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Item Type	event;event
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Download date	2024-08-11 02:20:19
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49159">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49159</a>

## **A moment in time: Commemorating the Armistice on the Somme in 2018**

### **Abstract**

The Great War of 1914-1918 has been commemorated during a four-year centenary period, with large commemorative events, organized by the governments of nations which fought the war, particularly Belgium, France and Britain. The final ceremonies for the centenary were conducted almost simultaneously at 11.00am on November 11 2018, at sites spread across the old trench lines of France and Belgium. How then, did tourists decide which event, and in which place they would spend this brief 'moment in time'? Data collected from a sample of tourists in the village of Pozières on the Somme, France, on 10-11 November, 2018, indicate that large national commemorations were given the highest priorities. Afterwards however, people had made plans to visit other sites such as family graves and memorial sites, some extending to the Ieper area in Belgium. The study suggests the importance of large state based events in motivating tourist travel to the battlefields.

### **Introduction**

The Great War of 1914-1918, ended at 11.00am on November 11, 1918, and since then, each year, ceremonies have been held to commemorate the peace and to remember the war and those who fought (Lloyd 1998; J. Winter 1995). Over the centenary period, governments of nations that had fought the war contributed substantial resources towards commemorative ceremonies, educational programs, building new museums and visitor centres, and refurbishing others. These efforts resulted in increased tourist visitation to the battlefields along the old Western Front in France and Belgium. In 2016 for example, battlefield visitation on the Somme increased by 11.4% at Thiepval to 189,000, and by 15.5% to the Somme museum in Albert, reaching 79,760 visitors (Atout France). The final part of the centenary was of course, the celebration and commemoration of the end of the war in November 2018.

The trench line along which the war was fought, extended for 700km from the North Sea to the Swiss border, and most of the war memorials including military cemeteries and large national monuments lie close to this line. This is the result of the decisions made by the British Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission during the war, to bury their men close to where they had fallen (Longworth 2003). The Commission built almost one thousand military cemeteries in the northern areas of France and Belgium, on behalf of their allies, Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and New Zealand (Longworth 2003). In addition, these nations also built their own large memorials at sites of significant battles that had resulted in large numbers of deaths. There is therefore, a close association between geography and the war dead, that is reflected in the locations at which large memorials were built (Lloyd, 1998; C. Winter 2012; J. Winter 1995).

Practices of 'remembrance' are those acts designed to perpetuate memories of the war, and they have been conducted at these war memorials (monuments and cemeteries) for a century. They are also places that hold great importance for people with personal and national connections to

the deceased (Lloyd 1998; J. Winter 1995). During the centenary years, major events had been conducted at these various memorials, located across the battlefields, and tended to be separated in time, reflecting the conduct of battles during the war. For example, the centenary for the First Battle of the Somme was commemorated by the British on 1 July 1916, and Passchendaele in July 2017. That is, funding notwithstanding, people were able to prioritize and select from this range of events, the one they preferred to attend.

The ceremonies for the centenary however, provided a different situation. To commemorate the final day of the war, and the signing of the Armistice, Britain, France and other nations, held major events almost simultaneously, at their respective national memorials at 11.00am on 11 November 2018. In addition, on the Somme for example, almost every village held its own ceremony. The aim of this study then, was to understand how people chose a particular location, to commemorate “a moment in time”, from a vast selection of events, spread over a large geographic area.

## **Literature Review**

Geography is critical to understanding and remembering the First World War, not only for the circumstances in which the battles were fought, but through the way in which the war memorials were later constructed (Hertzog 2012; Laqueur 1994). As noted above, the burials were made along the trench lines, and even though, as Morris (1997) argues, the horrors of the war were “smoothed over”, the enormous line of a thousand cemeteries made the scale of death highly visible (Laqueur 1994). Today’s battlefields thus present an intense collection of memorials for tourists, such that most visitors need to plan strict itineraries in order to see the most important places. The Somme Tourist Board for example, lists 410 military cemeteries and memorials of Britain and her allies, 22 French military cemeteries and 14 German cemeteries (*Somme Tourisme*, 2017).

