

Fenella Tillier personal memories of her trip to France. – 28TH-29TH April, 2010
To see where her Great Uncle Lt. Charles Percy Phipps died in the Great War
1914-1918

I was so excited, as Janice (Director and Producer) had arranged for me to go to France, and be filmed during my trip to Fromelles and the battle field where Gt Uncle Charles was killed and my Grandfather Ivor lost his leg.

At Pheasant Wood 8 mass graves had been found with bodies of casualties in the First World War. Archaeologists have excavated the pits and carefully removed the remains of 250 British and Australian soldiers, buried behind German lines after the Battle of Fromelles in July 1916. The British and Australian governments have asked the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to oversee the operation to recover the remains and to create a new cemetery at Fromelles for their reburial.

This was the first time in my 74 years I had ever been to France. I woke up in the morning sweating (a lady may say perspiring!) even through my scalp. A taxi picked me up at 6.30 a.m. to drive me to St. Pancras for the Eurostar. I met Janice outside at 8.45 a.m. and she took me in to meet the rest of the film crew. Mark who was the 'sound' recorder and Graham with his camera. All their equipment was astounding. I was fitted up with a microphone.

Janice had told me to bring my scooter, because of my bad leg and the pain it gives me to walk. I thought the Eurostar was half a mile long and our carriage would be at the end!

It was such fun as filming started immediately, I was so excited like a young girl whizzing around on my scooter tooting my horn. The trouble was if the sound or camera did not get it right the first time you had to do re-takes! I was not very clever at remembering how it was exactly! We even had the Station master looking after us, arranging for a ramp so I could drive onto the train.

As we pulled away from the station I thought we are off! In about an hour we were suddenly at the **tunnel** which goes under the sea! Seem so unrealistic. At this point I was thinking of Uncle Charles and how he went by boat in a rough sea and all feeling so sea sick. and a mixture of apprehension and excited (*I was feeling the same but a different sort of apprehension as to what he must have felt – the unknown – meeting his brother Jimmy and brother- in- law Ivor.*)

We were then given breakfast on the train including a chicken sausage (another first!). Suddenly the sky appeared and were in France. It looked similar to England, though not so many houses, more agricultural land, though didn't see any animals. A hour later we were at Lille at a huge French station with trains roaring through at break neck speed. I was slightly worried if I pressed the wrong lever on my scooter I would end up on the line! Again we were filming (and tooting) my arrival! Said Good Bye to Stefan the station master who had looked after us. No customs to go through, just straight outside.

I had brought warm clothes, mackintosh, just in case it was cold and raining! We were greeted with sunshine (very hot too). Thank goodness I had a skirt on and thin blouse.

Graham fetched his car and we were away. Janice very thoughtfully asked if I would like a rest at the hotel! Afraid my adrenalin was going far to fast and there would have been no hope of me relaxing! I really wanted to get to Fromelles..

We arrived in Fromelles seemed strange driving on the right-hand side of the road.. It was nothing really to see, the church was prominent (*it was new as the old one had been flattened in the 14/18 war*) and plain houses and the café/bar, you wouldn't have known it was there! It was locked just as we arrived c.2 p.m. (*I had to remember our time changed when we landed in France it was an hour ahead, seemed funny as it had only taken us c. one and a half hours to get to France.*)

We met Peter the historian with his assistant Ian and Nacressa from Darlow Smithson briefly. Janice was arranging with the next day's filming schedule..

Then I met David who is head man/director of the Fromelles cemetery, overseeing everything is correct and organising the up and coming opening on 19th July. He gave us a cup on tea in his office. I was delighted as he came from Co. Tyrone in Northern Ireland and my family lived at Summer Island, Loughgall. only 8 miles from his home He said "were nearly related!!" From then on it was great we never stopped talking. Poor Janice I never really thought what a job she was having.. We were making it impossible to get 'continuity' with the filming! Couldn't remember half the time where we had stopped walked; positions etc. had to have a lot of re-takes! So thoughtless of me.

The time had come for me to go into the ground where the memorial is, he unlocked the gates.

As I walked in there was a wall round it but I could see the cross behind and the brick arch way we would go through. As we entered under the arch, I was struck by the tranquillity and seeing all the white head stones at an angle each side of the cross facing up to it. The cross itself was simple on a platform with steps leading up to it.

David then lead me along row of graves pointing out the Australian and British headstones, they had been identified some of them by their buttons, badges etc. they were all unknown soldiers who had died at the battle of Fromelles, except for the few who had been identified. I was thinking as David and myself walked along the rows of graves with their headstones, how terrible it was all these young men slaughtered in such terrible conditions. Watching their friends die, unable to help them.

