

Visit to Yprés by Edgar's great nephew Malcolm Smith

On 20 February 2015 I made a trip to Yprés in Belgium. My great uncle Edgar Reginald Folker had been killed there on active service exactly 100 years ago, so I had decided to visit to pay my respects.

I drove to Dover the day before and took the cross channel ferry to Dunkirk, From there I drove to Lille where I had booked an hotel. I got to the correct exit on the motorway but then it started to go wrong. I only had a small scale map which did not show the streets in any detail, so I had to drive around a bit to try and find my bearings. Having stopped twice to ask directions, I finally found signs for the hotel. Nonetheless, it was still difficult as the access was far from obvious.

The next day, having planned my route, I set off for Yprés. That went reasonably well although I did lose direction a couple of times. Having worked out the parking rules, I found a spot just outside the town boundary that was free. My first mission was to locate the Menin Gate Memorial where Edgar's name is listed so I headed off into town. It was cold and raining and I had accidentally left my umbrella at home.

In the centre of town I reached the *In Flanders Fields* museum so I decided to visit there and then. Not only was it very interesting, it was also warm and dry. Unfortunately it did not have any information specific to Edgar's time in action. Having taken a coffee, I set off to find the memorial which turned out to be quite close by.

The Menin Gate Memorial lists the names of 55,000 of the 90,000 soldiers killed in action at Yprés in the first world war, and who have no known grave. Edgar was killed in trench 37 near a village called Verbranded Molen and was buried nearby. The commanding officer had made a sketch of the location but that has since been lost. I looked for Edgar's name but it was not on the panel number I had in mind so I decided to go back to the car to check. I had the panel numbers written on a copy of the trench map that I had brought.

The walk to the car and back was a case of enduring the cold and wet. I found Edgar's name on panel 55 and photographed it. Having had a good look around the memorial, I went back to the car to drive off to the area where Edgar had been posted.

I headed for the Hill 60 memorial as that was close to where I needed to be. Luckily it was only a short drive and, apart from overshooting to turning, found it quite easily. When I got the paper map out of my pocket, I found that it had got soaked and was stuck together and illegible. Knowing that I wanted to be south and east of Hill 60, I set off again and found a suitable side road from where I was able to take some photographs of the countryside where Edgar would have been posted.

I drove back to my parking spot at Yprés where I managed to open up my soggy map and laid it out to dry a bit. Eventually I did manage to read it and found that I had indeed been to the place I intended. I drove back to the battleground again just to see if I could find anything more tangible but there was nothing. Whilst there I stopped at several of the many cemeteries.

Back at Yprés again, I walked into town once more and decided to return to the museum to get out of the cold rain and for a warm drink. Whilst there, I tried to top up my 'pay as you go' mobile phone, but, just as I was completing the transaction I was cut off due to lack of funds. I now had three hours to wait until the 'Last Post' ceremony that takes place at the Menin Gate Memorial each night. I found a shop where I bought a larger scale road map then went back to the car then drove off to get some petrol. After that I looked for and found a parking place nearer to the gate so that I could get home as easily as possible.

That left me two hours and I decided to sit in the car as I had food and drink with me. At 7:30 I walked back to the memorial and found myself a good spot to stand. It rapidly became busy with the crowd reaching something like 600 or 700. Whilst there, I left my name in the visitors book which is kept on site together with a list of the names of all the soldiers remembered there. The road through the gate was shut then the ceremony took place. The buglers sounded the alert then the story of one selected soldier was read out. Then came the sounding of the Last Post followed by the laying of wreaths by relatives of some of the fallen soldiers. I made a video of the main parts of the ceremony on my small camera, so the quality is rubbish but the sound has the correct impact. Information about the daily ceremony can be found at <http://www.lastpost.be/en/home>

Afterwards, I got right back to the correct exit on the motorway again, but, as before, I missed the road to the hotel. This time I managed to work my round until I found a road I recognised, taking about 30 minutes on this occasion.

On the third day I had a ferry place booked for midday. However, I had hardly slept so I got up for breakfast as soon as serving started then headed straight off to Dunkirk. Luckily I was able to board the ferry at 10am so managed to get home two hours early.