



# BATTLEFIELD TOUR 2019 REPORT

## '14 TO '45 - FROM THE B.E.F. AND HOME DEFENCE TO FIGHTER AND BOMBER COMMAND



This year's Battlefield Tour could easily be described as the Association's most ambitious tour to date, a busy three days that would see people driving from three locations in the UK to rendezvous at the first Stand at Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey, while another member was travelling from Marseilles via Scotland to meet up with the main party near Calais. The tour involved twelve stands in the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, encompassed the broadest period of aviation and military aviation history that we have studied so far, a period that involved some of the people who formed, served on and led 33 Squadron from its formation in January 1916 to the end of World War Two, and we all had to back for work on Monday! .....

### FRIDAY 4 OCTOBER \_EASTCHURCH

The Tour started with visits to four locations in the south-east of England that either played or commemorated an important role in the development of aviation in Britain, the first Stand being the Eastchurch Aviation Museum on the Isle of Sheppey. Following 33 Squadron's reformation in 1929 and a short spell at Netheravon with Hawker Horsley bombers, it moved to Eastchurch in September 1929 and started converting onto brand new Hawker Harts, aircraft that were classed as bombers yet were quicker than the fighter aircraft of the day. 33 was based at Eastchurch for just over a year before moving to Bicester on 5 November 1930.

The curator, Peter West, gave us a fascinating tour of his Museum and the surrounding area, explaining that after the news of the Wright Brothers' first ever powered aeroplane flight on 17 December 1903 was released, public interest in aviation soared. The Isle of Sheppey is considered the birthplace of aviation in Britain; by 1909 the Aero Club of Great Britain had set up an airfield at Shellbeach near Leysdown and Short Brothers had opened an aircraft factory there. It was at Shellbeach in 1909 that John Moore-Brabazon made the first recorded flights in Britain – the exact dates vary on the internet from 27 February to 1-2 May! - and he took a pig up on one flight. In the first week of May 1909 the Wright Brothers visited the flying ground and met the Short Brothers, who were building 'Wright Fliers', the Honourable Charles Rolls and John Moore-Brabazon. In 1910 the airfield and aircraft factory moved to larger quarters at Eastchurch, and the renamed Royal Aero Club of Great Britain offered its facilities there to the Admiralty as a flying school for naval officers. Eastchurch airfield became a Royal Naval Air Service Flying School during World War One and transferred to the RAF on 1 April 1918. Around the site there are still a few buildings dating back to the two wars, some bearing the scars of the *Luftwaffe's Kampfgeschwader 2* attack on 13 August 1940 -

*Adlertag*. There are also three of the oldest existing WW1 hangars in Europe, isolated behind a fence, in a pretty sorry state and deteriorating daily. What a sad indictment against Civil Service and inter-departmental bureaucracy that something as important to the history of British aviation should be allowed to stand and rot instead of being restored for posterity. There is also a large covered pit near the Museum that probably contains the remains of dozens of WW1 aircraft that were considered Cat 5 and dumped. Where is 'Time Team' when you need them?! There is a Hawker Hart propeller on display but its provenance is proving difficult to prove.

### HAWKINGE

From Eastchurch the next Stand was the Kent Battle of Britain Museum, which houses the world's largest Battle of Britain collection on part of the old RAF Hawkinge site. While 33 is not a Battle of Britain squadron, a former CO, Robert Allingham George MC, was station commander there from 1937 to 1939, having commanded 33 at Bicester from 1932 to 1934. Sadly, cameras are not allowed in the Museum, but we can all vouch that with relics from over 700 Allied and Axis aircraft, a marvellous café and well-stocked shop, Hawkinge is a must for Battle of Britain fans. The WW1 Home Defence and WW2 V-weapons exhibits illustrated just how far military aviation and air power had advanced in the 27 years since the Wright Brothers' first flight.

### CAPEL-LE FERNE

It was a short drive from Hawkinge to the impressive Battle of Britain Memorial at Capel-le-Ferne, perched on the white cliffs looking over towards France. We read about the careers of six 33 Squadron COs who had been part of 'The Few' in 1940: Hector McGregor, Derrick Gould, John Proctor, John Finnis, Stanley Norris and Richard Mitchell. Hector McGregor had returned to the UK after commanding 33 Squadron in Egypt from September 1938 to December 1939. He went on to





**Top Left and Right: Peter West meets the group at Eastchurch and talks about the Museum's collection.  
Centre: the mysterious Hawker Hart propeller.  
Below: Eastchurch's deteriorating World War One hangars.**





**Top: The memorial Wall at the Battle of Britain Memorial, with Dick, Lis, Chris, Scarffy and Graham looking for the names of the six 33 Squadron commanding officers who were part of 'The Few'.  
Below: Chris briefs the first group to find their way successfully to the two RFC Memorials at Swingate Down.**

command 213 Squadron and became SASO 82 (Fighter) Group in June 1941. Gould, Proctor, Finnis and Mitchell were all posted to squadrons in the Western Desert in 1941. Norris arrived there in 1942 via Malta and Persia and is the CO we saw in the IWM archive footage at the AGM this year, filmed taking the salute at Benina in November 1942 as the convoy arrived from El Adem. Mitchell took command in September 1943 and brought 33 back to England in April 1944, handing over command to Squadron Leader Matthew at Tangmere shortly before the squadron moved from Tangmere to Caen in August 1944.

