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In Flanders Fields: Uncovering the Carnage of World War I

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The Belgian city of Ieper—better known by its French name, Ypres—is really two cities. One is a growing center of high-tech entrepreneurship and commerce with light manufacturing, biotechnology laboratories, and software-development firms clustered around the city in office complexes and industrial parks. The other is a place of cemeteries and war monuments: Flanders fields is where “the poppies blow/between the crosses, row on row,” according to the eponymous poem by

World War I Canadian combat surgeon John McCrae. For four hellish years during World War I, huge armies were bogged down here in a bloody stalemate. By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, this once-proud city, with its massive gothic Cloth Hall, step-gabled shop facades, cathedral, and medieval town square, had been pulverized by incessant bombardment. Its surrounding farmlands were transformed into a cratered, treeless wasteland. It was here that brutal trench warfare claimed the lives of nearly half a million British, Irish, Canadian, Australian, Indian, South

In Flanders Fields

Uncovering the carnage of World War I

◆
by Neil Asher Silberman



African, New Zealand, German, French, and Belgian soldiers. Today, battlefield tours of the “Ypres Salient,” as the Allied position deep in German-held territory was known during the war, visits to the 144 official war cemeteries, and attendance at memorial ceremonies annually attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to Ieper. A new, state-of-the-art museum, In Flanders Fields, offers a sobering multimedia vision of trench warfare for tourists, descendants of World War I veterans, and a steady stream of school groups.

Now archaeologists have been thrust into a new battle for the soul of Ieper that pits the city’s physical expansion against the commemoration of its tragic past. A plan for a new major highway, intended to bring economic development to the region, threatens its vast archaeological remains. Just beneath the surface of the fields, farmyards, and roads all around Ieper for at least three miles in every direction, are the remains of trenches, fortifications, ammunition dumps, bunkers, and dugouts, unexploded munitions, discarded equipment, and the unrecovered bodies of at least one hundred thousand soldiers who are listed as missing in action on the various memorials erected throughout the battlefield.

The struggle over Ieper’s future has highlighted many of the challenges facing battlefield archaeology the world over. What right

Boots and bones: More than 100,000 soldiers lie unrecovered in Flanders fields.

does a community have to expand and develop land that is the site of a historic battlefield? What are the obligations of the present generation to preserve the integrity of battlefield landscapes as a memorial to the fallen and a reminder of the horrors of the past? And what role can archaeology play in examining the nature of modern warfare and preserving its physical remains?

High-tech Ieper and war-memorial Ieper have always lived in polite coexistence, but in 2002, a new regional transportation plan suddenly brought their conflicting interests into sharp relief. The A19, a major eight-lane highway that currently ends at the edge of the battlefield, was slated to continue its northward extension from France, eventually connecting Ieper to the Belgian coast of the English Channel, with its heavily visited tourist spots and ferry ports. Supporters argued that A19 would be a boon to Ieper’s economy and draw off summertime traffic congestion from its narrow secondary roads. The plan for an initial four-and-one-half-mile extension was approved by Ieper’s city council and sent for final approval and funding to the regional Flemish government.

Naturally, the farmers whose lands would be expropriated for road building immediately objected. But wider and more pervasive protests soon began to be heard: Historians,





Belgian archaeologists excavate a serpentine trench at Crossroads Farm, the infamous no man's land between the warring forces. More than a half-million soldiers died in trenches like this.

work is.”

Over the years, battlefield archaeology at Ieper has been a sporadic, ad hoc affair. Year after year, a grim harvest of bones, twisted metal, and unexploded ordnance has complicated and sometimes endangered the inhabitants' lives. Even today, more than eighty-five years after the end of fighting, a Belgian army bomb-disposal truck makes weekly rounds of the rural roads around the city collecting bombs, artillery shells, and rusted clumps of ammunition and hand grenades that have turned up in the plowing and tending of fields. On rare occasions local farmers have been injured or killed. At building sites and roadworks on the expanding fringes of Ieper, workers regularly uncover trenches, bunkers, military equipment, and human remains. It is impossible to tell how many finds have been dug up and kept or sold as relics by the area's World War I buffs, working with metal detectors and digging in secrecy. Buried artifacts from World War I are pro-

veterans' groups, preservation activists, and commemorative organizations were outraged that the new highway would rip through a four-and-a-half-mile swath of Flanders fields, almost certainly obliterating all traces of the bodies, trenchworks, and fortifications.

