**WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION**

**NORTHUMBERLAND BRANCH**

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**2014 WFA SPEAKER WRITE-UPS FOR THE *NORTHUMBERLAND GAZETTE* & PARISH MAGAZINES**

**October 2014**

In October, members of the Western Front Association welcomed Andrew Charlton who gave his talk ‘*Walking the Front – History, Heritage and Helping*’.

‘*Walking the Front Association*’ is a registered charity originating from an idea Andrew first had in 2011.

His great-grandfather, Major Gordon McQueen, survived the First World War. Like many others he kept his experience to himself.

After completing an extensive genealogy project & having inherited several mementos of his great-grandfather’s military service in the First & Second World Wars, retracing the footsteps of his forebear through the fields & lanes of the Western Front, guided by contemporary trench maps & War Diaries, became Andrew’s aim.

Once the walk had been planned it seemed only right to try & develop the idea into fundraising for today’s veterans & to raise awareness about the efforts of our forefathers to protect the freedom of this country. At this stage, Paul Stephenson, a renowned North East film-maker & photographer revealed that his great-uncle, Harry Lisle, had served alongside Andrew’s great-grandfather & so a quest by two good friends was born.

The lads walked the Western Front from Ypres (now Ieper) in Belgium to Albert in France & followed the steps taken by many of the Tyneside Scottish Brigade, part of the Northumberland Fusiliers’ Regiment. They visited the key battlefield sites around Ieper, Messines, Arras & along the Somme, paying their respects to the fallen, raising funds for veterans & making a documentary for children to highlight the key events in our history.

After the walk the team of volunteers behind it & the walkers themselves came together to take the first steps to register the ‘*Walking the Front Association*’ as a charity before, then, turning their attention to planning the May 2013 Walk along the Normandy beaches.

Andrew also had time to explain other family connections with the Tyneside Scottish Brigade, notably that of another ancestor, J. R. Hall, the indefatigable Secretary of the Tyneside Scottish Committee responsible for raising the brigade.

When Andrew first started working he joined a firm of Solicitors &, on his first morning, he walked into the office to be unexpectedly confronted by a large painting of J. R. Hall who had been principal partner in one of the former firms of Solicitors from which Andrew’s employers could trace their origins. Coincidences like this littered the fascinating story Andrew told.

The WFA’s next formal meeting will be on Monday 24 November, with Derek Gladding’s talk ‘Tannenberg, 1914’.

WFA meetings take place at 7.15pm (for 7.30pm) at Alnmouth and District Ex-Servicemen’s Club, Northumberland Street, Alnmouth. A warm welcome awaits visitors & WFA members new to the branch. The suggested minimum donation is £2, to include a light finger supper.

**September 2014**

September’s talk at the Northumberland Branch of the Western Front Association was given by Branch Member Dave Barras – ‘*Starfish Trench, Gird Lines & Hook Sap – the 1/7th Northumberland Fusiliers part in the Battle of the Somme , August to November 1916*’.

Dave told the story of the 1/7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers, the north Northumberland-based Territorial Force battalion of the regiment. He focused in detail on the battalion’s participation in the 1916 Battle of the Somme, but also set the context of the unit’s whole war history, making the point that when it fought on the Somme it had already seen hard service fighting near Ypres, & many more engagements were to follow later in the war.

The 1/7th were ordered to the Somme area in July 1916 as part of the 50th Northumbrian Division, & the battalion was tasked with attacking German trenches called Hook Trench, Prue Trench & the Starfish Line which lay to the West of High Wood, already a place with a deserved reputation as one of the worst places to fight on the Somme battlefield.

Using extracts from the long out-of-print battalion history, their war diary & other research Dave told the story of a valiant but ill-fated attack on 15th September. This was part of a wider action known as Battle of Flers-Courcellette, which saw the first two objectives taken but with the 47th London Division held up in High Wood on their right, the delay added to the battalion’s casualties & left the unit in a precarious position until reinforced by other units of the 50th Division. He went on to look at the casualties & made particular reference to several from the Togston & Broomhill area with strong links to the mining industry as engineers. The battalion lost 44 men killed & 244 wounded on 15th September.

A period of ‘rest’ followed but this period was far from restful & still dangerous, involving heavy work in worsening battlefield conditions of heavy mud, often under fire.