### **SWINGATE DOWN**

The final Stand of the day was the site of RFC Swingate Down to the east of Dover, close to Dover Castle and the spot where Louis Blériot had landed after crossing the English Channel in July 1909. In August 1914, with air power very much in its infancy, Swingate Down was chosen as the point of departure for the first RFC squadrons deploying to war. Within the ranks of the aviators setting off to support the BEF were four future COs from 33 Squadron's 1916-1919 period: Captain P.B. Joubert de la Ferté and Lieutenant W.C.K. Birch deployed with 3 Squadron, while Lieutenant R.M. Vaughan and 2nd Lieutenant A.A.B. Thomson deployed with 5 Squadron. Unlike the Tour recce, which had been conducted when the visibility was crystal clear, the weather prevented a clear view across the Channel to Calais, Cap Griz Nez and Cap Blanc Nez, useful navigation features for the 63 aircraft that were ordered to climb up to a minimum of 3 000 feet over Swingate Down before heading over to France to give the pilots any chance of gliding to the French coast if the engine failed. The deployment must have been reminiscent of scenes in 'Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines'! Heading south towards the Somme valley they all managed to get to Amiens on the first day, and then moved up to support the BEF from Maubeuge. From Swingate Down we drove to our nightstop hotel, where everyone was able to sit down together and enjoy a meal and a couple of glasses before settling down for the night, knowing that Day Two would commence with a very early start to get to the ferry terminal.

### **SATURDAY 5 OCTOBER\_SAINTE INGLEVERT**

Despite the 0545 departure morale was remarkably good as the small convoy made its way to the Dover ferry terminal. Unfortunately our hopes of being loaded onto an earlier ferry were dashed when we saw the amount of lorries and coaches waiting at the port, so we had to wait until the 0725 crossing on the ferry we had originally booked. After minimal grumbles of '... we could have stayed in bed another hour...' the group's morale was soon restored after boarding, thanks to a good 'Full English' breakfast!

Less than 30 minutes after driving off the ferry in Calais we arrived at the first Stand of Day Two - the Canadian War Cemetery at Saint Inglevert - where we met up with Gordon Bruce and headed into the cemetery to pay our respects to a young RCAF pilot shot down about two weeks after D-Day. Flight Lieutenant Ernest Edward Tribble had joined 33 Squadron on the day that it carried out its first operational flying over Europe, 19 May 1944, the mission being against a V-1 site at Yvrench. Pre-tour research of the Squadron's records had shown that once 33 had returned from Egypt and converted onto Spitfire IXs, it had supported a number of these vital Operation CROSSBOW missions as the Allies tried to nullify the emerging V-weapons threat to Britain. On the evening of the day that Ed was killed by flak while attacking a train further south near Waben - 19 June 1944 - 33 Squadron was participating in another NOBALL mission, this time against the V-2 site at Watten. We passed several of the V-weapon sites as we travelled through the Pas de Calais region that day. After Mark Nuttall laid a wreath at Ed's grave Chris Perkins briefed us on some more casualties in the cemetery before we headed towards Saint Omer.

Shortly after leaving Saint Inglevert we noticed signs for Fortress Mimoyecques, which lies a couple of miles to the south-east of the cemetery. Mimoyecques had been built as a V-3 cannon site; the original plans had envisaged having a battery of five guns ready by March 1944; the full complement was to be 25 guns by 1 October 1944. Thousands of slave labourers had toiled around the clock to dig out five long tunnels in the chalk, which were intended to contain the enormous gun barrels, 130 metres long, and with a calibre of 150mm. They would have been the biggest guns in the world and could have fired a barrage of rocket-assisted shells capable of reaching London, one every 12 seconds. Waves of 300 rockets an hour could have been fired but, fortunately, the site was captured by Allied troops, abandoned and unfinished, shortly after D-Day.

