

12th Manchesters Remembered

“HEROIC in life and not forgotten in death. The people of Greater Manchester have remembered their debt to the 12th Manchesters.”

So read one of the wreaths laid at the foot of a new memorial to mark the sacrifices of a battalion of First World War soldiers who gave their lives on the Somme.

While the men’s descendants sheltered from heavy storms back in Britain, the former killing fields of northern France basked in glorious sunshine on the first weekend of July

The open agricultural lands of Picardy offer little shelter from the elements and it was the same 92 years ago when, on the morning of July 7, 1916, the men – and boys – of the 12th Manchesters stepped out of their trench in sunlight and headed across 700 yards of open ground towards the German guns.

By the end of the morning 16 officers and 539 men would be dead, missing or wounded. This from an initial roll call of around 700.

Like so many others before and to follow, the bodies of many of the dead were never recovered from the battlefield and they are commemorated by name only on the imposing Thiepval Memorial to the missing of the Somme.

This memorial dominates much of the northern battlefield of the Somme, but it is hidden from view in the peaceful hollow that houses the small village of Contalmaison. In truth, nine decades later it is hard to imagine the horrors that were visited upon this close-knit farming community in the world’s first truly industrialised conflict.

Nevertheless, the scars are there for those who wish to see them. The presence of two military cemeteries tell their own story, while a Croix De Guerre attached to a deceptively weathered building shows that this village was reduced to rubble in the 1914-1918 war.

There are only third-hand memories left in the village of those turbulent times, but an initial roll of the drums and burst of the pipes was enough to draw the residents from their doors to watch a modern parade to mark the sacrifices of the past.

The carnage of July 7, 1916, had resulted in an oak cross being unveiled by survivors of the 12th Manchester battalion in 1927. This was replaced two years later with a granite monument in the public cemetery in Contalmaison.

However, after battlefield tour guides pointed out that few people were aware of its existence, the Lancashire and Cheshire branch of the WFA decided that something



John Richardson and Tom Willis present the Mayor of Contalmaison, Madame Patricia Leroy with a plaque bearing the coat of arms of the City of Manchester.



The Somme Pipe Band lead off the full parade of visitors from the centre of the village of Contalmaison.



The contingent on their way up the hill to the gates of the village's communal cemetery where the new memorial awaits.



The Somme Pipe Band ahead of the Khaki Chums, who were all turned out in authentic 12th Manchesters uniforms, arrive at the gates of the cemetery.



Everybody assembles facing the memorial and Madame Leroy waits to lay a wreath held for her by a Khaki Chum.



John Richardson, Martin Purdy and Tom Willis are flanked by two captains representing the 75th Royal Engineers who delivered the new memorial to its destination.

should be done. An appeal was launched to provide road marker signs and a smaller ‘sister’ monument that explained, in English and French, what had happened on the site of the memorials on that fateful summer morn in 1916.

Finally, after many planning meetings and various problems concerning logistics and finance were overcome, a coach party set off from Manchester for a ‘rededication’ ceremony at the existing monument and the unveiling of its newly-completed companion.

Led by the Somme Battlefield Pipe Band, a platoon of the Khaki Chums living history group in WWI infantry uniforms – badged 12th Battalion Manchesters, a colour party from the 1914-18 Manchester Regiment, standard bearers made up of veterans from the Second World War, and officers of the 75th Royal Engineers of Failsworth, a large crowd paraded to the communal cemetery for the rededication and unveiling ceremony.

The two memorials, at the rear of the plot, sit proudly on part of the old German trench system that the 12th Manchesters had as their objective. The surrounding fields, once awash with the blood of battle, now alive to the sound of pipes and drums.

Thankfully, our island nation has always excelled at patriotic ceremonies, and as the National Anthem rang out across foreign fields again, there was a sense of pride in the moment as well as the unquestionable heroism of the past.

The Mayor of Contalmaison, Madame Patricia Leroy, John Richardson, of the WFA, and Clive Harris, of Battle Honours Ltd, spoke poignantly of the sacrifices of a previous generation before a lone piper played a mournful lament.

John Richardson said later: “I feel that we have finally paid due respect and thank the people of Greater Manchester, and fellow members of the WFA, for their donations to help make this possible. The new memorial was important. It not only marks the events of July 7, 1916, but pays tribute to all of the men from the battalion who went on to give their lives in the Great War – more than 1,000 of them.

The ceremony was very moving, but it will be forgotten in six-months time. What is important is that in 60 years time - and maybe 600 years time - this memorial will still be here to tell future generations what happened to men from their own local communities.”

The Mayor, Madame Leroy, said: “We rightly pay tribute to the men of Manchester and the part they played in fighting for freedom on our soil.”

