



From the Battlefields to the Grand Prix: Sharing a Journey of Discovery

Silverstone UTC

Inspired by their tour to the battlefield sites of the Western Front in February 2017, Juliet Hanson, Teacher of Business Studies at Silverstone UTC, shared her reflections of the experience with the Centenary Battlefield Tours team. The sixth-form students who accompanied her embraced their learning for use in further study and to inform their future careers. Juliet then worked with younger students at the school to encourage visitors to the Silverstone Grand Prix in July 2017 to remember the First World War. Through their activity stall in the Family Zone, the staff and student team were pleased to have initiated the sharing of reminiscences, between generations, from family experiences from the Great War.

The Battlefield Tour

Teacher Juliet Hanson, inspired by her First World War Centenary Battlefields Tour from the 19th to 22nd February 2017, accompanied by two of her sixth-form students from Silverstone UTC, wrote about her experience:

‘In the spring of 2018 an installation will open in Belgium to commemorate the lives of soldiers who died in World War One. Similar in scale to the poppy installation in London which captured the imagination of the world in 2014, The Coming World Remember Me project has been established to mark the 600 000 soldiers who died in Belgium in World War One and the sculptures, one for each of these soldiers. These are being made at a pottery studio in Ypres. On Wednesday 22 February our two students, Amber and James, added their contribution to this land art installation. Their names, along with that of a dead soldier, will be on the accompanying dog tag and will rest in an area of no man’s land in perpetuity.



This pottery activity was just one of many items on the agenda during a four-day three-night trip to the Western Front funded by the Department of Education and organised by the UCL Institute of Education. I was privileged to be the accompanying teacher for our students.

The trip began with a pickup at Junction 15A in Northampton on Sunday 19th February. A further pick-up in Cambridge and then a two hour trip to Kent saw us at Grosvenor Hall for our first evening’s activity. Grosvenor Hall is a residential educational establishment and after checking in we were introduced to the tour leaders, the battlefield guides and members of the military who were to accompany us. Students were taken off to participate in outdoor activities while the teachers gathered for a CPD session.

The evening activity was led by our astonishingly well informed battlefield guide Tony, who introduced us to artefacts from the battlefield. Our equally well informed James was able to add considerably to the discussion on some of the items, particularly the copper box issued by Princess Mary to troops for Christmas. We were introduced to the Enfield rifle, the fixed bayonet, bullets, shell casings, explosives and got to wear an original helmet and great coat.



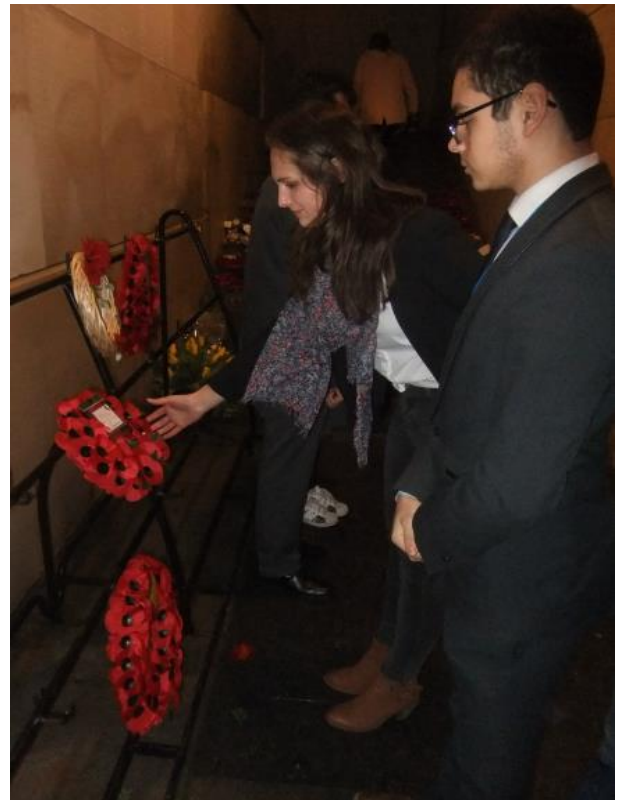
FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY BATTLEFIELD TOURS PROGRAMME

We were also given a chance to discuss the general themes for the trip and the specific themes to be developed by each school.

