

SOMBRE ON THE SOMME

Patrick Cruywagen reports from LRM's first-ever reader's tour – marking the centenary of the Battle of the Somme

Photographs: Alison Cole

The First World War's Battle of the Somme began at 7.30 am on July 1, 1916, and it lasted until November 18, 1916. By the end of the first day 19,240 British soldiers had been killed and nearly twice that number lay wounded in the muddy fields, trenches and field hospitals situated across a narrow 15 mile front in northern France. To put this number into perspective you could have filled the Old Trafford stadium with the dead and wounded British from that first day of the battle.

It was a military disaster of unprecedented proportions. The BBC website describes the battle as "141 days of horror" and at the end of this specific battle there were nearly one million dead or wounded Allied and German soldiers, making it one of the bloodiest and costliest of the First World War. Yet – incredibly – at the end of it all the British and Allied forces had still not been unable to break through the German defences. What a waste.

Today we wonder how this could have been allowed to happen. But more importantly we must make sure that it never happens again – and, of course, we must pay the appropriate respects to the deserving fallen.

When we decided to organise the first-ever LRM Readers' Tour in the summer of 2016, we decided to do it in conjunction with Battlefieldsby4x4 and call it the Somme Centenary Tour. Our plan was to travel along the routes and tracks the soldiers would have used before and during the battle, stopping at places of significance and some of

the countless cemeteries. LRM has previously used the services of the extremely competent guides from Battlefieldsby4x4 when doing a feature on the Battle of Arras. Their tours normally start early on a Friday afternoon and finish up just after lunch on the Sunday, so you can enjoy a decent weekend away.

Land Rover UK have kindly loaned me a Discovery Sport HSE Luxury for the trip and my beautiful wife Alison and Land Rover-mad son Isaac are with me. We have somehow managed to fit all our camping gear and Weber BBQ into the vehicle.

How do you turn a regular Sport into the luxury version? Well you add an Ebony interior with Windsor leather and a set of 20 inch Alloy Stormer Sparkle Silver wheels. According to the weather forecast the off-roading would be a little muddy and we would have loads of rain throughout the weekend. So my shimmering wheels and white hide seats wouldn't stay that way for long.

We leave the A1 at Bapaume and hop onto the D929, towards the town of Albert, where we will be camping for two nights. It does not take long and we pass the Warlencourt British Cemetery. Not long after that the imposing Thiépval Memorial comes into view on our right, it bears the names of the 72,246 missing British Empire soldiers from the Battle of the Somme. Camping Velodrome is about a 15 minute walk from the centre of Albert and if you look at old trench maps from the first World War then you will see that we will be sleeping on top of old German



The off-road sections that we do on the first day are not challenging, there is some mud, water and ruts to play in, but this tour is still definitely what I like to call novice friendly. Our final official stop of the day is at the Ovillers-La-Boiselle cemetery. Nigel takes us to the grave of Clem Cunningham before reading to us an account from his mate Private Ernest Deighton, 8th BN, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. "The bullets were flying all over the place. I don't think we'd gone twenty yards when my chum Clem Cunningham got hit straight through the breast. He went down. I went down. We got it in the same burst. I got it through the shoulder." Ernest adds that he hardly felt it and so he jumped up in a rage and made his way to a German dugout where he delivered a Mills bomb before using his bayonet to kill another German. It was real hand to hand combat. Ernest then got shot in the hand, but still continued. The Gods were on his side because the only thing that stopped him was a bullet that went through his tin hat before lodging itself in his foot. His only option was to take shelter in a shell hole. There he lay in pain and without water. This was the Battle of the Somme, raw and brutal.

We have it easy and jump back in our comfy Land Rovers before making our way to a little French restaurant to enjoy some local cuisine. Our first day on the Somme

had been a more than sombre reminder of the utter devastation and unimaginable loss of life that had taken place here a century ago. That night I cannot stop thinking of poor, brave Ernest.

As lunch stops are out in the field affairs, our second day begins at the Super U supermarket in Albert. Don't bring any food over from the UK for one of these tours. While the French might not be the masters of the battlefield they are certainly the kings of the kitchen. We stock up on baguettes, cheeses, local meats and salads.