### **LONGUENESSE AERODROME, SAINT OMER**

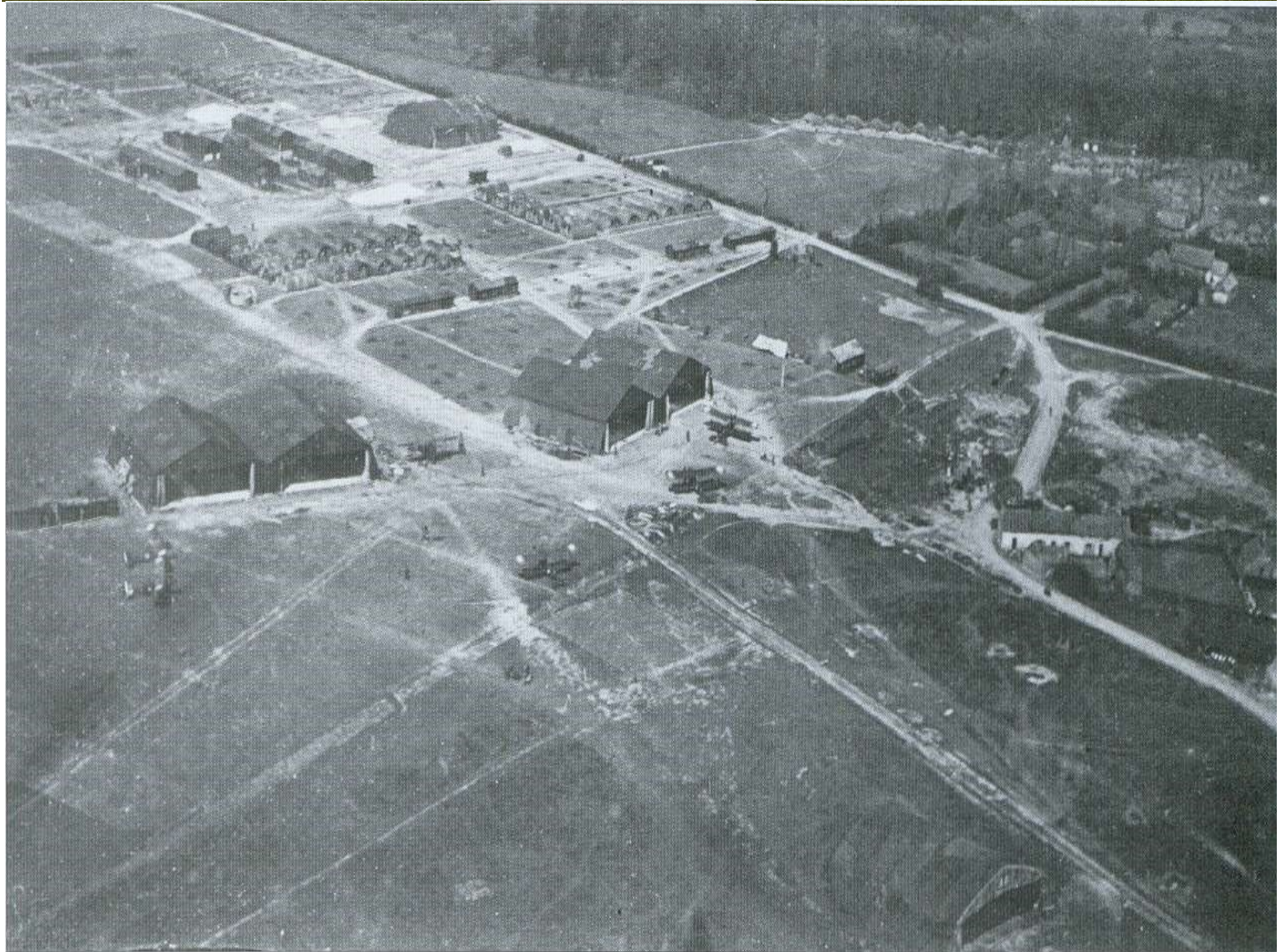
Stand Two took us back to the early deployment of the RFC from Dover to support the BEF in France at the beginning of WW1. After the battle of Mons on 23 August 1914 the BEF began a slow withdrawal under pressure from the steadily advancing German Army, which meant that the RFC detachment at Maubeuge had to withdraw too. Elements of the initial RFC deployment, plus the Aircraft Park established at Amiens, withdrew to the aerodrome at Longuenesse close to Saint Omer, some 30 miles inland from Boulogne. By the time of the 'Miracle of the Marne' and the German withdrawal to the River Aisne in September 1914, the RFC was firmly established at and around the aerodrome. By this stage a defended front line had been established from Dunkirk - Compiègne -Verdun





**Top: Dave tells the group about Flight Lieutenant Ernest Tribble (photo centre, right) and his month with 33. Centre, left: As we paid our respects, Mark laid the wreath next to Flight Lieutenant Tribble’s headstone. Below: As ‘Our man in the North’, Tony planted a memorial cross on the grave of a young 20 year old pilot from Harrogate, Peter Watson, shot down over Calais on 28 May 1940.**





**Top: The British Air Services Memorial at Saint Omer Aerodrome.  
Below: Saint Omer aerodrome in 1918.**



then south to the Swiss border. The war of movement had quickly given way to the static and attritional trench warfare that we now associate with WW1. The General Headquarters of the BEF was at Saint Omer between October 1914 and March 1916, while the fledgling RFC, over the next three and a half years, saw its small force of 63 aircraft in 1914 become a force of nearly 300 000 officers and men and over 22 000 aeroplanes, many of whom passed through and served at Saint Omer. For most of the War Saint Omer was a major British airfield, the largest on the Western Front. From 8 October 1914 until 1916 it was the site of RFC Headquarters in France, located in a small chateau at the foot of the hill between Saint Omer and the airfield. Over 50 of the RFC's flying squadrons operated from the airfield, some only briefly, but others for extended periods – including 9 and 16 Squadron that were first formed at Saint Omer. It was also the centre of a large and complex logistic organisation that sprang up around the airfield to supply the ever-growing number of front line squadrons and to make good the high wastage in aircraft and equipment as the war progressed.

Looking around the aerodrome it is difficult to imagine that, by March 1918, nearly 10% of the RFC's total strength of technical personnel in France and Belgium - over 4 300 people - were based at Saint Omer. By all accounts it was not an attractive base, described by one pilot as an ugly sprawling place, with scores of Bessonneau canvas hangars, workshops and sheds, a Power House and rows and rows of Nissen huts. When the German Spring Offensive of 1918 threatened the area, plans were made to move the aircraft depots closer to the Channel Ports, and by 10 May 1918 the evacuation of the technical facilities at Saint Omer was complete. At that point Saint Omer became an operational airfield, with at least two operational squadrons there until the end of the war.

