

## The Somme Battlefields

On Friday 12 July myself, Martin Lee, Tony Costin and Lester Marriner left the UK for Calais. Our purpose was to visit the battlefields of the First World War. On the first day on July 1st 1916 the British Army suffered 54,470 casualties at The Battle of the Somme.





After staying the night at The Ibis Hotel in Calais we started on Saturday morning to Bethune. This was quite a hard day's riding of 57 miles.



We were cycling mainly on flat paths alongside the Canal North.





The following day we cycled from Bethune to Albert and stopped to visit our first war cemetery.





On Sunday we cycled 44 miles to Albert and spent four nights there with the purpose of cycling to war memorials and cemeteries.



The first site we went to was the Locknager Crater. This was created by a large mine detonated beneath the German front line by the British Army's 179 the Tunnelling Company Royal Engineers at 7.28am on July 1st 1916.





20,000 men died in the assault. Among them was 22 year old Billy Disbury . His body was never recovered.



**THE LOCHNAGAR CRATER FOUNDATION**

### An account by Pte. Billy Disbrey 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks (Cambridge Pals)

For many years, Les Disbrey, one of the founding members of the Friends of Lochnagar would lovingly lay a wreath to his 'Uncle Billy' who fell at the Crater on the 1<sup>st</sup> July. Here is Billy's story - 15812 Pte. Herbert William Disbrey, 11<sup>th</sup> Bttn., The Suffolk Regt - the Cambridge Pals.

Amidst great enthusiasm, the young men of the small village of Barton in Cambridgeshire answered Kitchener's call in 1914. One of them was a cheerful 22 year old farm labourer called Billy who found himself, on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July, in the trenches 1,000 yards (approx. 900 metres) in front of their objective, the formidable German strongpoint of Schwaben Höhe. As he waited for the whistles to blow, the huge Lochnagar mine, to their left, exploded.

Billy's battalion set off following the Grimsby Chums. Both were untried in battle but they resolutely walked through the hailstorm of machine-gun fire that viciously swept back and forth along their ranks as, all around them they witnessed their lifelong friends cut down.

Miraculously about a dozen men even got as far as the relative shelter of their objective only to be engulfed by flame-throwers placed on the trench parapet.

By nightfall over half of the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks lay dead or wounded in no-man's-land and the original Cambridge Pals were no more.

On that one, terrible day Barton alone lost two of its young men, among no less than ten who died in the war and who are honoured on the village war memorial.

Billy's body was never recovered from the battlefield. He is commemorated on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Thiépval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme.



Herbert William Disbrey, 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks (Cambridge Pals). Courtesy of Stuart Disbrey.

### Le récit du Soldat Billy Disbrey 11<sup>ème</sup> Suffolks (Cambridge Pals)

Pendant longtemps, Les Disbrey, l'un des membres fondateurs des Friends of Lochnagar, a déposé chaque année avec amour une gerbe, en souvenir de son "Tonton Billy", tombé au Cratère le 1<sup>er</sup> juillet. Voici son histoire - 15812 Soldat Herbert William Disbrey, 11<sup>ème</sup> Bataillon, Suffolk Régiment, Cambridge Pals.

Pleins d'entrain, les jeunes hommes de Barton, un petit village Cambridgeshire, répondent à l'appel de Kitchener de 1914. L'un d'entre eux est un ouvrier agricole de 22 ans fort sympathique nommé Billy. Le matin du 1<sup>er</sup> juillet, il se trouve dans les tranchées à environ 900m de l'objectif, le redoutable point fort allemand Schwaben Höhe. Alors qu'il attend le coup de sifflet, l'énorme mine de Lochnagar, située à la gauche des Pals, saute.

Le bataillon de Billy se lance, à la suite des Grimsby Chums. Aucun des bataillons n'a encore jamais comitattu, mais ils avancent résolument à travers l'orage de balles des mitrailleuses qui balaient leurs rangs sans merci, et qu'entourés d'eux, leurs amis de toujours se font abattre. Miraculeusement douzaine d'hommes atteint l'abri relatif de l'objectif, mais sont dévorés par le feu des lance-flammes disposés sur le parapet de la tranchée.

A la tombée de la nuit de ce jour noir, plus de la moitié des 11<sup>ème</sup> Suffolks morts ou blessés dans le no man's land et les Cambridge Pals sont décimés.

Lors de cette seule journée terrible, le village de Barton a perdu deux jeunes hommes, sur les dix au total disparus pendant de la guerre et un hommage est rendu sur le monument aux morts du village.

La dépouille de Billy n'a jamais été récupérée sur champ de bataille. Sa figure figure parmi ceux inscrits sur le Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Thiépval Memorial aux disparus de la Somme.