It is acknowledged that familial and national connections form some of the underlying motivations for visiting sites on the battlefields, and that these two are very closely associated (C. Winter 2012; J. Winter 1995). Hutchinson (2009 p. 413) also argues that “the trauma was common rather than simply individual or sectional” and people grieved together. In addition, it is also acknowledged that the Great War saw the end of an era in which only the generals and senior politicians were acknowledged and remembered, but that individual men were now seen as equals. Monuments then, are no longer the sole source of or focus for remembrance activity for today’s battlefield tourists (Gough 2006), and although commemorative ceremonies remain of crucial importance, other activities that provide experiences are important.

Sumartojo (2016 p. 11) for example extends her analysis beyond geography to consider commemoration as “an affective and atmospheric event, rather than primarily a historical, textual or symbolic one.” One of the more recent methods in which the battlefields have been developed is through the creation of ‘trails’, developed along themes, and which may include family or national histories as well as other aspects about the conduct of the war (Miles 2017). At the same time, tourist organizations, such as *Somme Tourisme*, provide excellent guide books, with details of many sites, that are relevant to several national interests, and information to help tourists to design their own trails. There are also many other sites and sights in these areas that provide a range of facilities and attractions for visitors including war museums and the battlefields themselves.

Virgili et al. (2018) consider the battlefields in the French campaign area of Verdun, from a dark tourism perspective, focusing on a supply perspective to detail processes of commodification. Their results reveal “the transition from patriotic tourism through pilgrimage tourism and memory tourism to, ultimately, a tension between memory and entertainment tourism” (Virgili et al 2018 p. 68). The role of multiple stakeholders has, in recent years created tensions in the management of the Verdun battlefield. On the Somme however, Hertzog (2012) found that local actors and a range of stakeholders had achieved some unity between the past violence of the war, and the new, relatively lighter interests of today’s tourists.

## Methodology

This paper reports the results of data collected from tourists on the battlefields of France on November 10-11, 2018.

The site for this study was Pozières, a very small village, with a population of 250 people, located on the Somme, approximate 3km from the large Franco-British memorial at Thiepval. The village sits at the southern end of Pozières Ridge, which was of crucial importance in the First Battle of the Somme in 1916, and it is popularly known as the Australian campaign area. Total casualties (dead and wounded) for Britain (including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa) totaled 432,000 with similar numbers for Germany (Prior and Wilson 2005). The village was razed from the face of the earth during the war, and rebuilt in the 1930s. There are four memorials in the village, three of which are Australian, and although it is a small place, the village is located in a central position on the Somme “Poppy Trail”.

The researcher was based in the village pub (*Le Tommy*) on November 10 and 11, and collected data from tourists, using a researcher assisted questionnaire. Tourists were approached in the dining room of the pub, (while they were waiting for their meal or after they had finished), and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. Most people were happy to be involved, but two groups refused. The questionnaire asked visitors whether or not they had previously visited the Western Front (Somme or Flanders), details of the ceremony they will or had attended at 11.00 on 11 November and the reasons why this site had been selected. They were also asked about other places visited on the days prior to, and after November 11.

## Results

A total of 43 tourists were interviewed, who were travelling in 16 parties, and most group members responded to the researcher’s questions. Almost all (n=37) had visited the Western Front before while six had not. Most visitors were British (n = 30) or Australian (n = 12) with one person from Canada.

**Table 1.** Profile of Sample

Nationality	Freq (%)	Gender	Freq (%)
British	30 (70%)	Male	24 (56)
Australian	12 (28%)	Female	19 (44%)
Canadian	1 (2%)		
<b>Total</b>	<b>43 (100%)</b>		<b>43 (100%)</b>

It was evident that these people had clear plans for the two days, and were well versed in where they would go, with good knowledge of the battlefields, based on their previous experiences. It is perhaps not surprising that the larger national memorials were the most frequently attended at 11.00 given the very large ceremonies that had been organized by the various national governments, particularly Britain. Three large memorials, the Menin Gate in Ieper (Belgium), Australian National Memorial (Villers-Bretonneux) and the Franco-British Memorial, (Thiepval, Somme) had been attended by 11 of the 16 groups (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Sites Attended on November 11

