

WWI and WWII Battlefields

In the summer of 1993, our family had the third of our four European holidays. The trip began in Holland then passed through Belgium to France, to Switzerland then Luxembourg and back to Belgium and Holland. Most of the time was spent in France. My diary has nothing on this holiday, so much that I write here comes from memory and recollection from photographs of the trip.

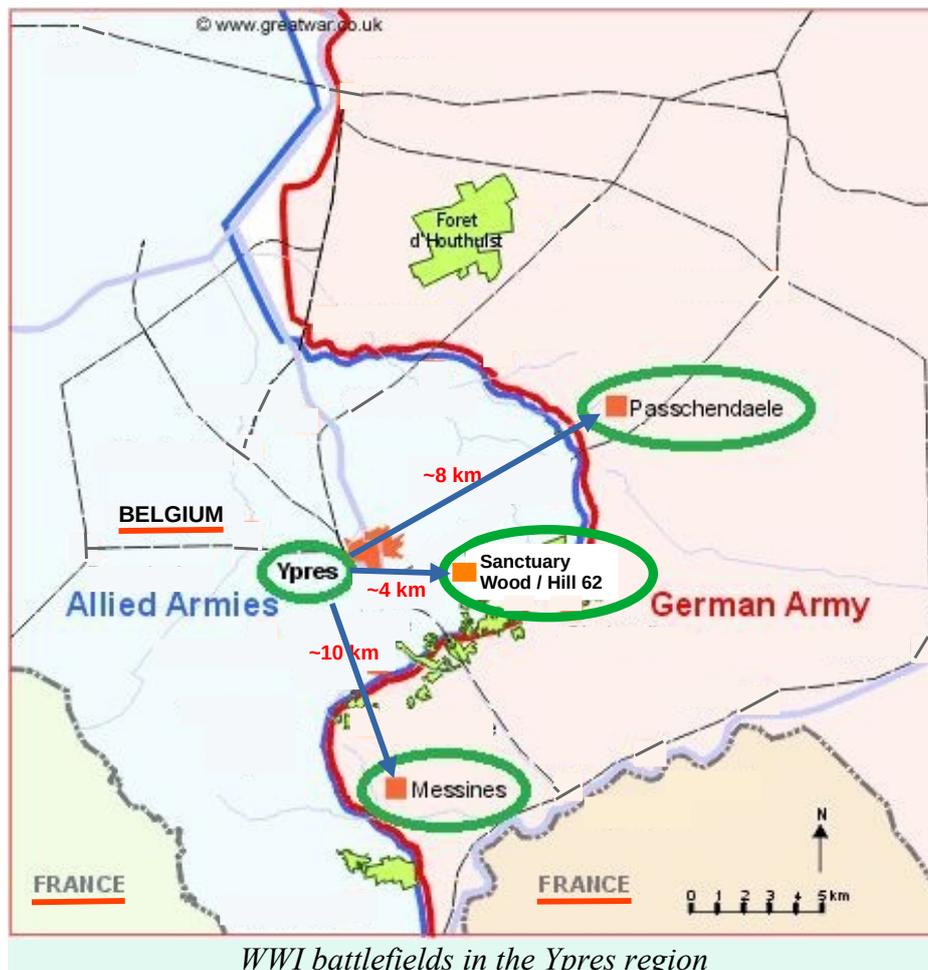
What I especially wanted to see was some of the WWI and WWII battlefields and especially those in Belgium, as I had a relative who had fought and died at one of them.

WWI battlefields in Belgium

The WWI battlefields we visited are in the Ypres region of southern Belgium, namely:

- 1 Hill 62 and Sanctuary Wood,
- 2 Passchendaele, and
- 3 Messines Ridge.

The map below shows where these battlefields are located in relation to the city of Ypres. As you will note, the distances from Ypres to the battlefields are not great.