The question for the second day was: How did the First World War affect ordinary people? We arrived first at the Lijssenthoek Cemetery near Poperinge, just west of Ypres. This was the site of a hospital during the war and we discovered how the chain of medical care, starting with the soldiers own bandages being applied to a wound in the field, ended at Lijssenthoek under more expert care. The chain kept the most valuable medical staff like surgeons out of the range of German field artillery but close enough (5 miles) to ensure the best chance of survival. Distressingly, the cemetery holds about 10 000 graves; mostly Commonwealth, but some French and German. More disturbing, was the identification of a number of Chinese graves with dates well after Armistice Day.

Our next stop was the Memorial Museum at Passchendaele where we were free to explore at our own pace. Amongst the heart-breaking significance of the artefacts we were able to identify were items that represented real progress in medicine, science and technology. The three of us started thinking more about our question for the day, starting to appreciate that amongst all the horror of twisted rifles, bullet ridden bugles and bloodied clothing, grief stricken communities were able to benefit from some of these advances. This visit concluded with a long walk through reconstructed dugouts and trenches and an American wood hut – thousands of which were erected immediately after the war for Belgian refugees returning to their obliterated towns and villages.

Approaching from the north the Menin Gate looks magical: lit up by well-placed lights and surrounding by the ramparts and moat of the ancient town; but this first impression belies the horror and scale of death that the detailed panels provide. The Menin Gate commemorates 54,400 Commonwealth casualties of the war and each evening at 8pm a memorial ceremony is held at which the Last Post is played followed by a two minutes silence and the laying of wreaths. James and Amber joined one of our military representatives and another student to lay a wreath and I watched with pride and emotion as the straight-backed and dignified four-person line walked slowly across the road under the arch to pay respects on our behalf.



The question, ‘Was the Battle of the Somme in 1916 really a disaster for the British Army?’ was the focus for Tuesday and we started exploring it at a visit to the Newfoundland Memorial Park, a preserved battlefield and the story of the Newfoundland Regiment. We discovered that casualties and injuries were so high in the first onslaught across no man’s land that the second wave of soldiers couldn’t move through the mass of dead and injured bodies in the communication trenches, radically slowing down the offensive. We learned that the overwhelming numbers of casualties and elements of folly during the first day of battle have blinded many to



FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY BATTLEFIELD TOURS PROGRAMME

the few successes of the day, and how these informed the eventual turning of the tide in November the same year.

At Sunken Lane we walked slowly in the bitter cold and wet and tried to imagine what it was like to anticipate an almost certain death. The guides used our march to demonstrate how futile that particular offensive was, with each school having to stop when their name was called – our group of 30 got less than 50 metres towards the target before we were all still. Our accompanying soldier told us about the underlying fear of being a British soldier in Irbil. He described being ‘grabbed’ by a man with darkened hands – a sure indicator of someone who has worked with explosives – before being saved by a colleague.

Caterpillar Valley Cemetery brought home the large number of unknown bodies that are buried and also the large sacrifice made by the other Commonwealth countries. This cemetery allowed us a clear view of the ground successfully captured by British forces and is also the place where the tank first saw service.

Tuesday 21st February was also the centenary of the sinking of the SS Mendi, a ship carrying members of the South African Native Labour Corp to the Western Front via England. Over 600 of the 800 passengers aboard died in the freezing waters off the Isle of Wight when she was struck the RMS Darra in the early hours of the morning. The guides were kind enough to agree to my request to spend a few minutes at the South African war memorial at Dellville Wood, the site of a ferocious battle to take the ‘devil’s wood’ by South African troops during July 1916. I was asked to tell the group the story of both the memorial and of the SS Mendi.

Our final visit of the day was to the Edward Lutyens designed Thiepval Memorial to the Missing. It was at Thiepval where James and Amber located the memorial inscription of the first of our two Silverstone men who were lost on the Western Front.