In response to these complaints, the ministry of culture ordered the Institute for Archaeological Heritage (IAP), the public research body responsible for excavation and archaeological preservation in Flanders, to undertake a detailed assessment of the proposed route of the A19 extension. The project would provide an opportunity to learn more about Ieper's World War I artifacts. Archaeology in the region has long been focused on the pre-historic, Roman, and medieval periods. Twentieth-century archaeology, and particularly twentieth-century battlefield archaeology, was something new. "At first, I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about this assignment," says Marc De Wilde, head of the IAP West Flanders regional office and a specialist in the area's medieval period. "But we all now recognize how interesting and important this

Map TK



In this wartime photo of Ieper, soldiers walk among the skeletal frames and smoldering building debris. Reduced to one wall, Cloth Hall, center, wasn't fully restored until the late 1950s.



Finds from Crossroads Farm indicate the presence of at least three regiments (clockwise from top right): a loaded British Webley revolver, found near skeletons from the Royal Sussex; a cap badge from the Royal King's Rifle Corps; another from the East Kent "Buffs"; and an ammunition pack with shells.

ected by the antiquities laws of Flanders, but in practice they are vulnerable: Because the region is so archaeologically rich, it has been impossible for local IAP archaeologists to effectively patrol the entire area.

In other places along the Western Front, World War I archaeology has been limited to small-scale research projects on select French and Belgian battlefields. But here at Ieper the potential size of the dig was unprecedented. To get a better sense of the nature of the fighting and the places most likely to contain extensive battlefield remains, an enormous cache of contemporaneous documents was studied: military maps, reports, requisition orders, personal snapshots, diaries and letters, and World War I aerial photos.

Assisted by British colleagues from the University of Greenwich, the Imperial War Museum, the National Army Museum, and University College London, De Wilde and his team began work in the spring of 2002. Using the archival maps and documents, first they plotted the recorded locations of trench lines and other fortifications on modern topographical maps of the survey area. They then field walked the entire four-and-a-half-mile strip to spot concentrations of artifacts on the surface and tie them into documented battle sites. This turned up several intense concentrations of material: wire, supplies, tracks, bunkers, dugouts, pipelines, glass bottles with markings, shovels, helmets, concretized sandbags, bullets, cartridges, shells, and indications of trenches. The location of the finds closely matched the documentary record.

Nine areas were selected for excavation on the basis of the surface finds, and digging on two started right away. The IAP archaeologists began with a site identified from the WWI maps and accounts as "The High Command

Redoubt," the German front established after the second Battle of Ieper, in April 1915, when the Germans' devastating chemical attack using canisters of acrid, blinding chlorine gas cleared the way to this strategic point. The English war chronicler Edmund Blunden, an Ieper veteran himself, noted that this redoubt was of the highest strategic significance to the German forces, as it directly overlooked the Allied frontlines. The excavation revealed a system of trenches and machine gun positions linked to substantial wooden structures. One of the walls still bore the initials "K.W." carved by one of the builders or soldiers stationed there. It was eerily empty except for a rusted bayonet blade and a cache of unexploded hand grenades. Luckily, the IAP team had been trained to handle such potentially dangerous finds by the bomb-disposal unit of the Belgian army. "Once we learned how to deal with the grenades, shell cases, and unexploded bombs, we had no problem with these types of finds," says archaeologist Pedro Pype.

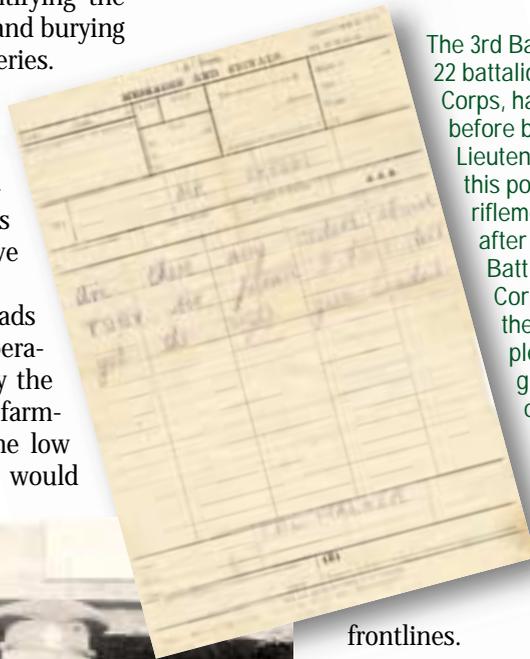
At the second site, known in war accounts as Turco Farm, the discoveries were much more numerous and grisly. According to historical sources, this was the place where first the French and later the British established their frontlines after 1915. Excavations revealed a network of narrow trenches with "duckboards"—wood planks laid to keep soldiers above the mud—that had been lined with now-rusted sheets of corrugated iron. Within these trenches, the team recovered digging tools, a copper teaspoon, shoes, a waterlogged woolen sock, and a shattered skeleton, identified as British from the distinctive uniform buttons found with it. Nearby they discovered the bones of a lower leg, with the foot still intact, inside a well-preserved military boot. The French factory marks stamped into the sole indicated the likely nationality of the fallen soldier.

