

## **FFFAIF 2106 Commemorative End of Tour Report**

The *2016 FFFAIF Western Front Commemorative Tour* was comprised of 35 members (15 were repeat customers) and tour leaders Matt Smith and Chris Bartolo. The Tour was supported by member David Wright of *Travel Prospects* who acted as our travel agent for the first time.

Highlights included:

1. Ray Black (With Olive and Carolyn) standing within a 30 metre radius of the body of his Great Uncle, killed on 4th October 1917 on the Broodseinde Ridge. After four attempts and armed with higher resolution maps, we got him to the spot. We await a forthcoming article.
2. Opening Dinner at the Brasserie Katzematten - site for the printing of the Wipers Times - 5 Belgian members in attendance, including Anny De Decker.
3. Fromelles - Dedication, 19th July - Extremely hot day, with a couple of the party especially feeling the heat. Nothing that a couple of hydration tablets and water couldn't rectify. A great day and many old and new friends in attendance, including Lambis Englezos, Colette Durand, Pierre Seillier, et al.
4. Arras - change from the Wellington Quarries to the Boves Tunnels under the Belfry in the Place De Heros. A nice view from the top and interesting underground history in the tunnels.
5. Bullecourt - visit to the Bullecourt 1917, Jean and Denise Letaille Museum and battlefield. Old friends and 2010 FFFAIF relics still on display; thanks to Col Sutcliffe.
6. Amiens - dinner on Le Quai and then Cathedral Luminere after dark.
7. Bertangles Chateau Tour - Australian HQ 1918, including Knighthood of Monash by King George. Great experience and saw tree planted by FFFAIF Patron, the Governor-General.
8. BBQ Lunch at A La Ferme B and B at Bayonvillers - enjoyable few hours.
9. Member Simon Blake's emotional visit to Cerisy-Gailly to pay tribute to a relative from Broken Hill who died in 1918.
10. 23rd July - Attendance at the funeral of 3 Unknown Australian soldiers at Pozieres New British Cemetery before the main Pozieres commemoration at 4pm. We were the only tour group in attendance, much to the disappointment of many others we met later at the main event. Insider information paid off and once again, it is easier to gain forgiveness, than to gain approval. According to most, it was the highlight of the tour.
11. Visit to Hem Farm to catch up with Les Curley. Photos to follow. Then French Re-enactment group at the Historial De La Grande Guerre in Peronne - arranged to meet us after day touring in the Aisne region. Opportunity for members to hold historic weapons, taste traditional French army coffee and meet a great group of guys.
12. Compiègne (Armistice), then to Belleau Wood, the site of the battle by the US Marines during WWI. Member Jerry Boland gave a stirring account of the battle, recalled some famous quotes that have remained legendary in the Corps annals, and for his father (Lieutenant-Colonel, US Marine Corps WW2 and Korea), visited the memorial in the wood.
13. Chemin De Dames and Caverne Du Dragon - guided tour by Froggie Cobber, Yves Fohlen. Always a blast and great experience on the battlefield and underground.
14. Verdun - tour guided by local expert Ingrid Ferrand - Toured the main battlefield, Ossuary, Cemetery, Fort Douaumont. Then afternoon we explored the craters and underground German tunnels of the Butte de Vauquois, 30 km north-west of Verdun. German tunnels to 100 metres deep. 13 FFFAIF Tour Members - 16 metres deep.
15. Farewell dinner near hotel in Verdun - great night, great meal, great wine and beer - Many thanks, with speeches by Matt, Chris, Graeme. And recitations by Sue Tongue and Deej.
16. Final day - Meaux WWI Museum - spectacular collection.

Members had the opportunity to commemorate soldiers at many different cemeteries along the length of the Western Front - from old favourites to new visits.