On Tuesday evening our soldier friends brought out boxes of uniforms and allowed the students to dress up in clothing from then and now, 100 years on. He also opened up army rations and they got to taste the food that current troops eat. We again linked back to our focus question of the day when we realised how much of the current kit given to soldiers were influenced by the failings of the first day of the Somme.

Day four and our focus question for the day was: Is remembrance more or less important 100 years on? To answer this we began with the pottery workshop. We then went to the Langemark German Cemetery where we examined the different ways the war is remembered by the vanquished and the victors. A dark and depressing place made only slightly lighter by our well informed guides who were able to give us the full story behind the shape and style of the place.

Our final stop of this tour was the Tyne Cot Cemetery, the largest Commonwealth one in the world. The size is staggering, with 12,000 soldiers buried here and a further 35,000 remembered. Here, we found our second Silverstone soldier and it was also here we each laid a cross at a grave of our choice. The final moment of this extraordinary tour was the reciting of John McCrae’s *In Flanders Fields*, by our tour guide.

The hard and icy drops of rain were coming down and all heads were bowed under the hoods of jackets, and yet I could see tears being wiped away as the he reached

‘We shall not sleep,
though poppies grow In Flanders fields.’



FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY BATTLEFIELD TOURS PROGRAMME

The Legacy Project

Since participating in the visit, James has embarked on his career in the armed forces. Amber, meanwhile, has used her experiences from the trip to inform part of her Extended Project Qualification work (EPQ).

Whilst in school, James and Amber looked at the issues of bravery and courage, remembrance and the role of colonies and their people. They worked with students in their own school as well as local junior schools, during assemblies and in Personal, Social and Health Education lessons to introduce them to these themes.

Meanwhile, Juliet Hanson enlisted younger pupils at the college to work with her on a First World War family activity. Silverstone UTC is situated in the grounds of the famous motor racing track. Each year at the British Grand Prix, the UTC becomes the family activity zone. The UTC therefore successfully sought permission to establish a stall dedicated to the sharing of experiences relating to the war. As young people wandered past the stall, they were encouraged to handle, and identify the uses of, a variety of artefacts including an entrenching tool and wire cutters. Many had the opportunity to try on a soldier's tunic and helmet. A variety of resources were given out, including copies of the excellent informative publication *Commemorating the Men and Women of the Great War* from programme partner Never Such Innocence.

Families were then encouraged to share stories from their ancestors who were involved in the First World War.

Teacher Juliet Hanson commented that:

'Even though people were here to view the Grand Prix, they took time to engage with us. We heard family tales from the war, from a variety of countries representing all sides in the conflict. These stories had been handed down through the generations; it was particularly rewarding that so many took time, prompted by our stand, to talk to their children about the conflict. It was particularly interesting to draw out stories from our visitors whose ancestors represented various parts of the Commonwealth.'



Families were also given the opportunity to research the involvement of members of their family in the First World War. UTC representatives were able to guide this research, making use of, for example, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website introduced to them whilst on tour.

Finally, each child visiting the stall was asked to decorate and dedicate a poppy to a soldier of their choice. Those with no known family link often chose to dedicate their poppy to the 'unknown soldier.' This provided an opportunity to share the experience from tour of the vast First World War memorials in Ypres and at Thiepval, which list thousands of names of men whose final resting place has never been identified. By the end of the weekend, a bright giant collage of poppies, each with an accompanying dedication, had been formed with contributions from the next generation from around the globe. These were mounted in the school entrance hall, ready to greet all students, staff and visitors as they arrived back in school the morning after the Grand Prix had ended, and the crowds had dispersed.



FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY BATTLEFIELD TOURS PROGRAMME

Key Statistics	
Number of people attending the Grand Prix	120000
Number of people entering the Family Zone	1000
Number of people reading related tweets	1637

Each contributor had come to Silverstone for the speed of the race track, yet all visitors to the Family Zone had been afforded the opportunity to pause for thought, to share their family story, and to remember those who fought, and those who lost their lives, a century earlier.