The 1/7th Northumberland Fusiliers were called upon to ‘*go over the top*’ again on 14 November & attack the Butte de Warlencourt in atrocious conditions. The unit took its initial objective in Gird Trench but because of heavy fire communication was impossible & many men were cut off & wiped out by German counter-attacks. The Butte was not taken, & battalion commanders felt that this attack had been a waste of good men, with 24 killed, 98 wounded & 107 missing.

**July 2014**

The Western Front Association’s meeting on 28 July coincided with the centenary of Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia which triggered a conflict that soon spread throughout Europe and beyond.

The meeting also marked publication of a book to which the WFA’s Northumberland Branch has made a significant contribution, with many never-before-published photos & facsimiles. To order your copy of Ian Hall’s book ‘***Alnwick in the Great War***’ visit [www.wildsofwanney.co.uk](http://www.wildsofwanney.co.uk/)  or get in touch with Ian at [books@wildsofwanney.co.uk](mailto:books@wildsofwanney.co.uk). It is priced at £4.50.

Our speaker for the evening was Peter Hart, Oral Historian at the Imperial War Museum. His talk ‘*L’Armée de Terre Francaise, 1914*’ traced re-development of the French Army after its humiliating defeat during the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War & how it performed, especially, during the early months of WW1.

By then, it had become imbued with the ‘*Cult of the Offensive*’ yet, tactically, it was again found wanting with a lack of effective collaboration & coordination between its infantry & artillery arms such that, often, attacks simply lacked sufficient ‘*punch*’ to break through German lines.

Peter went on to compare the performance of various Generals during the early months of the war. The French General Joffre handled himself well throughout as did many of his Army & Corps subordinates but the British C-in-C, Sir John French, did not emerge with too much credit!

What saved France in 1914 & what, then, determined the course & conduct of the war was the Battle of the Marne (6-10 September) when Joffre was able to withdraw forces from throughout France to create a new Army which successfully attacked the Germans with a flank offensive thereby stemming the whole German advance. Arguably, the Battle of the Marne was the key battle of WW1.

Peter sought to put into perspective the British contribution in the early years of the war. He concluded that British Army tactics were also found wanting & that the first few months of the war represented a steep & costly learning curve – by the end of 1914 the British had lost over 18,000 men killed; almost 100,000 wounded or missing, & about 17,000 prisoners of war, effectively the whole of the British Expeditionary Force despatched to France in August 1914. However, during those early years the British were always very much the junior partner in the alliance & their losses pale into relative insignificance compared with those of the French in 1914 – 300,000 killed with at least twice, possibly three times or more, this number wounded or missing.

There is a break in August & the WFA’s next meeting will be on 22 September.

**June 2014**

John Mason-Sneddon was the guest speaker at June’s WFA meeting with his talk ‘*War is the Father of all Things*’.

The focus was the September 1914 commencement of trench warfare & the need for new weapons to fight such a war. Given the scale of the Great War it was also necessary to organise manufacturing capacity to meet the demand.

At the beginning of the war most weapons & ammunition production was still carried out at Ordnance factories but these did not have the capacity to meet the increased demand. There were existing sections of the War Office responsible for the supply of weapons, etc to infantry & artillery but grenades & mortars needed to be improved, produced in greater quantities & those like flamethrowers needed inventing. A new section was established to do this.

A recently retired Engineer officer, Colonel Jackson was put in charge. His brief was concerned with fortifications so matters relating to trench warfare, similar to siege warfare, fell to him. The section eventually became the Trench Warfare Department.

Jackson had relevant expertise & a refreshing approach to his responsibilities. He was not tied down by existing bureaucracy so was able to assemble a staff with experience in manufacturing & business, well able to go out into industry, find solutions to problems & ways of getting things made in sufficient volumes - if the 1915 volumes were large compared to 1914, they were huge by 1916 onwards!

By the end of 1914, 35% of skilled labour in manufacturing had joined the Army. Because of this Jackson was not allowed to utilise premises, materials or people already engaged in war work. His section solved the problem by dealing with small companies who collectively could meet demand. His Supply Officers were responsible for manufacture, quality assurance & delivery. His section became the most efficient in the War Office. It developed & produced grenades leading eventually, to Mills bombs & even a catapult to fire grenades into German trenches. The development of mortars led to the Stokes Mortar.

A very important find was an explosive called Ammonal, used in civilian industry, cheap to make & could be used in landmines, naval mines & artillery shells. Without it Britain would have had difficulty in producing the high numbers of shells required.

