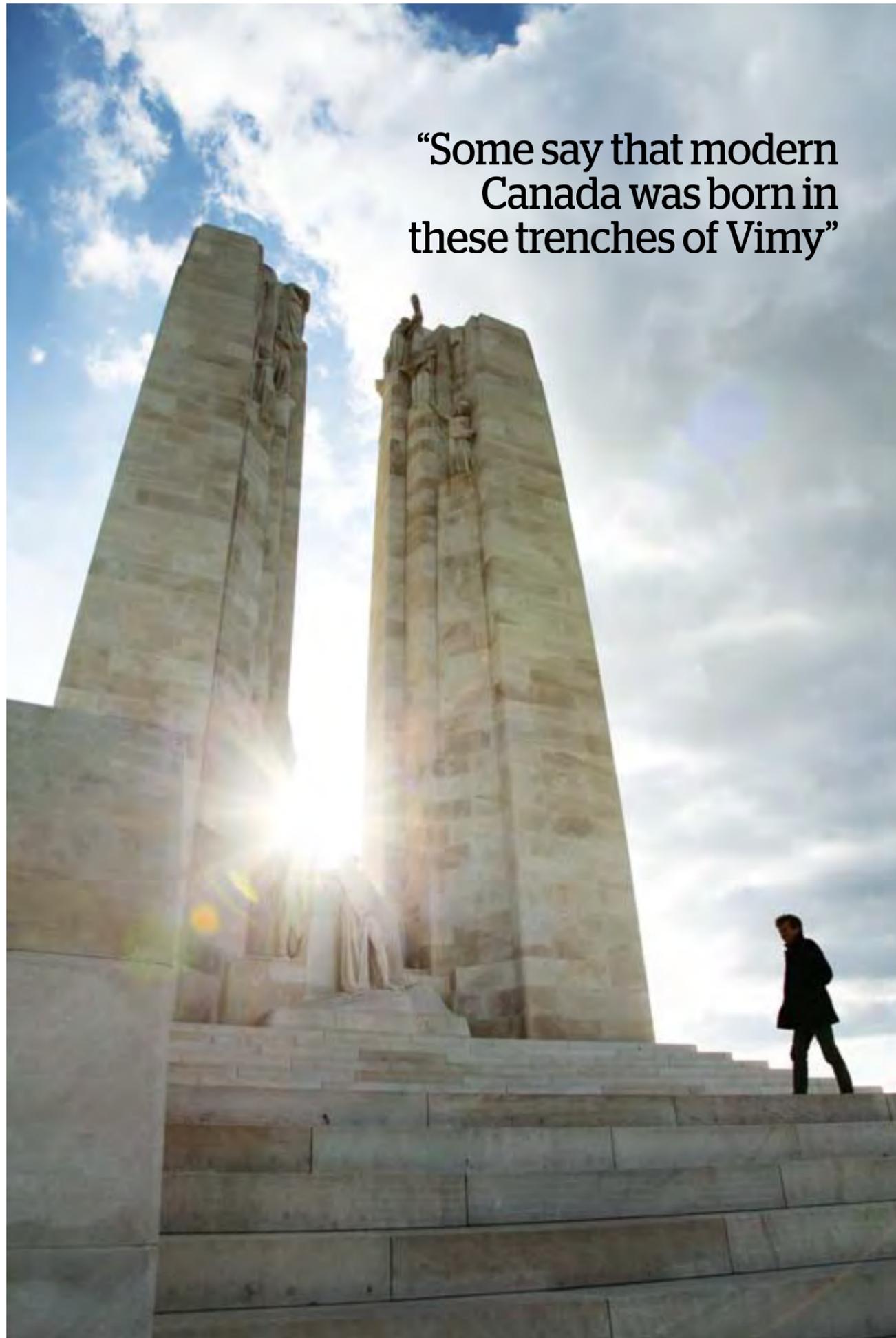
Story and Pictures: Patrick Cruywagen

FIELDS OF BATTLE

We join a 4x4 tour operator to experience the seldom seen views of the Arras battlefield



“Some say that modern
Canada was born in
these trenches of Vimy”



[First World War Battlefields Tour]

It's a grim Sunday morning but nowhere near as grim as the fate suffered by Corporal Alf Razell during the advance of the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers on May 03 1917. We are standing at the exact spot where he was taken POW. That was probably the nicest thing to happen to him during the attack. We all huddle in closely for warmth around our Battlefieldsby4x4 guide Nigel Stevens. The rain and wind are trying their best to force us back into the comfort and heated seats of our Land Rovers. Nigel begins to tell us what happened to Alf and his small party of Fusiliers on that fateful day.