In between the graves there were gaps every so often marked with a post. This was where the **known** soldiers were to have their named headstones. (I believe there are about 65 identified there are only two or three British born and they were with the Australians) But no actual British from a British Regiment. as yet., though I await results with my DNA and Uncle Charles.

I now realise now how much I would have loved his body to have been identified (it still may, I will know very soon). I could still feel his spirit in the cemetery. I do truly believe when we die our soul goes up to heaven (if we deserve it) and our spirit stays around.

I then walked up the platform to the Cross and felt overcome with grief. David took my hand and led me down the steps it was such a comfort. (I find myself crying as I type this). I said Goodbye to David and the Cemetery.

We had one more trip to make and that was Loos Cemetery where Uncle Charles name maybe printed on a tablet. on the wall. When we went through a little wooden gate I was confronted with thousands of white headstones, unbelievable and all round the wall were plaques to the soldiers who had died and their regiment they were in. Poor Janice walked round the whole wall and could not find Uncle Charles names. She did find the soldiers from Oxford and Bucks but no 'C.P.Phipps' I felt so disappointed but she and Mark had one more look and they found him hidden at the bottom of the plaque with the officers.

The plaque was to the right of the cross in a little curved alcove on the last plaque. I was overwhelmed it really hit me to see his name in print on a stone slab. I felt rather like Doubting Thomas in the bible having to touch Jesus' wounds to believe he was alive, I had to touch the lettering on the plaque to believe Uncle Charles name was really there and he **had** died in France.

The tears came and I sat on a stone bench between the plaques in the alcove, I gave Uncle Charles my love and thanks. The reality of it all hit me. As I walked back to the gate I was overcome with grief again. I thought of his mother and father Constantine and Mabel Phipps, my Great Grandfather and Grandmother and the profound grief that they had to bare. I talked to them in my mind. I said out loud "I have found him and gave their love, he had to die and in a foreign land to save England" (I am crying again as I type).

(I don't think any of the family would have visited here until last few years when cousin Richard Stewart-Liberty did)

We then went to find our hotel and I could have a whisky! The Sat Nav got us there I would never have thought it was a hotel on its derelict site. It was very ugly and absolutely no facilities for the disabled no lifts or escalators.

This was where I had my first taste of France and French being spoken. It was a bleak place with about 400 bedrooms. Janice had difficulty in making the Receptionist understand to tell us where we were sleeping. She had hoped for downstairs rooms. Not at all, they were full up. Poor Graham and Mark had to lug all their heavy equipment upstairs and along passages miles away.. Then they said there was no downstairs room for me so I struggled up stairs where I thought my room was only to find the receptionist coming up and saying we were going the wrong way! I would have to go downstairs again and up another lot of stairs. Janice was so kind she was really looking after me and when we got down the stairs she said “Fenella can go no further!” so the receptionist asked someone to swap bedrooms and I had a room downstairs.

We then met in the bar, it seemed funny people speaking in French and I could not understand them or they me! No smiles or expressions on their faces! It was lovely I had my whisky and then we had dinner. Mine was very good, scallops and salad and a starter of very thinly sliced raw beef in olive oil!

I slept quite well though awoke at 4 am and then at 6 a.m. (British time) read my notes re. Uncle Charles and the war. Met Janice for breakfast, v. good scrambled eggs, bacon and mushroom. *(In the morning I was told the disabled lavatory was upstairs! Not much help and the one I had was too low! No lift in the hotel!)*

9 a.m. and we were off to Fromelles to meet Peter (Barton) the historian and see the battlefield. The adrenalin pumping and wonderment of what I was going to see and feel. Arrived at the Café and met Peter everyone had a coffee and was very relieve to find a portaloos which had a higher seat! Maps and arrangements were being made by Janice and her film crew. We drove to the field and Peter and Ian and Nacressa had marked it out with little flags the day before. Red ones showed where the British Lines were and Blue flags for the Australians and yellow where the German lines. It really helped to make it come to life.

I was told the lines went from miles and miles and miles across France . Hard to imagine it. I was struck by the complete flat expanse of the land for miles around nowhere to hide except in your trench. There were trees to our left and I forgot to ask if there had been hedges. (If I ever meet Peter again I will ask him!)

We drove through a wheat field and the British lines were marked in a potato field. It was very dry and dusty and the sun baking hot above us. Peter and my myself had microphones attached and filming began.