Within the shell craters were the shattered remains of five soldiers, two of them still wearing leather webbing, entrenching tools, pistol, bayonet, and ammunition packs.

The discovery of human remains changed everything. Over the years, whenever bones were found in the Ieper area, local police had been called in to determine whether they were those of battle casualties or evidence of a more recent crime. If war related, the bones were taken to a government morgue and eventually given over to the appropriate combatant nation. Often the remains could be linked to a particular army, unit, or even individual by the equipment, uniform buttons, or personal possessions found with them. England's Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) had been particularly active in identifying the remains of British and Commonwealth soldiers and burying them with full military honors in national cemeteries. Since one of the bodies from Turco Farm was British, it was transferred to the CWGC for proper burial. Though no German archaeologists or scholars have been involved in the excavations, had the bodies of the country's soldiers been recovered, German authorities would have been contacted to repatriate the remains.

The excavation at the next site, Crossroads Farm, was not merely a battlefield recovery operation. The archaeologists were also able to verify the hellish dynamics of trench warfare. The level farmland between the outer ring of the city and the low ridges that surrounded it—through which A19 would run—had been the deadly no man's land between the Allied trenches and those of the besieging German forces on the ridges above. Here, the IAP team traced the complex trench system that the Allies had expanded in preparation for an assault on the German positions during the Third Battle of Ieper in the summer of 1917. A variety of structural details and artifacts were uncovered, including duckboards, a deep concrete bunker, a wooden dugout, and cap badges representing the Royal King's Rifle Corps, the Dorsetshire Regiment, and the East Kent Regiment known as the "Bufs." The archaeologists also examined the clearly defined shell craters that pockmarked the entire area. Within the shell craters were the shattered remains of five soldiers, two of them

still wearing leather webbing, entrenching tools, pistol, bayonet, and ammunition packs. British visitors to the excavation created a temporary memorial there, marking the places where the bodies were found with the familiar poppy-decorated wooden crosses used in Ieper's military cemeteries; formal military burials are planned for the coming months. From these remains and the location of the trenches, the archaeologists were able to trace in precise detail how the British had expanded and shifted the orientation of their trenches as they edged closer to the German



The 3rd Battalion Rifle Brigade, one of 22 battalions in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, had been stationed in India before being sent to Flanders. Lieutenant Robin Skeggs received this polite note from one of the riflemen in his command some time after the beginning of the Second Battle of Ypres in April, 1915. Corporal Walker asked: "Are there any orders about TOBY sir please I have still got the right gun loaded." Looking almost cheery—revolver in hand, pipe in mouth—Lt. Skeggs stands in front of a dugout in the photo below. Archaeologists uncovered several such structures.



frontlines.

At the very start of the project, the IAP had convened a panel of military historians and preservation experts from the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium to compile a background report on the historical significance of the threatened section of the Ieper battlefield. Though the panel was cautious in expressing its political opinions about the wisdom of the proposed highway plan, they were unambiguous in their opinion about the site's enormous historical and archaeological value as one of the most important battlefields of World War I. The excavations dramatically confirmed this conclusion.

Yet for the problem of the proposed high-



Archaeologists found artifacts at Crossroads Farm that illuminated life on the Front, such as the duckboards that kept soldiers above the mud (far left), but it is the pitiless horror of trench warfare that was most exposed: two soldiers from the Royal Sussex Regiment seemingly frozen in their last moments, while a third lies face down, arms splayed, still wearing his boots.

way, there are no easy answers. The panel recommended that the area be declared a protected heritage zone, but the supporters of the road project countered that the extent of the battlefield is so vast that any attempt to shift the road's path to skirt the entire area would be too expensive and inefficient to achieve the region's development aims. Alternatively, raising the highway on pillars to protect the human remains and archaeological deposits beneath it would also be costly and, as the preservationists pointed out, would forever destroy the visual context of the open ground and low ridges where the battles of Ieper were fought. Excavating the entire four-and-a-half-mile stretch would be far beyond the capacity of the IAP—or of any similar archaeological organization—considering the hundreds of bodies, dense network of trenches and fortifications, and tons of equipment that would almost certainly be found.

Something will have to be done to prevent the total destruction of the World War I remains, says Marc DeWilde. "I am concerned about any destruction of archaeological deposits. If the highway plan is approved and the archaeological remains are in danger, it's our responsibility

to excavate what we must and preserve what we can."

At the time of this writing, no decision on the A19 extension has been made, and the archaeological project goes on. More finds—and more funerals—can be expected. And with elections for the Flemish Parliament in June, no decision is expected soon. As the preservation and development debates continue, only one thing is certain: The pioneering project at Ieper has demonstrated archaeology's essential role in preserving and understanding the great historical trauma of modern warfare, whose gruesome traces lie beneath the surface of this now-peaceful ground. ■

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