Upon reaching the outskirts of Pelves they found themselves cut-off from the rest of the attack, little did they know that they were right in the midst of the German defensive positions. While digging in, a cluster of stick grenades fell amongst them and wreaked havoc, instantly killing several of them. One by one the rest of Alf's troops were picked off until only he remained, he took shelter in a shell hole, where he lay amongst his dead comrades.

The long night came, eventually day replaced it, accompanied by a German digging party. They searched the British bodies for cigarettes. Much to their surprise Alf jumped up with his hands in the air, he was led away to a manned German trench about 50 yards away. As he stepped in the trench a familiar voice greeted him. "Hello Razz, am I glad to see you." It was Bill Hubbard, one of his mates, lying on the trench floor. He had been injured when the cluster of stick grenades fell between and he had been on the trench floor for a few days. The heartless Germans had refused to help him. There was a massive hole in his back and his intestines hung out of it. There was earth and chalk in the wound and Alf tried to play down the seriousness of the wound to his friend. He used what he had to patch up poor old Bill.

Two days later the Germans were relieved and they ordered Razz to carry the bigger and heavier Bill away from the frontline with them. The craters made it almost impossible for Alf while the pain made it unbearable for Bill. He begged Alf to put him down and leave him there. Razz found a shell hole and did just that but promised Bill



that he would come back for him. He later tried to convince some German stretcher bearers he met that they should help him fetch Bill, but they refused.

Alf says that not a day goes by that he does not think of Bill. As Nigel told this part of the story he was in tears, so was I. The rain and cold did not matter anymore. They seemed irrelevant. As I looked around I saw that we were not the only ones moved to tears by this story. When I got back to the UK at the end of the tour I read *Cheerful Sacrifice - The Battle of Arras 1917* by Jonathan Nicholls, it gives a detailed account of the story of Alf and Bill. My favourite part of the book is the black and white photos found on pages 148 and 149. One of these is a close-up of Alf's hand, it was taken May 3 1984 when he returned to the spot we're now standing. In the picture he is holding a cross in his hand and on it he wrote: "In memory of my dear pal Bill Hubbard." He says that he did this to put his mind at rest.

No one in our party says a word as we climb back into our Land Rovers. I notice a pile of ammunition lying next to the path and not far away from my Range Rover Vogue is parked. The local farmer must've found them while ploughing his fields. Ironically one of them is an unexploded stick grenade. It has been spray-painted neon





Right: Any Land Rover will comfortably complete one of these tours

green by local explosive experts as it needs to be destroyed. Maybe this was one of the cluster of stick grenades that was thrown amongst Alf and his brave group from the 8th Royal Fusiliers?

We will never know but what I do know is that men like Alf made it possible for you and I to enjoy the freedoms that we do today. This my friends is why the Battle of Arras tour that I did with Battlefieldsby4x4 is one of the best 4x4 trips I have ever done. There were no rocky mountain passes to climb or incredible views over lakes or glaciers, but that did not matter. This was about something more important than that. It was about the poor people who never came home and paid the ultimate price and today lie buried near to the place where they fell. One of the best places to get a scale of the amount of people, who did just that, is by driving along the old Western Front.

When I was a student at the Military Academy of South Africa, I dreamt of visiting the European battlefields of the World War I and II to get a better understanding of what really happened. The Somme and beaches of Normandy seemed a million miles away and I would have to watch movies like Saving Private Ryan to satisfy my yearning for battlefield reality. Now that I have moved to the UK all of that has changed of course. I first met Carl Liversage and Nick Gage from Battlefieldsby4x4 at the recent Donington 4x4 show where we made arrangements for me to join their Arras 1917 tour. To get from where I live in Bedfordshire to Arras took less than five hours, this included the channel crossing by train.