Some examples of the very positive feedback received from tour members includes:

**Andrew Quinn:** *Just a note to give you some feedback on the tour. I enjoyed the tour very much and felt comfortable travelling and sharing experiences with people with similar interests to me. You both did a great job keeping everybody organised and informed. Matt, your knowledge of the places we went and the Australian involvement was extensive and detailed and clearly has come from years of research and visiting the sites.....*

*I now have a better idea of what the 'commemorative' aspect of the tour meant and think it is a great initiative to arrange for FFFAIF members to visit graves, memorials, battlefields and other sites significant to their family and relatives. It is exactly what an organisation like the FFFAIF should do.*

**Noeleen Lloyd:** *The tour was a wonderful experience and thank you to everyone for making it so. Chris and Matt...the hard work you do before hand and during the tour can't be understated or over thanked!! The highlight for me remains the Ceremony at Pozieres Cemetery.*

**Margaret Kelly:** *Thanks again to Chris and Matt for all their work and care and especially for remembering about the Maze and taking me there.*

**Angie Little:** *Lots of photos and videos I have looked through and realise how lucky I am to have met some new Friends as well as the Oldies from the FFFAIF Group.*

**Ray Black:** *It was another great, informative tour – thanks Matt and Chris.*

*It was also an excellent catch up with our fellow repeat offenders and newbies – and that was great. Photos, photos, memories and memories.*

**Ray Hudson:** *Just a quick thank you note for all of your efforts in organising the recent tour. I really don't know how you conjure up the energy to do what you do.*

*We broke two golden rules this time - never go to Europe in summer, and never go on a bus tour. Well I am glad that we did.*

*Your FFFAIF tour was more than an average bus tour. Pretty well guaranteed to have good people and Matt plays his part so superbly well.*

*Personally I enjoyed reinforcing the impressions from our previous time in 2008, also going to new places and the commentary from Matt added so much. To be at the Fromelles ceremony exactly 100 years after my Digger uncle - words cannot express how much that meant to me - so thank you so much for making it possible.*

The FFFAIF Committee on behalf of the FFFAIF members participating in the Tour acknowledge the contribution of the following people who contributed to the success of our Tour:

- **Mrs Lorraine Curley** for her support in making the ever useful Tour bags which we once again a great success;
- **Mr David Wright** of *Travel Prospects* for his contributions to the organisation, support and success of the Tour;
- **FFFAIF overseas members** who joined the tour in various capacities and helped make the tour a memorable experience: **Anny de Decker; Carole Laignel and Yves Fohlen.** Along with new member **Danielle Roubroeks** from Antwerp
- **Coach Partners** in Belgium and the marvellous and professional job done by coach driver **Joris Coutereel.** It was the 3rd time **Joris** has been our driver and he offered

service above and beyond. He regularly extended his responsibility and increased the tour access to locations that most other tour groups and coaches would never attempt to reach. This included reversing a 50-seater coach, 300 metres up a single dirt track so that members did not have to walk back.

The overall running of the tour went smoothly as a result of the detailed preparation undertaken by Matt, Chris and David. The maximum daytime temperatures averaged 30+ for the first week, with the 19th July (Fromelles) reaching 37 degrees. This was a challenge for the bus air conditioning, especially with the frequent stops on the battlefields. There were a few issues with the standard of a couple of the hotels which will be taken into account in arranging future tours.

The Tour was completed within budget, with enough funds for each Tour participant to receive a calendar which will be produced using entries in the inaugural *Carole and Robyn Ward Battlefield Flower Photography Competition*.

Tour leaders Matt and Chris have thanked the FFFAIF Committee for their ongoing support in their efforts to provide this unique opportunity to fellow members of the association. The FFFAIF Committee of Management has recognised that Matt and Chris have now delivered outstanding experiences and value for FFFAIF members in the Western Front Commemorative Tours of 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016 with Gallipoli and UK extensions and extends its appreciation and congratulations to them and congratulates David Wright and *Travel Prospects* on enabling a smooth transition to a new Travel Agent and facilitating such an outstanding Tour.