In the summer of 1940, during the Battle of Britain, the *Luftwaffe* operated Bf109s and 110s over England from Saint Omer. As a result, the airfield was a regular target for RAF fighter/bomber attacks through the early years of the war. The Saint Omer Flying Club operates out of one of the old *Luftwaffe* hangars today. Douglas Bader was shot down over the town and captured, and it was at Saint Omer aerodrome that Bader's new tin legs were parachuted to him, permission having been granted by Reichsmarshal Goering himself. The members who attended the Tour also know the link between another former 33 Squadron CO from WW1, Cyril Gordon Burge, and Douglas Bader!

The large British Air Services Memorial was unveiled on 11 September 2004 to mark the centenary of the RFC arriving at Saint Omer in 1914, while close to the turning into the aerodrome off the D928 lies the

Cimetière des Bruyères, containing the Longuenesse Saint Omer Souvenir Cemetery. That cemetery has over 100 men from the Royal Flying Corps or Royal Air Force buried there, the largest grouping of RFC/RAF personnel in Europe.

### WIZERNES - LA COUPOLE

Just a short 3 mile drive southwest down the road from Saint Omer is the town of Wizernes, which houses the massive V-2 launch site known as La Coupole - The Dome. The Allies first noticed construction activity here in mid-August 1943 when the Germans began building railway track and the offloading stores into the old chalk quarry. After Hitler authorised the decision to turn the depot into a missile launch site, work began in November 1943 and tunnelling in the cliff face below began in December. At the start of January 1944, Allied aircraft observed an elaborate system of camouflage on the hill top, installed to conceal the dome. Bomber Command attacked Wizernes with over 3 000 tons of bombs between March and July 1944, and work was stopped 229 times in May 1944 alone. In response to Hitler's desire to see the site completed the workforce was expanded substantially between April and June to nearly 1,400. About 60% of the workers were Germans; skilled workers, such as miners from Westphalia, were recruited to excavate the tunnels and build the dome. The remainder were principally Frenchmen conscripted by STO (Service du Travail Obligatoire), plus Soviet prisoners of war. The project was overseen by several large German construction companies.

In order to construct the great dome while under regular air attack the designer, Todt Organisation engineer Werner Flos, devised a plan whereby the dome was built first, flat upon the ground, and the soil underneath was then excavated so that the construction works below would be protected. A circular trench was excavated on the top of the hill above the quarry to an outside diameter of 84 metres (276 ft). The dome was built within this trench and the galleries and preparation chamber were excavated below. For additional bomb-proofing the dome was surrounded by a bomb-proof 'skirt' of steel-reinforced concrete, 14 metres (46 ft) wide and 2 metres (6.6 ft) thick.

The cube-shaped concrete building constructed on the top of the hill, next to the dome, was intended to be used as the bomb-proof outlet for a ventilation and air conditioning shaft, an essential component of a facility where dangerous and explosive gases were expected to be used in large quantities on a daily basis. It was never finished, and when the Allies captured the site they found that the ventilation shaft had not been fully excavated. The building survived the bombing intact and is still prominently visible today. Unlike its sister site at Watten, there was no on-site power plant.

