



Saturday 28 September 2019

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Symbolic Menin Gate lions return to site of bloodiest WWI battle



by Denzil Walton,

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West Flanders



THE PRIDE OF YPRES

One hundred years ago, Flanders witnessed one of the costliest, bloodiest offensives of the First World War: the Third Battle of Ypres, also known as the Battle of Passchendaele.

Meticulously planned, it was intended to be British commander Sir Douglas Haig's breakthrough battle. Allied forces were to sweep through the strongly fortified German defences enclosing the Ypres Salient, and then push on to the German submarine bases on the Flemish coast.

The offensive was launched on 31 July, 1917. Over the following months, battles broke out in places that have now become infamous: Pilckem, Langemarck, Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde and Poelcapelle.

Finally, on 6 November, the tiny village of Passchendaele fell, mercifully bringing an end to the Third Battle of Ypres. The Allied forces ended up no nearer the Flemish coast than when they had started.

A MASS OF RUINS

FIRST WORLD WAR

Claiming the lives of more than nine million people and destroying entire cities and villages in Europe, the Great War was one of the most dramatic armed conflicts in human history. It lasted from 1914 to 1918.

FLANDERS

FIELD - For four years, a tiny corner of Flanders known as the Westhoek became one of the war's major battlefields.

UNTOUCHED -

Poperinge, near Ypres, was one of the few towns in Flanders that remained unoccupied for most of the war.

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time are revealing.

On 17 September, Private Leicester Grafton Johnson of the 20th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, wrote: "Ypres, that much war-worn city, is now reduced to a mass of ruins. Only the walls of the fine Old Cathedral are left standing."

The muddy roads were strewn with wreckage of transport lorries; dying horses and mules writhed in agony along the Menin Road

- PRIVATE JN SHEARER

Private JN Shearer of the 15th Battalion noted on 25 September that "shells from guns of huge calibre were tearing up the swampy marshes behind and in front of us ... the muddy roads were strewn with wreckage of transport lorries; dying horses and mules writhed in agony along the Menin Road."

It would have been quite possible for both these soldiers, and many of their compatriots, to have marched out of Ypres via the Menin Gate. As they did so, they would have noticed two stone lions guarding the entrance to town.

Could the sight of these imposing stone beasts have conjured up a little more courage to face the enemy?

The lions were made from calcareous blue stone constituted from fossilised marine organisms. The stone was probably quarried at Soignies in Wallonia in the 17th century.

the largest
Commonwealth
cemetery in the
world.

**550
000**

lives lost in West
Flanders

**368
000**

annual visitors to
the Westhoek

1 914

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The 1638 is the most popular theory, as that coincided with the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), who was responsible for the erection of ramparts around the town of Ypres. The walls were pierced by two gates, one on the road to Lille, and the other on the road to Menin.

In 1830, the fortifications were modernised by the Dutch government but then dismantled by the Belgian government in 1855. This is when the lions were placed on brick plinths on either side of the Menin Road where the original Menin Gate once stood. It was along this road that allied soldiers marched into warfare, including the Third Battle of Ypres.

After the war ended, a photograph taken in 1920 by a Mrs GH Webster shows one of the lions by the roadside near the Menin Gate. It is probable that both lions lay in the rubble until 1923, when work on a memorial commenced.

GESTURE OF FRIENDSHIP

This is the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, dedicated to the British and Commonwealth soldiers who were killed in the Ypres Salient and whose graves are unknown.

Designed by British architect Sir Archibald Blomfield, it was unveiled on 24 July, 1927. It is inscribed with the names of 54,900 dead from Britain and Commonwealth countries.

After being recovered from the rubble of the city, the lions were stacked with other broken masonry and statuary under the ruins of the town's Cloth Hall. Then, in 1936, the Menin Gate lions were donated to the Commonwealth of Australia by the mayor of Ypres as a gesture of friendship and an acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by Australia's soldiers.

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Empire, France, the United States and Belgium

- AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPER THE BARRIER MINER

As the Australian newspaper *The Barrier Miner* recorded at the time: “Through this historic gate during the war marched the great armies of the British Empire, France, the United States and Belgium, who fought in the battle of Ypres.”

The *Adelaide News* took up the story: “The Menin Gate was pulled down 80 years ago, but hundreds of thousands of allied troops, including many Australians, marched through the passageway in the ramparts during the Great War.”

The lions were certainly in need of some tender loving care. Shellfire had left them battle-scarred and chipped. One of them had lost its right foreleg. The other had been reduced to just a head and torso.



For several years the lion with the missing leg was displayed at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, but its partner was kept hidden. In 1985, it was decided to reconstruct both lions, and the task was given to Polish sculptor Kasimiers L Zywuszko.

Using period photographs obtained from Ypres, Zywuszko modelled the missing limbs in clay, took plaster moulds and filled them with a mixture of crushed marble, araldite and pigment. After the

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25 Sep 2019 by Flanders Today

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of shellfire could still be seen. The work was completed in 1987.

The restored lions were lifted by crane over the steps of the memorial and placed at the entrance. For the past 30 years, visitors entering the building have passed between the two statues.

‘SILENT SENTINELS’

Now, as part of the centenary commemorations of the Third Battle of Ypres, the lions are temporarily returning to their symbolic home at the Menin Gate.

“The Menin Gate lions are of immense military, cultural and emotional significance to Australians,” says Dr Brendan Nelson, director of the Australian War Memorial. “These silent sentinels have stood at the entrance to the Australian War Memorial for a generation. Now they return to where they stood watching over the British and Commonwealth troops who marched between them to serve, suffer and die on the Ypres Salient.”

More than “13,000 of my countrymen lie in Flanders,” he continues, “silent witnesses to the future given to us and the people of Flanders”.

*Flanders and Australia forged
a bond in bloody sacrifice
within which we both live*

- DR BRENDAN NELSON

A Last Post ceremony takes place every evening at the Menin Gate. The unveiling and inauguration of the lions will take place during a special edition on 24 April.

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live. The Menin Gate lions are our tangible reminder of all that was given for us."

The lions will stand on the bridge in front of the Menin Gate and will return to Canberra after Armistice Day, 11 November.

LION LEGENDS

It's not the first time, though, that these famous lions have been on tour. In 2014 they were loaned to the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa for nine months.

A small exhibition about the history of the lions will run in the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres. "We are delighted that both governments and the other relevant partners, such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Last Post Association, have joined forces to make this remarkable project possible," says Ypres city councillor Jef Verschoore, chair of the museum.

A popular legend about the lions is that during the Third Battle of Ypres, locals placed straw in the mouths of the two statues. The belief was that the Germans would not be able to enter the town until the lions had eaten the straw.

Another story is that after the end of the war, Australian soldiers themselves boxed up the lions and sent them home, and the official "gift" of the lions in 1936 was to cover up this embarrassing escapade.

Photo (top): Eric Lalmand/Belga

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Flanders has officially opened its Memorial Garden contained within Australia's War Memorial in the capital city

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