Peter led me across the potato field to the flags and said “You are now standing on a trench” He explain how the trenches were formed with a back in front and a roof over head (but this did not keep the rain out). I think he said they were about four foot wide. I put my sticks on the ground to visualise it. It really seemed so narrow no room to stretch and Uncle Charles would have had to live and sleep in this trench with mud and rats. (It was the lie of the land and clay soil made it so wet, they just dug two feet down and water appeared.)

Peter also pointed out the line of the communications trench where everything was brought along to the trenches. and where the sally ports came out.

When the attack took place Germans could just shoot the soldiers as they came out of the sally ports. So the British were ordered to go along over the top and along Rhondda Sap. A trench which had been dug towards the German lines. Peter had marked the direction of it with his flags.

I looked across to the Sugar Loaf where the German soldiers had been embedded in concrete bunker and underground tunnels, and thought how unfair our boys had not a chance to capture their lines. I had expected it to be on a hill but it was flat. I think there was a mound of earth all the way round in front of the Germans (*can't quite remember what Peter said*)

Looking across no-man's land it seemed so near to the German lines. Peter had put a yellow flag to mark them. (estimated about 400 yards away). And yet with the wire and boggy land and ditches it was so difficult to cross and at the same time being mown down with machine guns.

When Janice asked me how I felt. I said “I just cannot not put it into words. I could imagine what happened but I couldn't live it and really put myself in Uncle Charles' shoes. It was too horrific.” Peter said he felt the same all the times he was marking out battlefields he could only imagine it and not live it.

It was extraordinary the more Peter and myself talked and he showed me the trenches and the communications trench the closer we got and I felt very attached to him at the end, and him too me. He gave me such a real hug when we said “Goodbye”. Peter said he found it brought to life speaking to a relative of one of the soldiers.

When we were leaving the battlefield Peter bent down and found some spent bullets and a broken toothbrush. He said “these are British bullets which have been fired”. That really did bring it home, we were standing on the battlefield. *I have them with me now. I may put one with Uncle Charles' letters with the archivist.*

We climbed in the Landover, though I had great difficulty and needed a lot of assistance, my muscles have got so weak now. It was terribly difficult also with my bad leg..

We got to the edge of the battle field and I felt suddenly so sad, it was like a farewell to Uncle Charles the end of the saga. As I kissed Janice goodbye it seemed to finalise my whole quest in finding Uncle Charles. I felt lost. Janice had become a friend and so much part of my thoughts and Uncle Charles. Also Graham and Mark had felt like a part of my family..

The taxi came to take me to Lille with my scooter and Nacressa came to look after me (*what a wimp I am!*) but it was a comfort. I said goodbye to Fromelles. Don't think I will be coming back again unless it is proven that one of those identified bodies is Uncle Charles' and then I would. We arrived back at the Eurostar and Necressa got me a quiche which turned out to an egg custard flan! V. good lunch!!. We went to clock in and wait for an attendant. Eventually after 45 minutes someone came to take me to the train and I said Good by to Nacressa, felt it was the end of my farewells.

I was on my own but the attendant could speak a little English. The train came in and said it was waiting for a very short time! Got the ramp up just went in doorway (tight fit) and then found the scooter could not turn. So it was just left it by the door! I was given a seat for a person sitting in a wheelchair, not comfortable! They moved me down the carriage to a proper seat. They were serving lunch and I said "Pour moi" and got some!! Cous cous and cheese platter with a pink moose on bit of cake! and tea and orange juice.

A family of four on my right were sitting to my right, who spoke English and had been to a Fish Festival in Brussels and lived in Nairobi but daughter being taken to England to university. I started talking for a change! Told them about film and Uncle Charles. Would you believe the girl had a camcorder and started filming me!! I suppose I was still excited with all I had been through but I was fooling around as usual. The girl said at the end of the journey "You should be a comedienne!"

The station master met me but was called away immediately to help and old woman so I scooted off found a lift and got down stairs, England is far stricter letting in people had to show ticket then go to immigration. No sign Lanke (she could not get onto platform.) Then I had to go through immigration loads of people queuing. I nipped through the middle on my scooter and Lanke phoned me, I was very relieved. We then had to find the taxi went out the wrong entrance, went back and onto Kings Cross road, I was very relieve Mohammed was there. It took us 45 minutes to go two miles trying to get out of London. I got home at 6.10. Guy was there and had cooked a kedgeree for me.

It seemed unbelievable in just 48 hours I had been to France and seen Fromelles and lived the First World War.

I have Janice to thank for this. Thank you

Fenella (Tillier) 30th April, 2010.