The British had developed flamethrowers by October 1914, some 9 months before Germany but at first we did not use them ‘*because it was not the sort of weapon a gentleman should use*’!

Eventually the Trench Warfare Section was transferred to the Ministry of Munitions. Jackson himself became a general.

**May 2014**

May’s meeting of the Western Front Association welcomed branch member Phil Huntley speaking about the naming of some 50 ships after places, people & events connected with the county of Northumberland.

Whilst he did refer to the days of Nelson & even earlier, his talk in the main focussed on the ships in the two World Wars. He described the different classes of ships & their uses & how smaller boat yards had been brought in to use to build vessels such as corvettes. These provided an important element in the escort of convoys.

Phil explained how names were selected. Tradition, continuity or community support were important but care had also to be taken not to choose a name that could create confusion when signalling, to have a name appropriate to the class of vessel & not allocate a name that could be twisted into something that produced ridicule.

The re-use of a name was important & this allowed for battle honours awarded to an earlier vessel of that name to be handed down. This helped create pride in the ship & esprit de corps similar to battle honours emblazoned on a regimental flag.

Having given us the background, Phil then gave details of some of the ships. These were mainly warships but there were also drifters & trawlers taken over by the Royal Navy for use as mine sweepers.

The stories of two of these he told in greater detail. HMS Alnwick Castle was built in 1943-44 by Geo Brown of Greenock & was used in the protection of Arctic Convoys sailing to & from the White Sea. Not only did these convoys have to battle with the arctic weather but also the Luftwaffe & U- boat wolf packs were frequently waiting for them. Not all made it through but HMS Alnwick Castle was one that did & in doing so helped to send 3 U-boats to the bottom. It was eventually broken up in 1958.

The other ship, a destroyer, was HMS Cheviot built on the Clyde in 1944 by Stephen & Sons Ltd. She was completed too late to participate in the war but saw a lot of service in the Mediterranean & the Far East through to October 1958.

Phil admitted to being fascinated by naval history since his boyhood. It was clear that this fascination is still with him today.

**April 2014**  
April’s meeting welcomed Dr Dan Jackson speaking about ‘*The Martial Traditions of the North East of England: Understanding the rush to the Colours in 1914*’.

Amongst other things, Dan explored the inherent military culture of the region since Roman times when the area experienced what can only be termed a turbulent history & Northumberland lay north of Hadrian’s Wall!

After the Roman’s left at the turn of the fifth century & the Kingdom of Northumbria established itself, the area was subjected to frequent raids by the Vikings & Anglo-Saxons; then, there was the Conquest which left much desolation; & this was followed by the period when Border Reivers held sway; all of which led Dan to conclude that, maybe, it should not come as a surprise that men of the region have always been able & willing to take up arms.

Dan went on to deliver evidence of such traditions continuing through the Napoleonic Wars & throughout the nineteenth century before turning the focus onto 1914.

In England, three of the region’s counties ranked in the top ten (*of 40 counties*) in terms of percentage recruitment with Northumberland second; Westmorland sixth; & Durham eighth.

36.5% of the male population of military age of these three counties, plus Cumberland & the Scottish Borders, volunteered for service in the nation’s naval & military forces which was 20% higher than the overall average for the UK & Ireland (29.4%).

The regiments of the area contributed over 10% of all British Army battalions raised in the UK during the First World War, which was disproportionately higher in relation to the population of the area.

Although Scottish regiments suffered even more than their English counterparts, casualties sustained by regiments of Northern England – 50,708 men – were, again, disproportionately high in relation to other English, Welsh & Irish regiments.

To complete the story Dan went on to illustrate how the region continued to contribute a disproportionate amount of the nation’s efforts during the Second World War & all subsequent conflagrations.

**March 2014**Professor Emeritus John Derry spoke about Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig.

While not a good conversationalist, Haig was very good with the written word & he proved to be very professional, competent soldier.

He was soon identified as someone of potential, which potential was realised under Richard Haldane’s 1906-1909 Army reforms.

Haig then became Chief of Staff in India where the reform of its Army was badly needed. He also applied his mind to the sending of a contingent from India to Europe.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Haig was in command of the 1st Corps of the British Expeditionary Force. Sir John French, in overall command, is generally now seen as having been out of his depth & was replaced by Haig in 1915.

As the Army in France grew rapidly Haig realised that it was little more than a ‘*collection of Divisions*’ rather than a cohesive Army. It needed time to become ready for battle but Haig was forced to attack on the Somme in July 1916 in order to take some pressure off the French at Verdun. Without the British attack the French Army was likely to have collapsed.