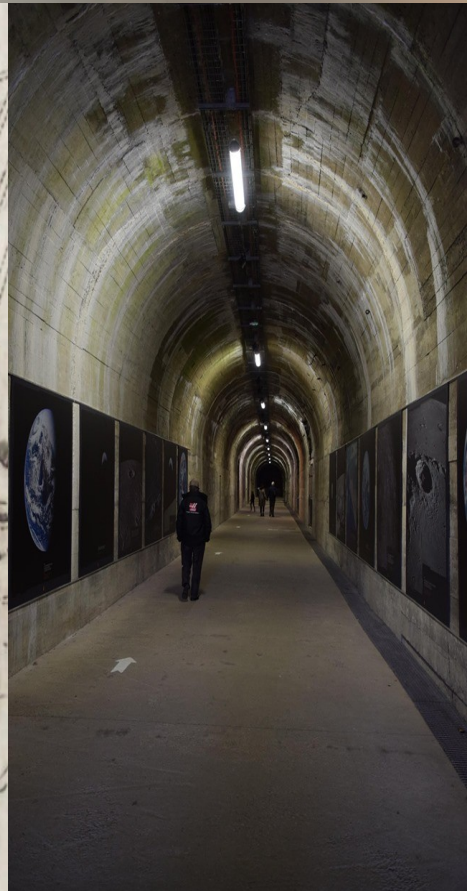
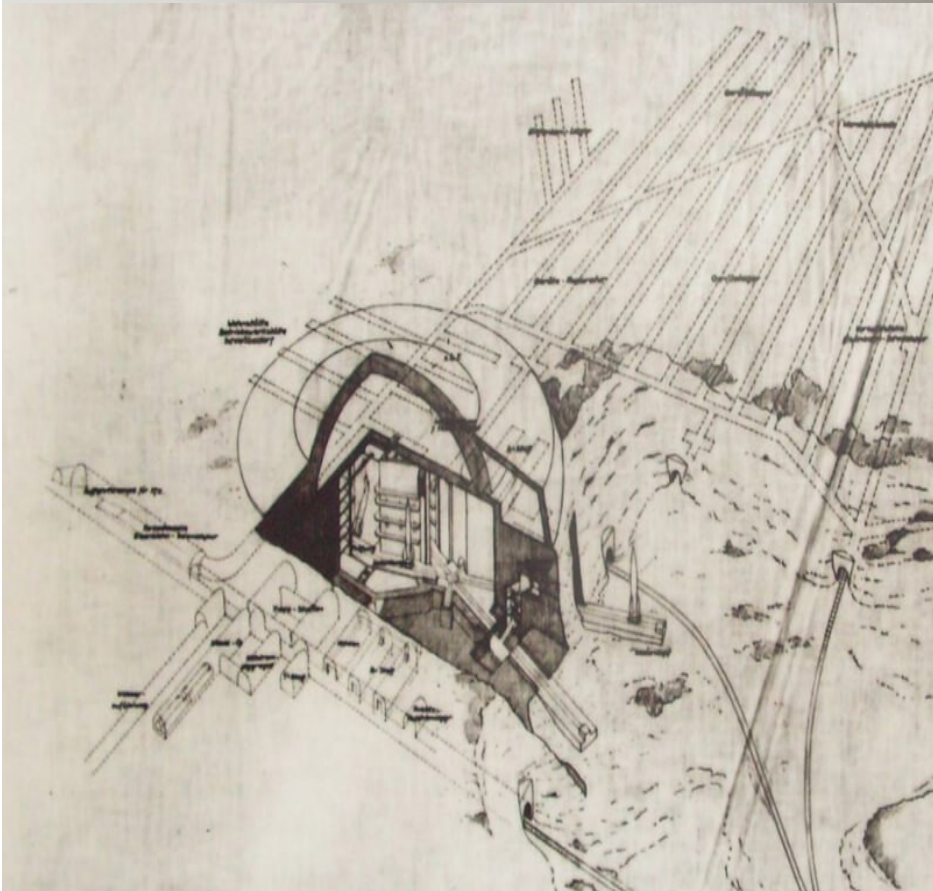




Top: The dome, with the unfinished ventilation and air conditioning shaft building to the left.

Below: A 542 Squadron photograph from 30 June 1944, showing La Coupole ringed in red. 542 was a PRU Squadron based at RAF Benson, equipped with Spitfire XIs. On that particular day, 33 Squadron was escorting 256 bombers attacking enemy concentrations around Villers Bocage. Bomber Command launched 369 aircraft to attack six V-1 launch sites on 20 July 1944, and 33 Squadron escorted Pathfinder Mosquitos and 100 Lancasters during this raid to the V-2 site at Wizernes.





**Top: An example of a manned V-1 rocket, hanging in the entrance hall of La Coupole. Apparently the wings were reinforced to deal with barrage balloon lines.**

**Below: A plan of La Coupole, showing the vast network of railway lines bringing in the various parts of the V-2 rocket to be assembled in the large area under the dome, and one of the tunnels that leads to the area under the dome. The plan illustrates how the fully assembled and armed V-2 would then be transported outside for launching.**



Electricity at Wizernes was provided by a connection to the main electric grid, with power consumption estimated at between 5,000 and 6,000 kVA.

Walking through the tunnels at La Coupole one could be impressed by the technical achievement of building so many complex new weapons sites so rapidly under such harsh conditions. But the truth is that the Germans used huge amounts of forced labour to build the sites and the V-weapons themselves. An estimated 20 000 of the 60,000 prisoners who were used died in brutal work-camp conditions between Autumn 1943 and Spring 1945. Germany did not have enough skilled labour to produce as many V-weapons as quickly as it wanted; therefore, skilled prisoners were forced to build V-1s and V-2s in a huge underground complex known as the *Mittelwerk*, which the Nazis set up after Allied bombing disrupted V-2 operations at Peenemunde. Each operational V-2 to come off the *Mittelwerk* line, which was hidden in large tunnels near Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains in central Germany, consumed about six human lives. Apparently more people died manufacturing the V-2 than were killed by its blast. When the Allies began destroying V-1 factories in bombing raids, V-1 production also moved to the *Mittelwerk*. So we should never forget the scope of the human sacrifice made for each piece and part that was produced from these workshops.

Thankfully, due to the repeated heavy aerial bombing carried out as part of Operation CROSSBOW the Germans were unable to complete the construction works and La Coupole never entered service. It was captured by the Canadian Army in September 1944, abandoned and partially flooded. The complex remained derelict and abandoned until the mid-1990s. In 1997 it opened to the public for the first time after being redeveloped into a museum but only around a third of the complex is used, the rest being off limits due to health and safety.

### **BOIS DES HUIITS RUES**

From La Coupole we drove east to a V-1 fixed launch site near Hazebrouck known as Bois des Huits Rues—the Wood of 8 Roads. Full scale development of the V-1 had been authorised by Hitler in June 1942 and on paper it looked ideal, given the bottlenecks and shortages plaguing Germany's war effort. The V-1 was built of plywood and sheet steel, and did not use scarce aluminium. Its engine burned low grade petrol instead of aviation spirit and it only took 500 man-hours to manufacture, excluding the explosive and autopilot. The problem was getting it to work; in tests it kept crashing. It took the famous German aviatrix and test pilot, Hanna Reitsch, to conduct some test flights in a modified V-1 with makeshift controls to discover the problems. By May 1943 the modified V-1 was working properly, allowing Reitsch to work on the Fieseler

Fi103R *Reichenberg* variant, a piloted V-1 designed for use by the *Kamikaze* units of the Japanese Imperial Naval Air Service and the *Luftwaffe's* KG 200 Gruppe V's 'Leonidas Squadron', the latter having the option to bail out before impact. An example of the manned V-1 hangs in the foyer at La Coupole.