Our second day on the Somme begins by driving along the very same routes that the British soldiers would've taken to get to the front lines or defensive trenches. What strikes me about the landscape here is how exposed it is, if you occupied the high ground then you owned a gold mine. Great care had to be taken to ensure that all troop movements took place along dead ground, that is the terrain between you and the enemy, where if you move along it, they cannot see you. As it is raining again and a large portion of the driving is through rutted and muddy fields, the mud and ruts option on my Terrain Response becomes my new best friend. We are only ten vehicles plus the local farmers who are using these tracks, so I dread to think of what they must have looked like when thousands of soldiers, artillery pieces, tanks equipment,

Below:
The off-road sections are far from challenging making our tour novice friendly - and fun with all the muddy ruts



"Terrain Response becomes my new best friend"

READERS' COMMENTS

Paul and Corinne Ashdown (Range Rover Sport HSE)

We have owned all types of Land Rover but decided to do the tour in our 2011 Range Rover Sport HSE, it never let us down. The tour was brilliant, the hospitality was great and the camping facilities good. The guides were extremely informative. We are currently restoring an older Defender and hope we will be ready for the Arras tour next year.

Mark Harrison (Defender 110 Adventure)

We would not have been able to visit these parts of the Somme without our Land Rovers. I found it all informative, thought provoking and entertaining, but above all it gave us all a real insight into what our forefathers went through in this dreadful battle.

Rich Myers (Discovery 3)

The rewards from this trip will last a lifetime. It was special to experience it with my family members, especially my 86-year-old mother-in-law who achieved her life goal of visiting the places where her father fought and survived.

Hieth George (Discovery Sport)

This trip was a great combination of fun and history that left us all feeling humbled by the heroic actions of others during the Battle of the Somme. Everyone should find the time to visit this place. When in the Armed Forces I drove Defenders, my Discovery Sport did well thanks to all the great tech and Terrain Response.

carts and horses were moving along them in the rain. I don't think Terrain Response would've helped anyone.

At La Boisselle we stop at the Lochnagar Mine Crater, the largest man made crater on the Somme Battlefield. This mine was laid by the British Army's 179th Tunneling Company Royal Engineers under what was known to be a German strategic strong point. Precisely two minutes before the mass attack started at Zero Hour, the mine was exploded. The huge crater was initially held by British troops but the Germans' relentless artillery and machine-gun fire soon put an end to this. Each year at 7.28am on July 1 they have a little ceremony at the large crater to pay their respects.

From the crater we move on through the German defensive positions. While they might have had more time to prepare them than the Allied forces, they too suffered massive losses and we witness this during our stop at the Fricourt German Military Cemetery. A quick look at the visitor's book reveals that it definitely does not receive as many visitors as a British or French cemetery.

The Welsh 38th Division went through hell on earth while trying to take Mametz Wood between July 7-12, 1916, and so our next stop is at the special memorial to mark those dark days in Welsh history. The strong German positions, machine gun fire and bombardments killed hundreds during the first day of the attack. They had to bravely move across a hopelessly exposed open field. The red dragon at the top of the memorial is tearing at the German barbed wire, just like the poor men of the 38th would have done.

As we move on we pass a special memorial which marks the spot where Donald Bell, a VC recipient, was killed. Donald was the first pro-footballer to sign up to fight in the war and he bravely attacked a German machine gun via a comms trench to earn his VC. Today





“Our day on the Somme had been a reminder of the utter devastation and unimaginable loss of life”

Below:
The Somme 1916 museum is must-see and is located in the crypt of the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Brebières

defensive positions. There are ten vehicles in total on the trip, surprisingly only three are Defenders, of which one is a new limited edition Defender 110 Adventure, owned and driven by Mark Harrison from North Yorkshire. I am surprised by all the newer Land Rovers on the tour. I am not the only Discovery Sport on the tour with Hieth George in a 2.2-litre version.

After a briefing and the handing out of goody bags to all the participants, we are ready to officially start the tour. First stop is the must-visit Somme 1916 Museum in the centre of Albert. The museum is situated in the crypt of the impressive Basilica of Notre-Dame de Brebières. Albert lies about three miles from the Somme frontline and most British and other Allied soldiers marching to the front would have seen the golden Mary and Baby Jesus statue at the top of the Basilica. It was shelled at the start of the conflict and from then it stood at an awkward, almost right angle. The Germans thought that if they could make it fall then the British would fall with it, the Brits thought if they could keep it up then they would halt any German advance.

In the 100 years since the battle the surrounding landscape has changed to what would today be considered normal. This is why the museum is so great as the various underground enclaves depict real-life scenes from the war. There are also many black and white photographs to help one visualise what it was like here a century ago.