I was travelling in a black Range Rover Vogue SE, which as you can imagine is not the smallest vehicle to maneuver onto the channel train, but we just fitted in with the other standard cars. I did cheat by using the kerb

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cameras. They are also useful when you have to go through tolls and you want to get really close to the ticket box without damaging the shiny 21” Delta Winged Diamond Turned Wheels on the kerb. Most Battlefieldsby4x4 tours are two half-days and one full day, so they start on a Friday afternoon and finish again at lunchtime on the Sunday. You could get back to work by the Monday if you have to.

There are two types of accommodation types on offer on these tours, camping or a hotel. We were on the latter tour and found ourselves in the centrally located Hotel Ibis. From here it's a short walk to the cities two ancient market squares, the Grand Place and the smaller Petite Place, referred to by the locals as the Place de Heros. The eye-catching Flemish-style architecture found around the two squares definitely makes a stroll around them a memorable affair. My favourite building was without a doubt the town hall known as the Hotel de Ville, which is located on the Petite Place. You cannot miss this UNESCO World Heritage Gothic-inspired listed building. During the First World War the Hotel de Ville was completely destroyed and flattened. Fortunately for us it was rebuilt afterwards so we were able to enjoy its majestic splendor.

I don't want to spoil it for those planning on going, but please allow to me share with you a few of my personal highlights and hopefully these, plus the moving story of poor old Bill Hubbard, will inspire you to sign up for one of the Battlefieldsby4x4 tours.

While the tour officially begins at the Arras Memorial we went to the offices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) beforehand for an exclusive insight into the great work that they do. Two of our hosts, Carl and Nigel, work for the commission, this makes them the perfect people to take clients on 4x4 battlefield tours. Plus they share a passion for off-roading.



Just opposite the reception stands a large map of France. Each CWGC cemetery is indicated with a blue dot and as you look at the map the Western Front is easily identifiable by the masses of blue dots that run from the Belgian coast all the way to the Swiss border. The area around the city of Arras has more blue dots than anywhere else on the map. Sadly this can only mean one thing. The Battle of Arras, which raged from April 9 to May 16 1917, had a much higher daily death toll than the Battle of the Somme, fought less than a year before.

The battle took place on a front no wider than 24 miles and before the first British, Canadian, New Zealand, Newfoundland and Australian troops went over the top on the morning of April 9, there was the little matter of the preliminary bombardment, a period in which 2,689,000 shells rained down on the German defenses. To give this number some sort of perspective, it's over a million shells more than they had used during the Battle of the Somme. This also explains why even today, we were still finding hundreds of old shells next to the track we were driving along. In fact, each year someone is killed along the Western Front from an unexploded bomb that has decided to explode.

After leaving Arras for the first time we headed north. The plan was to approach the infamous Vimy Ridge from the west, just like the Canadians did on the morning of Easter Monday in 1917. Unlike them we did not have ten inches of snow to contend with. The broader plan of this Easter offensive was to try and bring about a speedy end to a war that had pretty much reached a stalemate. Initially this seemed a real possibility as four divisions of the Canadian Corps, who had never fought together before, managed to capture the strategically important ridge. They suffered great losses in the process and when we saw the impossibly steep and exposed ridges they had



BATTLEFIELDSBY4x4

Want to go?

I CAN'T say enough good things about Battlefieldsby4x4. Despite the fact that they don't drive Land Rovers themselves they're a professional outfit with a sound knowledge of their specialist subject. They will take you where mainstream tourists cannot go and in the process bring the battlefield to life with the exact details of what happened where you are driving.

They offer several different battlefield tours including The Somme, The Tank, D-Day and Arras of course. Trips are either camping or hotel based. For more details or dates of tours see www.battlefieldsby4x4.com.