1 Hill 62 and Sanctuary Wood

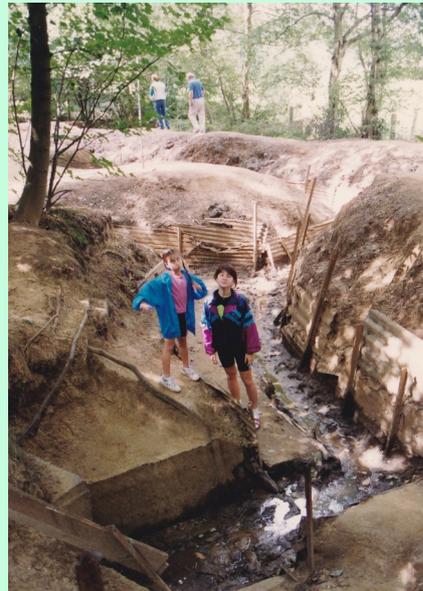
Our first battlefield stop near Ypres was at Hill 62 where there was a battle in 1916, and the adjacent Sanctuary Wood museum where many relics from the battle site are on exhibit. In addition there is a Hill 62 war memorial that commemorates the actions of the Canadian Corps in defending this area between April and August 1916.

There are also preserved WWI trenches where an original trench layout can be seen in some semblance of what it might have looked like. Three pictures are shown below, though the sites would have been bare of trees during the war. Note that the trenches are made in a zig-zag manner (French construction style). This was to prevent the shock wave of an exploding shell from travelling the whole length of the trench which would happen if it was straight.

In the picture (below right), note the low height of the trench; this was partly because people in those days were not as tall as today.



▲ Sanctuary Wood museum



Sanctuary Wood WWI trenches



Gavin 'borrowed' some souvenirs from the battle site! We then had a look through the Sanctuary Wood museum and following that a look at the adjacent Canadian war cemetery.

2 Passchendaele

It is a short drive from Hill 62 to Passchendaele, where several battles took place. The Second Battle of Passchendaele occurred in and around the village of Passchendaele between 26 October and 10 November 1917. In all, almost 500,000 men were killed for only eight kilometres gain of ground.

We looked through the Passchendaele cemetery where many New Zealand and other Commonwealth (then 'Empire') soldiers are buried. The pictures below shows the Passchendaele cemetery and the New Zealand war memorial.

Passchendaele:

Cemetery ▼

New Zealand war memorial ▶



After a drive through the centre of Ypres, it was off to Mesen (Messines in French, historically used in English) where the Battle of Messines Ridge took place.

3 Battle of Messines Ridge

This was a significant WWI battle ground in 1917 and 1918. A key 'Battle of Messines ridge' took place from June 07, 1917 to June 14, 1917, that is, just one week. There were many Commonwealth soldiers there from New Zealand and Australia.



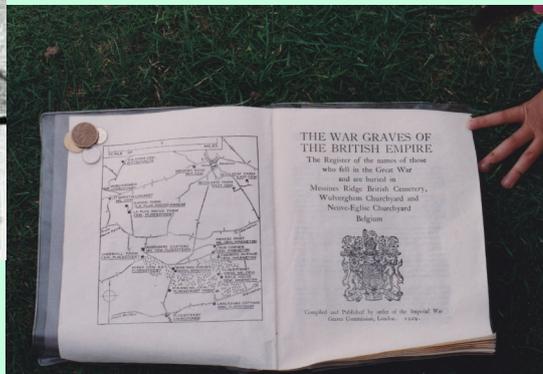
**SERGT. A. B. HARPER,
of Hastings.**

Messines Ridge memories:

▶ 'Uncle' Bernard

Nadine at the battlefield war memorial ▶

Register of all who died ▼



My mother's uncle (on her mother's side), Bernard Harper, pictured above, was one who took part.

He was part of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade. He was killed on June 07, 1917, that is, on the very first day of this battle, aged just 24. He has no known grave but we found his name in the register there listing all those killed. The picture above shows the register of names at the cemetery.

The other picture above shows Nadine in front of the Messines Ridge war memorial where Uncle Bernard's name is inscribed along with those of 826 other officers and men of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force with no known grave who died in or near Messines in from 1917 to 1918.

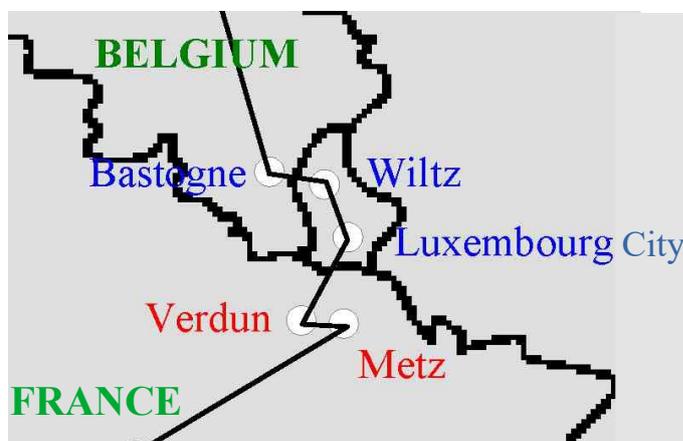
Although the visit to Messines Ridge was significant for our family, there was not actually much to see compared with the other sites we visited. The cemetery and war memorial were the main sites.