Once we are back in our Land Rovers the group is split into two, with five Land Rovers in each, this is to ensure that the convoys will be compact and manageable. Each group has its own guide and we have Nigel Stevens, who will be providing the commentary and expert insights. From here we make our way along an old Roman road to the Thiepval Memorial, which I had seen earlier from the road. It's an imposing and rather large memorial and stands in the grounds of the Thiepval Château, atop the Thiepval Ridge. People ask why did it all go so wrong and bloody on July 1, 1916? The answer is pretty simple. The Germans occupied the ridge and surrounds on September 27, 1914, which means they had two years to choose and prepare their defensive positions.

As we make our way closer to the memorial, the rain starts to hammer down. Our group scurries ahead and takes shelter under its imposing arches. I head off on my own with my son Isaac, he is too young to understand the significance or magnitude of the memorial. This reminds me of the time that I visited the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda, where over 250,000 poor people are buried in a single mass grave.

By the time we are all back in our Land Rovers the sun has come out to play just like it did on July 1, 1916. Time for some more lanes. Our route takes us into Authuille, which lies about 5 km north of Albert, soon we find ourselves on the Thiepval Ridge again and we follow it into the village of Courcellette. From here we run a lane below the Pozier Ridge, all goes well until I bottom out in the Discovery Sport. I reverse my way out and put the wheels on the higher ground as these ruts are too deep. I definitely do miss the adjustable ride height of some of the other Land Rover products.



Below and opposite page:
Our tour took in many memorial parks as well as the same tracks used by the British and Commonwealth forces

you can see his VC medal on display in the National Football Museum in Manchester.

Our lunch stop is at Delville Wood, which for me has much personal significance. We South Africans call this the Devil's Wood as we literally lost thousands here while trying to capture this small wood. Our guides have kindly made a special arrangement for me to lay a wreath here. After this I take a solo stroll through the eerie woods. Many South Africans who fought here are soldiers without graves, such was the ferocity of the fighting. I am immensely proud of what my countrymen did here. After Dellville Wood we take a muddy track towards High Wood, where thousands of British and German soldiers were killed during the three months it took for the British to eventually take the woods. After a short stop at the Pozieres Memorial we return to our campsite in Albert.

Before setting off on our final day of our Somme tour we first have to pack away the tents as we will be finishing up in the nearby town of Arras. Our convoy makes a beeline for the village of Mesnil-Martinsart, it lies about 8 km north of Albert. From here we go off-road along what was once a railway line which was used to take supplies to the frontline, we pass the Knightsbridge Cemetery along the way. Many of the 548 burials here would've been from the poor soldiers trying to take the all-important Mesnil Ridge.

Our convoy calls a halt at the Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Park, it was established to honour the many Newfoundlanders who died during the First World War. The Battle of the Somme and more specifically the attack on the German positions around the village of Beaumont-Hamel was the first serious engagement for the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment. No other unit suffered heavier losses on the first day of the battle. They lost all their officers, of the 801 who went into battle, 233 were killed while 386 were wounded and 91 were missing. I walk up and over the Newfoundland trenches, then into No Man's Land and on towards the German defensive positions. From here I look back towards the memorial. The poor Newfoundlanders had absolutely no chance.

Next, our convoy takes some off-road tracks towards the battlefield around Serre. Along the way we pass a memorial dedicated to the Accrington Pals battalion from the North Country. Around 720 of them went into action on the first day in an attack on Serre and almost all of them were killed in the first half hour. The German machine gun nests were perfectly placed to mow them down with minimum effort. It was extreme carnage, later on we stop at what was once a German machine gun nest, it is well protected and hidden.

After finishing off our last few muddy lanes the time has come to press on to Arras, where the tour officially ends, it has taught us so much about one of the bloodiest battles ever fought. The fact that we were in Land Rovers meant that we got to experience something pretty special as we could move along the same tracks, trails and routes of the advancing British and Commonwealth forces.



TOUR INFO



Our guides **Battlefieldsby4x4.com**

Totally professional, very knowledgeable about the Battle of the Somme and most importantly respectful to the many fallen. The battlefield will come to life as you travel along the same tracks and routes that soldiers once used. For more details see www.battlefieldsby4x4.com.

Thanks

Thanks to Britpart for providing some of the bits for our goody bags. Also special thanks to Paul Wells from the Wells Brewery for providing Bombardier pint glasses and ale.