The first V-1s were not launched until 13 June 1944 and although the Germans had attempted to hide their long launching ramps in forests all over the Pas de Calais region, like the example at Bois des Huits Rues, the buildings and launch ramps were easily spotted from the air and rapidly bombed. Consequently the Germans switched to mobile launch ramps, which they moved frequently, and 33 Squadron's operational records detail several missions flown against such sites. In total it is estimated that around 10 500 V-1s were fired at England, and of the 3 531 which got through the defences, 2 419 reached London, causing the deaths of 6 184 civilians.

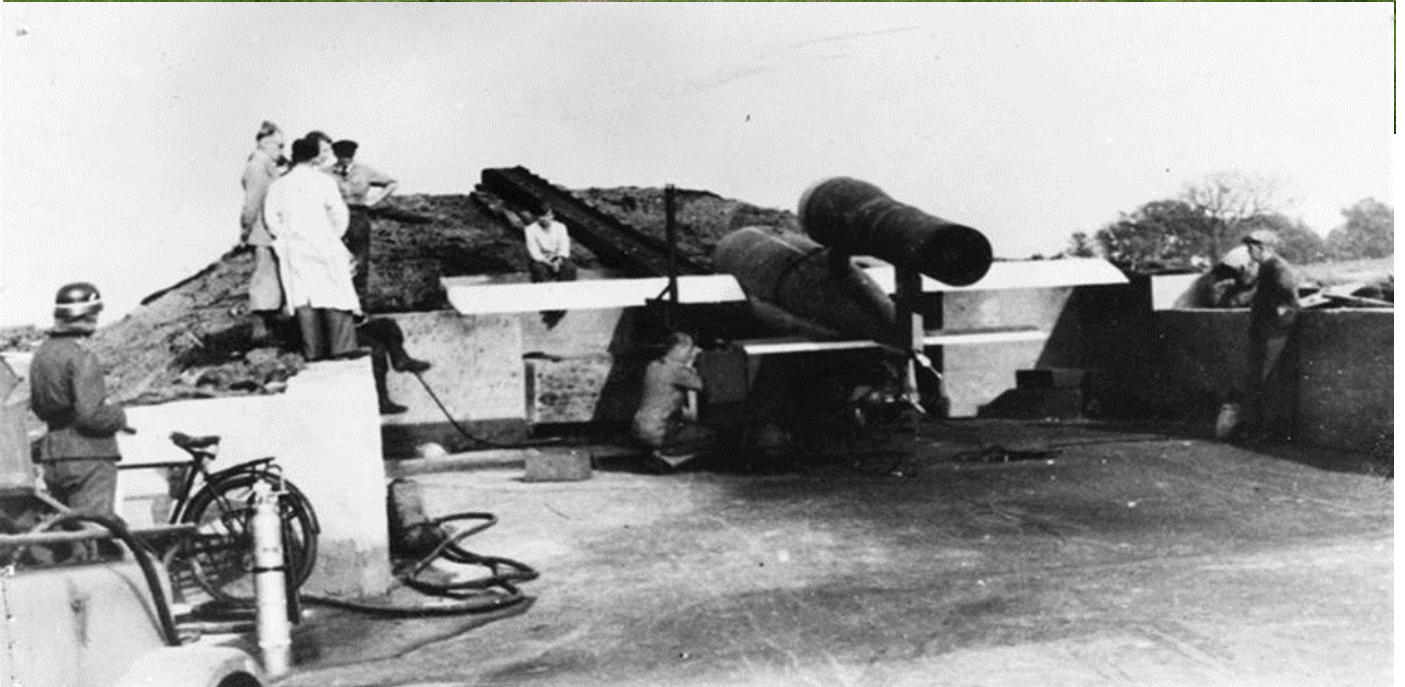
### **RAILWAY DUGOUTS, ZILLEBEKE**

To end the day our last 'proper' Stand was in a small CWGC cemetery on the outskirts of Zillebeke near Ieper / Ypres, one of many that we had driven past throughout the day. There was a special reason for visiting this particular site, as it contained the grave of Captain William Birch MC, one of the RFC pilots who had deployed from Swingate Down in August 1914 and had returned from France to command 33 (HD) Squadron in 1916-17. Captain Birch had stopped flying in March 1917 and had returned to his regiment – the Yorkshire Regiment – as Adjutant. By November 1917 he was a Major and in command of the 2nd Battalion. At his graveside the group heard how Major Birch and a number of his officers and men had died together in a tragic fire in the Hedge Street Tunnel on 5 January 1918, Birch having had the opportunity to get out and save his own life, but went back into the fire to try and save his men after being told that there were still men trapped inside.