WWII battlefields in France, Luxembourg and Belgium

From Belgium, we travelled south to France. On the return route we travelled to the north-east of France, then to Luxembourg and back to Belgium again. We visited three battle areas, all connected with World War II. The areas visited were:

- 1 The Maginot Line (in France),
- 2 Luxembourg, and
- 3 Bastogne (in south-eastern Belgium).

The map below shows where these places. Refer to the more detailed map of the route taken under *1993 Holland, Belgium and France* on the webpage.



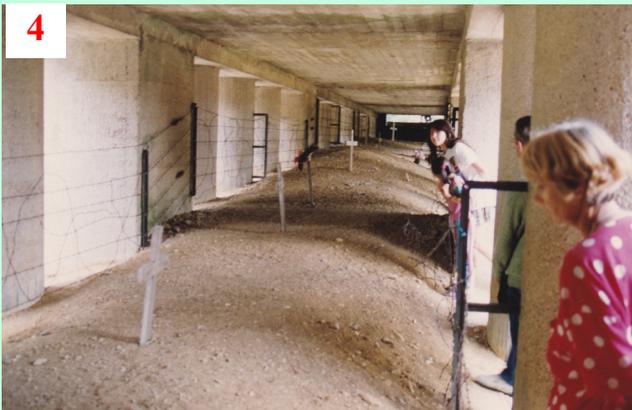
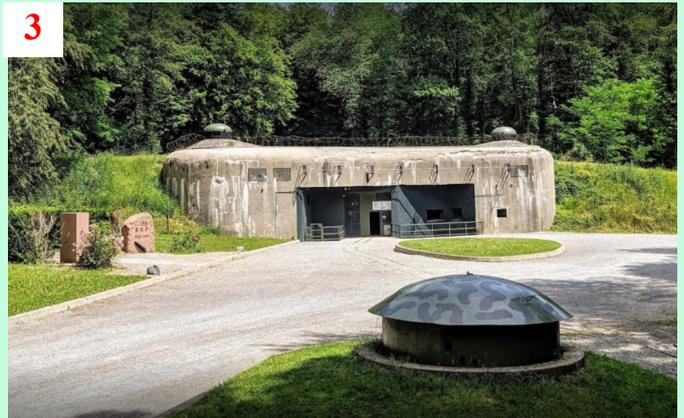
1 The Maginot Line

The Maginot Line, a long 450 km array of defences that France built along its north-eastern border with Germany in the 1930s, was designed to prevent a German invasion. However, Hitler's forces went around it and into neighbouring Belgium. Access to parts of the Maginot line are possible from many places such as Metz and Verdun.

We looked at just a few of the ruins of fortifications in the area (which Gavin missed as he was sleeping) and a small part of the main part of the Maginot line itself which is still in good order.

The pictures below show some of what we saw:

- 1 Maginot line and a pill box; Leonie on a World War I tank.
- 2 Maginot line and turrets.
- 3 Bunker and pillboxes (picture from Internet; we didn't actually see this one).
- 4 Graves in former trenches of the Maginot Line.
- 5 War memorial and cemetery.



2 Luxembourg

From Verdun, we headed north to Luxembourg. After a quick look at the *city* of Luxembourg, we continued on to the town of Wiltz, which was involved in the *Battle of the Bulge* in the final unsuccessful push by the Germans in WWII.

In the town square is a US Sherman tank which the children enjoyed clambering over (pictured with Nadine on its gun).



3 Bastogne

After an overnight at the Wiltz youth hostel in Luxembourg, it was on to nearby Bastogne in Belgium and a look through the *Battle of the Bulge* war museum and war memorial (pictured). The picture on the right is the kilometre marker at Bastogne for US General Patton's march from Normandy to Bastogne.



▲ Bastogne war museum and US war memorial



▲ Kilometre marker

Shown right is a photograph of Leonie at the same kilometre marker. Even though it is not as clear as the one above, it is included.

Bastogne was the last of our visits to war sites. From there, it was on to the northern Belgian town of Westerloo for one night then to Holland for the return flight to Hong Kong.



▲ Leonie at the same kilometre marker