

Australian Reunion at Lijssenthoek

It was sunny on an early April day when my wife and I left our B&B in Ieper to tour the 'rear area' of the First World War Ieper battlefield. We devoted most of the day to visiting French, and Belgian military cemeteries and the various war related sites in Poperinge. Of special interest to us was Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, located southwest of Poperinge. We had been informed that this particular cemetery was one of the largest and most beautiful of the over 1000 Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries in Europe. We also believed that a handful of Americans had ended up buried there and we felt a special obligation to locate our countrymen's graves.

The cemetery was, at first, difficult to locate along the many county lanes in the area; CWGC signs, which offer directions to most Commonwealth cemeteries, were finally spotted and they led us directly to it. We had come during the correct season; for, as I parked our rental car across the road from the cemetery entrance, the warm spring air was filled with the fragrance from the blooming Wisteria vines which covered the cemetery's brick walls. The thick, twisted stems were profusely laden with purple blossoms, providing a soft outline to the otherwise dismal stone enclosure.

After entering the cemetery gate, Nancy and I split as I wandered across the immaculately manicured lawn of the grave area in search of the 'foreign' graves amongst the ten thousand headstones marking soldiers from England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, and even Germany. All of the headstones, including even those of the enemy, were separated by carefully tended flowers or shrubs, varied as to present no particular pattern, but reminiscent of a classic English country garden. I eventually found the three Americans, buried separately from the others, and I looked to find where Nancy had gone.



Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Belgium

I spotted her some distance away, standing with an elderly couple who I earlier had noticed were intensely examining headstones. As I approached the small group, they ended their conversation and the pair gave me a gentle hello as they passed walking towards the entrance gate. Nancy related her conversation with them.

It seems they were brother and sister who had come to this rather forlorn spot in Belgium from Australia to reunite their recently deceased mother with her long dead brother. Their uncle, a musician,

had enlisted in the Australian military at the age of 16. Leaving his drums and sticks in the care of his younger sister, the youth was transported to Europe and soon became a casualty of the horrific 1917 fighting before the village of Passchendaele. His sister married and raised a family, leading a quiet life in Australia. However, she always cherished her brother's drumsticks as the lasting childhood memory that she had of him.

She had died at an advanced age, never able to visit her beloved brother's last resting place. That mission fell to her children. Now, with the original letter from the War Office in hand and 87 years after their uncle's death, they had found his grave. They had prepared a written summary of the family's life after the war, relating the births, deaths, and marriages that the young boy had never witnessed, but somehow was always felt to attend. Bending tenderly over the headstone, they read the letter and placed it in a plastic bag. The couple scooped a few handfuls of dirt from near the headstone, and into the hole they placed the letter, the brother's cherished

drumsticks, and a favored cameo brooch that had been his sister's. There they still lie, in a quiet corner of a Wisteria fragrancd cemetery – the drumsticks of the boy who never grew old and the brooch of the sister who never forgot.

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