At the going down of the sun the men of the 12th Manchesters will clearly not be forgotten.

Martin Purdy



The accompanying tour from Manchester stand where the Manchesters stood and were well briefed about the circumstances of July 7th 1916 by GBG Tour Guide Clive Harris of Battle Honours Ltd.

JOURNEY'S END – and thank you ...

The rededication and unveiling ceremony at Contalmaison marked the end of a three year project which had been undertaken principally by a trio of WFA Lancashire and Cheshire branch members, namely - WFA Membership Trustee, John 'Private10749' Richardson and two of Manchester's finest, Tom Willis and Martin Purdy.

From sing-a-thons organised by Morris dancers to raffles and events at working mens' clubs, raising the money for a new memorial was to have its colourful and memorable moments. Thankfully, the public responded strongly to a series of local and regional newspaper articles written by Martin Purdy, and the fund started to grow.

The irrepressible bantams Richardson and Tom Willis, soon found themselves trawling the British Isles for suitable stone for a monument, and craftsmen capable of casting a bronze plaque which would be of the very best quality. After much heated discussion in the HQ, The Crown Inn, Rochdale Road, Middleton, decisions were taken. The stone was supplied by Moray Stone Cutters, of Elgin, Scotland; the bronze work and sign-posts were designed by Ted McAvoy, of Leander Architectural, Dove Holes, Buxton, Derbyshire. The casting being done at his foundry in Powys, Wales.

Our sincere thanks are extended to the most professional and efficient Helen McPhail, who provided the French translation for the plaque. In the year that marks the 100th anniversary of the Territorials, our sincere thanks must go to the lads of the 75th Royal Engineers of Failsworth, Oldham. Led by Staff Sergeant Jason Shawcross, and ably assisted by Sgts Pete Whitworth, Alan McHale, and Cpls Ian Stinton and Jimmy Nuttall, the engineers transported the stone to Contalmaison and positioned it in the cemetery. They also painted the cemetery gates and erected the sign-posts. Quite an amazing operation! Our indebtedness is expressed

to Avril Williams, of Ocean Villas, for very kindly assisting with their billeting on a complimentary basis.

The project would not have progressed far without initial reconnaissance and follow-up visits to the Somme. Our HQ was Les Alouettes, at Hardecourt aux Bois, and our thanks go to Diane and Vic Piuk. Diane (Hodge), for looking after us so well and providing local intelligence, and to Vic for acting as our translator on numerous occasions with the local dignitaries of Contalmaison.

Madame Patricia Leroy, the Mayor of Contalmaison, was pleasant to deal with and we thank her for permission to hold the ceremony in the village.

The following are mentioned in dispatches – the Mayor of Pozieres, M. Bernard Delattre, for kind permission given to erect a sign-post on the Albert – Bapaume corner; the former Mayor of Contalmaison, M. Bernard Senechal for his original agreement to the project; M. Jean-Luc Tryhoen for his kind provision of his barn for the vin d'honneur and buffet; Francois Bergez of Souvenir

Francais for his translation services at the ceremony; Ian Alexander for quality advice and information; Les Disbrey for coordinating activities in Contalmaison; Derek Bird, WFA North Scotland branch chairman for the provision of the National Anthems CD; Yves Holbecq and the Somme Battlefield Pipe Band; the ubiquitous Taff Gillingham and the splendid Khaki Chums; the 1914-18 Manchester Regiment Colour Party; Alison Haslock of the 'Old Blighty' at La Boiselle, for providing the most excellent of buffets; Clive Harris and Julian Whippy of Battle Honours Ltd. for organising the tour party and for their participation in the ceremony; Hydes Brewery of Manchester for the provision of 'Manchester's Finest Ale'; Ian Edmonds of the Lancashire Eccles Cake Company; Captain Robert Bonner of the Manchester Regiment, for all his helpful advice and the provision of his books for the tour – 'The 12th Battalion Manchester Regiment 1914-1919'; Richard Dunning of the 'Friends of Lochnagar' for his kind permission for the use of their sound equipment; the Booth Charities of Salford, and our sincere friends Vera and Alan Lenord of Mellor, Blackburn, and Victor Black of Formby, whose generous contributions assisted greatly with financing the project; last but not least is George Heron of Nunthorpe, Middlesbrough who deserves a very special mention. George took command of the public address arrangements. Not only did he set up the microphones and CD player in the cemetery for the ceremony, but tested the sound system the previous day in the rain with the assistance of his wife Pat. George contributed further to the ceremony by eloquently reciting two of the three poems. This is a man that you would want in your trench. Thank you for making this an occasion to remember.

The 12th MANCHESTERS ARE REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR AND PRIDE.



Bugler of the SPB sounding the 'Last Post' at the end of the ceremony.

JR/ MP/ TW