Site	Group attendance
Menin Gate, Ieper (Belgium)	3
Australian National memorial (Villers-Bretonneux)	3
Franco-British Memorial, (Thiepval, Somme)	5
Longueval village memorial	1
Arras memorial	1
Lochnagar Crater (La Boisselle)	1
Small French village	1
Compiègne	1

Table 3 shows that national affiliation appeared to have been the dominant reason for decisions to attend a ceremony, with six groups attending their national memorial. Beyond November 11 however, most tourists had been very busy travelling the battlefields to other places, where they were involved in other more personal commemorative ceremonies. Some people had attended the ceremony at the Ulster Tower which preceded the Thiepval ceremony on November 11. One Australian group who attended their national memorial were intending to travel to Ieper later in the day, while others were moving east to St Quintin, and several other sites on the Somme, to visit graves of great uncles. Some tourists who attended Thiepval were then traveling to Lille, and others to Neuve Chappelle, Bapaume, and the Arras area. In other words, most people attended a ceremony at one major site at 11.00 on November 11, as well as several other sites, some on the same day and others in the following days.

**Table 3.** Reasons for Selecting a Memorial on November 11

Site	Group attendance
National site importance	6
Family	3
Other personal connection	3
Historical - Compiègne, site of the armistice	1
Convenience	1
Influenced by others in the group	1
To spend time with local people in the village	1

Visitors were asked what the notion of an “experience” on the battlefields meant to them, and the summary of their responses in Figure 1 shows it to be have been deeply felt, and as one person said, “emotionally demanding”. For some, a visit to the site of battle or a cemetery was an honour or a privilege, and that being on site provided an additional layer of understanding, particularly about the scale of the war.

**Figure 1.** The Experience of November 11

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- History
  - Not an experience but a journey of commemoration
  - A privilege to visit
  - Trying to find family
  - Nostalgia – tradition experienced with grandfather
  - Emotionally demanding
  - Place
  - WW1 was a major event connected with us
  - An honour
  - Family pilgrimage
  - Sobering; to see the scale of the war
  - It adjusts your views
  - A difficult experience
  - Brings history to life
- 

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This study sought to understand how tourists prioritized their decisions about where to commemorate the end of the Great War, at “a single moment in time”, (11.00am on November 11, 2018), from a range of ceremonies that were conducted almost simultaneously across the old Western Front battlefields. Data were collected from tourists who were partaking of a meal in the local pub (*Le Tommy*) in the village of Pozières located on the tourist ‘Poppy Trail’, close to several large national memorials.

Based upon their previous visitation and their knowledge of the sites on the battlefields, this sample of tourists was very experienced, and as a result had been able to create their own remembrance trails. They had, for the most part, a particular purpose, designing their own remembrance itineraries within themes of family and nation, to well-known sites. These connections to the dead through familial and national associations reflect a longstanding tradition of battlefield visitation noted by other researchers, notably Slade (2003) and Seaton (2000). Most people had clear reasons for selecting the site at which to commemorate the Armistice, but beyond that, their itineraries were much more extensive, with several groups travelling around the Somme battlefield, and others visiting Ieper in Flanders. Many agreed in one form or another that the physical experience of visiting the battlefields provides an extra dimension to understanding the war’s history, with some saying it was an honour and privilege to visit.

Over the centenary years, the governments of France, Belgium, Britain, Australia and Canada in particular, have staged very large commemorative ceremonies in their home countries and/or at battlefield memorials. This study illustrates that these ceremonies are but part of the activities undertaken by tourists, and that any number of private acts of remembrance are performed alongside larger state events. At the same time, it is possible these larger events inspire and

motivate people to travel for the opportunity to experience a range of other ceremonies, beyond their own personal interests.

The study was limited to tourists at a single site in France, and other sites may evidence a different sample, particularly variations resulting from nationality, age, and personal connections, that were not captured in this study. Further research must now focus upon the post centenary years, to assess the results of the various state commemorative programs on local tourism, and how this may be continued in the future. Research can also explore the way in which commemorative practices, designed to enact the promises made in 1918 to remember the dead, may be continuing.

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