Despite the tremendous pressures of his post, Haig continued, in his professional way, to lead the British Army on the Western Front & under his leadership it was widely acknowledged as the most effective & efficient army in the west.

John then spoke about the accusation that Haig showed a lack of feeling & pity when considering death sentences. He believes this is an unfair accusation that fails to look at the facts – 86% of those sentenced to death were reprieved by Haig. The evidence is that he applied the policy of clemency whenever he could. Of those who were actually executed some had already been reprieved previously & some were murderers.

Lloyd George’s criticism of Haig was dismissed as being undeserved & reflecting a self-interest theme.

John concluded that Haig, whilst not comparable to Marlborough or Wellington, was the best soldier Britain had at the time to undertake a very difficult task. His men respected & admired him; this was confirmed by the very large numbers who turned out for his funeral.

**February 2014**

February’s meeting warmly welcomed Dr Martin Farr (*Newcastle University*) who tackled an enormous subject in the time available to him, ‘*British Politics and the First World War*’.

Notwithstanding a natural reluctance to be drawn into a major confrontation on Continental Europe, Britain was able to set aside many of its own internal problems – for example, in Ireland; industrial disputes stemming from the growth of Trade Unions & Labour movements; & pressure for greater enfranchisement of the populace, notably for women – eventually she was drawn into a war destined to shape the rest of the twentieth century & some consequences of which are still being felt today.

To illustrate the political changes which happened during the War, Martin drew comparisons between the General Election results of 1910 with those of 1918 by which time the Liberal Party was split between factions supporting Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, & that supporting Herbert Asquith, the party’s official leader.

Taking advantage of the ‘*feel good*’ factor following signing of the Armistice, Lloyd George called a snap election. It was the first General Election to be held after the vote was given to women over the age of 30 & to all men over the age of 21.

While most of the pro-coalition Liberals, Lloyd George’s supporters, were re-elected, Asquith's faction was reduced dramatically, with Asquith himself losing his own seat. The coalition won a landslide victory & Lloyd George remained Prime Minister despite the fact that the Conservatives outnumbered his pro-coalition Liberals. The Labour Party also greatly increased its share of the votes cast &, in Ireland, Sinn Fein gained control over most of the country, which soon led to the majority of Irish counties seceding from the Great Britain.

The First World War resulted in great changes for Britain & British politics & society. Mainland Britain had been attacked for the first time in war; eventually, the economy was placed on a ‘*Total War*’ footing; the role of women in war changed; the power of the press increased enormously, as did the influence of Trade Unions & the Labour Party; BUT the exhaustion of Britain’s pre-War wealth was to have far-reaching consequences for the nation & its Empire.

**January 2014**

The Western Front Association’s first talk of its 2014 programme saw Alan Fiddler speak on the ‘*Tynemouth WW1 Project*’.

The project aims to remind today’s population of the 1,700 local residents of the former Borough of Tynemouth who gave their lives in the service of their country during the First World War, & to explore the social & economic consequences for the town & its inhabitants.

Some years ago, Alan & a few friends realised that between 2014-2018, inevitably, there would be an increased focus on WW1 with a series of important anniversary dates to be commemorated in communities throughout the country. They resolved to build & encourage a pool of willing & able volunteers, to undertake a large research effort to greatly expand biographical information about as many as possible of those on the 1923 roll of honour for the Borough – & almost 70 volunteers responded enthusiastically to the call for help.

When as much information as can be traced has been entered into the electronic database the public will be given availability via the Internet. The team’s task is nearing its end & Alan’s audience was treated to a brief insight as to what will be available – & very impressive it was notwithstanding a few technical problems encountered with the Internet connection on the night! The target date for making the database available to the public is 28 June 2014.

A copy of the Roll of Honour will be displayed widely & the project team has plotted the losses of men on a contemporary housing plan if the Borough, which is indeed a salutary sight!

The project’s ambitious goals include an exhibition running from July to September 2014; ‘*The Response*’, a concert to be held at the Sage, on 27 September 2014, in association with the Army Benevolent Fund; & a series of prestigious lectures on WW1 by nationally renowned military historians at the University of Northumbria.

The team also aims to place individualised memorial markers on Tynemouth Borough residences (where properties survive today) of men who were killed.

For more information about the project, visit <http://www.tynemouthworldwarone.org/>.

**END**