Battle of the Somme Centenary Tour

JOIN THE LRM Battle of the Somme Centenary Tour in association with BattlefieldsBy4x4 to be held from 17 till 19 June 2016. This very special tour is held over three days (one full and two half days) nearly one hundred years after the Battle of the Somme took place. The cost for this special exclusive LRM tour is £399 and includes your vehicle, driver and one passenger. A four course meal, all camping fees, museum visits etc. For more information or to book this 'not to be missed tour' see www.battlefieldsby4x4.com/lrm.

Top and middle:

Most of the lanes were dry and hard but we did encounter one very muddy one that caused a nervous moment or two.



to move up, we could see why. 11,285 Canadians lost their lives on French soil during this war. Some say that modern Canada was born in these trenches of Vimy.

To celebrate their victory they built the impressive Vimy Ridge National Historic Site of Canada at the spot place where they captured the ridge. The two white pylons can be seen from miles away and when standing at the memorial you get great views over the Pas-de-Calais coal basin. A young Canadian guide by the name of Oliver Parker took us on tour of the ridge, his chest seemed to swell each time he told us about how his countrymen captured the ridge. He also took us to see the intricate network of underground subways used by the Canadians, these were vital in keeping them safe when under bombardment. Some subways went under and towards the German defensive positions.

While the Canadians enjoyed some almost instant success, the same could not be set for their allies further down the line. The Germans knew that the enemy had been preparing for a massive attack and they withdrew to the Hindenburg Line, their new well-prepared defensive positions. We visited some of these, any small ridge in an area that is generally pretty flat, was of rather significant tactical importance. I could not believe how exposed the poor advancing soldiers must have been, this obviously explains the shocking casualty figures. This elastic defence tactic used by the Germans made life difficult for their enemy who now had to go looking for them.

Our second day on tour began with a visit to the Wellington Quarry in Arras. Before the battle commenced an incredible 24,000 soldiers were housed underneath the city in old chalk quarry tunnels for over a week. This was to help the attack achieve the all-important element of surprise. Some of the tunnels took the soldiers closer to the German positions. During our tour of the cavernous tunnels I could not believe that so many men lived here in the darkness for over a week before the battle. They showed us what typical quarters of officers and soldiers would have looked like. Now that we had seen the subways of Vimy and the chalk quarry, I realised that there was a whole underground war going on that most people, including myself, never knew about. I thought that all the action was happening in the trenches.

I could write a book about the many cemeteries we stopped at, each soldier, section, platoon, battalion, regiment and army had a separate story to tell. We ended



our second day with a stop at the Vis-En-Artois British Cemetery; here lay almost 900 identified casualties and almost 2500 casualties in total. We had half an hour to take a look around. I decided to walk up and down each of the many rows so no one would be left out. Sadly some of these fellows died only days before the war ended.

The official German losses for the battle are 85,000 though some historians argue that this figure might be as high as 120,000. The losses suffered by the Germans really hit home when we stop at the Maison Blanche Cemetery where 45,000 are buried.

Allow me to try and demonstrate the brutality of the battle by sharing some more figures. 10,000 non-German soldiers died on the first day alone. Then for the next two months 4000 non-Germans died a day. Places such as Roeux, Wancourt, Bullecourt and Monchy-le-Proeux were eventually taken but at a rather high cost.

You're probably thinking why I have not mentioned the Land Rovers? The truth is that the routes are not technical at all. You are crossing what is predominantly farmlands where a very brutal war once too place. Yes we did engage low range once or twice and I did use the Terrain Response in a muddy section, but no Land Rover model should have a problem with the route. The great thing about using a 4x4 for these tours is that you get to parts of the battlefields that the general public just doesn't see unless they love walking or mountain biking.

The three days left me with an incredible sadness. The chaps buried in the never-ending graves we saw were brothers, fathers, husbands and sons to people back home and they left irreplaceable holes in families. How could we ever forget that? My great hope is that future generations fully appreciate what they did. Fortunately for us Land Rover owners, we can get to places on the former First World War battlefields that other tourists can only dream of. This is thanks to the great efforts of the chaps from Battlefieldsby4x4. Now that I have come back I genuinely cannot wait to go back to France and learn some more about what once transpired on these now peaceful fields. I owe it to Bill, Alf and their mates.