The Lochnagar Crater is privately owned by Richard Dunning MBE and is dedicated to Remembrance, Respect and Reconciliation.  
[www.lochnagarcrater.org](http://www.lochnagarcrater.org)

**'THE LOCHNAGAR PROMISE FOR PEACE'**  
"In Remembrance of all those who have suffered in conflict, and those who are suffering still, may we live our lives today with more Compassion and Kindness, Understanding and Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Unity. Let us now, in their honour, wage Peace."

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At the site there are a number of memorials to people like Billy who had their lives shattered by the war.



For the next few days we visited other memorials like the one in Thiepval for British and French war victims.



We visited a number of Commonwealth sites which were all immaculately looked after.





Tribute to the Scottish soldiers who lost their lives.





Tribute to Canadians who lost their lives.

On our last day in Albert we visited a German cemetery. It was striking that all the graves were marked by black crosses. In the cemetery lies the famous German fighter pilot,




Manfred von Richthofen, better known as “ The Red Barton”. He was only 25 when his plane was shot down.



Perhaps the final word for what happened should be left with Harry Patch. He was the last survivor of World War One and said it was basically over a family feud and “ T'isnt worth it”.



  
THE LOCHNAGAR CRATER FOUNDATION

**“T’isn’t worth it...”**  
**Pte. Harry Patch**

1898 — 2009

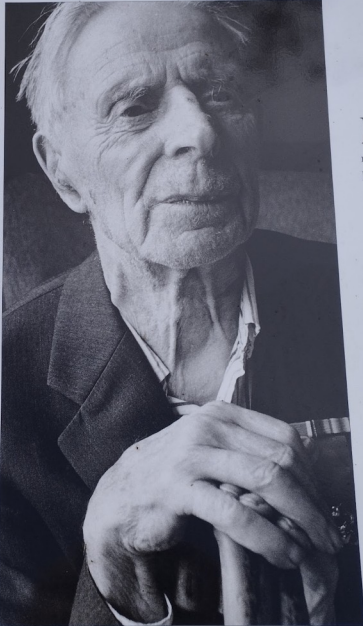
Pte. Harry Patch arrived in France and celebrated his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday in the trenches of Flanders. As part of a Lewis gun team, he was one of five men, who along with many thousands of others were sucked into that horror of mud, blood, and death - the Third Battle of Ypres, now better known as Passchendaele.

*“If any man tells you he went into the front line and he wasn’t scared – he’s a liar. You were scared from the moment you got there. You never knew. I mean, in the trench you were all right. If you kept down, a sniper couldn’t get you. But you never knew if the artillery had a shell that burst above you and you caught the shrapnel. That was it.”*

And it wasn’t long before Harry did catch some shrapnel; in late September coming back to camp from the trenches one night with his comrades, a German shell exploded nearby killing three and seriously wounding Harry. His war was over.

For eighty years, Harry kept his thoughts to himself, never speaking to anyone about what had happened to him all those years before. He was one hundred years old before he started to talk about life and death in the maelstrom of war.

*“It wasn’t worth it. No war is worth it. No war is worth the loss of a couple of lives let alone thousands. T’isn’t worth it... the First World War, if you boil it down, what was it? Nothing but a family row. That’s what caused it. T’isn’t worth it.”*



Harry Patch, 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry. Photo © Keith Collman - www.gratwarpanels.com

**« Ca n’vaut pas la peine... »**  
**Soldat Harry Patch**

1898 — 2009

Le Soldat Harry Patch arrive en France et fête son 19<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire dans les tranchées de Flandres. Membre d’une équipe à 5 hommes mitrailleur Lewis, qui, comme des milliers d’autres est entraîné à l’horreur de boue, de sang et de mort - la troisième bataille d’Ypres connue aujourd’hui sous le nom de Passchendaele.

*« Si un homme vous dit qu’il est allé à la ligne du front et qu’il n’a pas peur – c’est un menteur. On avait peur dès l’arrivée. On ne savait pas se faire avoir par un sniper. Mais on ne savait jamais si l’artillerie avait une obus qui vous éclaterait au-dessus et que vous vous prendriez de la shrapnel. C’était fini pour vous. »*

En effet, Harry se prend bientôt des éclats d’obus ; en fin septembre rentrant des tranchées au campement avec ses camarades, une explosion non loin, tuant trois hommes et blessant gravement Harry.

Pendant quatre-vingt ans, Harry garde ses pensées pour lui-même, ne parlant de la vie et la mort dans le maelstrom de la guerre.

*« Ça n’en valait pas la peine. Aucune guerre ne vaut la peine de perdre la vie ou deux vies, encore moins des milliers de vies. ... La Première Guerre Mondiale, si on la réduit à l’essentiel, quoi ? Rien de plus qu’une dispute de famille. C’est ça qui a causé ça. Ça n’vaut pas la peine. »*

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After we had stayed in the area near the Somme we made our way back to Calais over two days. The final day was a brutal ride of 70 miles in 39 degrees.





It was a great tour and very well organised by Martin. It was moving and sad that so many young men lost their lives.