### **LAST POST AT THE MENIN GATE**

During the planning phase of the Tour, having arranged to meet Jan and Renate Westhoeve and stay in Ieper for the evening, Chris Perkins had registered an Association wreath laying party at the Menin Gate for Saturday evening. The Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, often referred to simply as the Menin Gate, bears the names of more than 54 000 soldiers who died in Belgium and have no known grave. The Memorial commemorates casualties from the forces of Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and United Kingdom who died in the Salient which, broadly speaking, stretched from Langemarck in the north to the northern edge of Ploegsteert Wood in the south. In the case of United Kingdom casualties, only those who died prior to 16





**Top: Standing in front of the launch ramp site at Bois des Huits Rues, looking towards London.  
Centre: Preparing to launch a V-1 from a site similar to that at Bois des Huits Rues.  
Below: V-1 storage and construction buildings in the woods at Bois des Huits Rues.**





**Top: Lis Perriman lays the wreath at Major Birch's grave.**

**Below - left: 33 Squadron Association's Wreath Laying Party at the Menin Gate.**

**Below - right: Paul and Mark at the Menin Gate**



August 1917 are listed, with some exceptions. Any United Kingdom and New Zealand servicemen who died after that date are named on the memorial at Tyne Cot, a site which marks the furthest point reached by Commonwealth forces in Belgium until nearly the end of the war. New Zealand casualties that died prior to 16 August 1917 are commemorated on memorials at Buttes New British Cemetery and Messines Ridge British Cemetery. The Memorial was built between 1923 and 1927 and the Last Post has been sounded here every evening at 8.00 pm since 1928, interrupted only by the Second World War. The idea of performing the Last Post was first conceived by the Superintendent of the Ieper Police, Pierre Vandenbraembussche, in 1928 when the Last Post Committee (now Association) was formed from local volunteers. The ceremony has become part of the daily life of Ieper and traffic is stopped from passing through the Memorial each day at this time.

Much to Mrs Westhoeve's delight, we found on arrival at the hotel that we were sharing the accommodation with the London Scottish Regiment's Pipes and Drums Band, who were playing and marching at the ceremony that evening. After a quick SH-style turnaround, accompanied by the skirl of the pipes and drums warming up outside, we all gathered in the foyer / bar and trooped along to the Menin Gate in our best 'No1' Association rig to attend the extremely moving and very well attended event.

Once the ceremony was over, and as we had not eaten anything since La Coupole, the group split up and went off in search of sustenance in one of the many restaurants and bars in the town. In a restaurant near the Cloth Hall Andy Abbott and I opted for a local dish - stoofvlees met paterbier en friets. In Jan's words it was indeed '*lekker*' and we both wished we had ordered a double portion!

#### **SUNDAY 6 OCTOBER - GROENEWEG, SCHOONDIJKE**

Before we headed north out of Belgium and into the Netherlands we shared breakfast in the hotel with the kilted pipers and drummers of the London Scottish Regiment, who had played so well at the Menin Gate the night before and were heading to the Messines Ridge for their second engagement of their weekend. With Jan and Renate having set off early to make sure everything was in place for the first ceremony of the day we all drove north at 9.00 am, in ever worsening weather, to meet up near the Dekker family farm on the outskirts of Schoondijke. Most of the group had been on the inaugural battlefield Tour to Walcheren in 2017 and were well aware of 33 Squadron's route and role supporting the Canadians in capturing the Scheldt and Walcheren in the latter months of 1944. Our first Stand was on the edge of the Dekker's maize field on Groeneweg where our young New Zealand pilot, WO George Roney, had crashed exactly 75 years ago.

Jan Westhoeve has been working tirelessly for two years to ensure that George's memory and story will never be forgotten in the region, and we gathered there under umbrellas with several of the Dekker family and local friends to watch Jan present a plaque telling George's story to Wethouder (councillor) Werkman of the local council. The intention is to mount the plaque on a permanent memorial at the edge of the field near the road for all passers by to see. The permanent memorial will replace the temporary one that Suzie Dekker and her family have maintained there since the day that the Association, the 33 Squadron Force Development group and Rob and Trish Roney visited in 2017. The Dekker family had even bought a replacement wreath to place under George's photograph after the one that Rob Roney had laid at the site had blown away.

#### **COMMEMORATION SERVICE AT SCHOONDIJKE CHURCH**

Jan had informed us the previous day that because the weather was going to be so bad an early decision had been taken to hold the entire commemoration to George Roney inside the church. The weather was kind to us at Groeneweg, but once we got to the church in Schoondijke the weather got steadily worse. However, the warmth of the welcome extended to us by Dominee (Pastor) Jacqueline Geertse and the congregation more than made up for the rain outside. To maximise our time in Schoondijke, Jan did a great job as the Master of Ceremonies, and had produced a small booklet for the attendees, with the order of service and the speeches written out in English and Dutch. In response to the speech given by Alderman Werkman, the Association Chairman, Dick Brewster, gave a heartfelt and sincere speech that the congregation followed in Dutch in their booklet, followed by a short message from Rob Roney, who was attending a family wedding in California. After the wreathes had been laid at the altar, the Pastor said prayers, there was a two minute silence and then three pipers played two laments, for which they each received a generous dram of Islay's best from the Vice-Chairman's quaich. As a sign of the Association's and 33 Squadron's appreciation and friendship towards Schoondijke, and in gratitude for everything it has done for George Roney, the Chairman then presented the Pastor with a framed print for the church before we all convened into the ante room for coffee and bolus which, despite its unfortunate appearance is a delicious local delicacy.

In order to catch the Calais-Dover ferry we had planned to leave Schoondijke at 2.00 pm, which was fortuitous in view of the worsening weather. Before leaving we did venture outside to the cemetery to pay our respects to George and lay the wreathes at his





Op 6 oktober 1944, tijdens Operation Switchback, vertrokken twaalf Spitfires van het 33 Squadron Royal Air Force vanaf Merville in Frankrijk om Duitse postities rond Breskens te beschieten en bombarderen. Tijdens de missie werden drie Spitfires door Duits luchtafweer neergeschoten en daarbij werd een vliegenier gedood. Die vliegenier was George Roney uit Nieuw- Zeeland. Het vliegtuigwrak, met het stoffelijk overschot van George, werd pas op 9 juni 1948 geborgen. Drie dagen later werd George Roney begraven op de begraafplaats te Schoondijke.



Warrant Officer George James Roney RNZAF  
No 33 Squadron RAF  
1 January 1922 - 6 October 1944

On 6 October 1944, during Operation Switchback, twelve Spitfires of 33 Squadron Royal Air Force took off from Merville in France to strafe and bomb German positions in the Breskens area. During the mission three Spitfires were shot down by German anti-aircraft and one airman was killed.

That airman was George Roney, from New Zealand  
The wreckage containing George's remains, was not salvaged until 9 June 1948.

Three days later George was buried in the cemetery in Schoondijke.

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going of the sun and in the morning*



33 Squadron Association



We will remember them



**Top: Standing next to the temporary memorial set up by Jan and the Dekkers at the crash site.  
Below: The plaque that will be attached to the permanent memorial to George Roney.**





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Above: The Association and congregation members listen to the speeches in Schoondijke church.  
Below: The Association Chairman, Dick Brewster, presents a framed print to Pastor Jacqueline Geertse.  
(Photos: Courtesy of Danielle Roubroeks)



© Danielle Roubroeks



grave - and we got absolutely drenched in the process! All that remained was to say thank you and goodbye to everyone who had turned up in the atrocious conditions, complete Operation MANNA II with the Westhoves and then dash, dripping wet, back to the cars and head down the coast past the Dunkirk beaches to Calais. By the time we reached Calais the weather had improved markedly. Wet clothes were peeled off and packed away, a complete kit fuff took place while we queued for boarding, so that the right people were in the right cars with the right kit, ready to drive back to the right drop off locations once we got to Dover.

### CONCLUSION

The Three Amigos' comprehensive recce and prior planning ensured that the three day Battlefield Tour, as hectic as it was, had run as smoothly as was hoped. During the Tour, options had been discussed for future events, which including the Annual 33 km (20 mile) Canadian Liberation March from Hoofdplaat to Knokke Heist in November. The March, - or maybe a cycle ride? - had received encouraging support when it was discussed during the meal in the hotel in Dover.

There will be a Book Launch taking place in Sluis in April 2020, Part 3 of the 'Air War over Zeeland', which will feature George Roney's and 33 Squadron's story. Those chapters of the book have benefitted greatly from the research work done by Dave Stewart, and his contacts with the Roney family. Jan Westhove will be attending, there is a possibility that the Roney family will be represented there, and it would be appropriate good to have an Association, and maybe a Squadron, presence there too.

It is hoped that Jan Westhove's and the Dekker family's plan for the establishment of a permanent memorial will soon be realised, and we can attend the unveiling at the maize field in Groeneweg. For the hard core members, there is also the premiere of the Battle of the Scheldt film to look forward to, either at the end of 2020 or sometime in 2021. It will be a Dutch language film but there will sub-titles! At least the story of the hard fought Allied victory is finally being told, and the 'Forgotten Battle' tag attached to the series of operations to open up the port of Antwerp is finally receiving long overdue public attention. All that we need then is an historical military aviation archaeologist with access to ground radar survey equipment to step forward and scan the maize field to see if the remains of George's Spitfire are still there—and then recover them!

### APPRECIATION AND THANKS

The 33 Squadron Association Committee would like to extend its appreciation and thanks to the following people and organizations for making our 2019 Battlefield Tour a great success:

Peter West and the Eastchurch Aviation Museum

Dave Brocklehurst and the guides at the Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge

Jenny at the 25 Squadron Café, KBOBM, Hawkinge

The Battle of Britain Memorial, Capel le Ferne

The staff at the Premier Inn, Dover West, and the Beefeater next door

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission - for the outstanding work you do around the world.

The staff of La Coupole, Wizernes - merci!

The staff of the Novotel Ieper - merci!

Suzie Dekker and the Dekker family, Samira Claeys and the village of Schoondijke - bedankt voor alles wat jullie voor ons en George Roney hebben gedaan

Pastor Jacqueline Geertse and the Schoondijke church congregation - for your wonderful prayers, for looking after George Roney as if he was one of your own, and for the welcome you extend to us whenever we visit

Danielle Roubroeks—excellent photographs every time

Our special thanks go to Chris Perkins and Jan Westhove - for epitomising everything we could ask for in an Honorary Member, and for always going that step further for the benefit of others

