WFA SUFFOLK BRANCH
Branch Briefing
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Special Email Edition ! (5)

Private 2518, John Hervey Wiggin, 5th Battalion, Suffolk Regiment Kelvin Dakin

Born 4th April 1895 in Ipswich he was the son of John Chenery Wiggin* and Alice Harriett Wiggin of 7 Constitution Hill, Ipswich.

Reported missing, presumed killed, 12th August 1915.

He attended Ipswich School, the Cathedral Choir School and The King's School Worcester. His obituary appeared in the King's School magazine in November 1916:

> H. Wiggin, the elder son of Mr. J. C. Wiggin, of Ipswich, entered the School as the first Dean Forest Scholar from the Cathedral Choir School in January, 1910. Placed in the Third Form he rose rapidly and left in the Sixth Form in December, 1913. Debarred by a hesitation in speech from pursuing his earlier aim of taking Holy Orders, he worked and qualified for a post in the Civil Service. He was one of the first to enlist at the outbreak of the War in the Suffolk Regiment, with which he went to Egypt and Gallipoli. On August 12th he took part in the attack on the Turkish position at Suvla Bay and was among a party who gained their objective but could not be reinforced. He was reported missing and is now presumed killed. His Colonel writes that both he and the Adjutant had looked forward to a commission for him. While at the Choir School he was an excellent Monitor [i.e. Prefect] and later on showed great perseverance in overcoming difficulties, winning the respect of all who knew him.

From the *History of The Suffolk regiment 1914 – 1927 :*
"Sir Ian Hamilton had issued orders that a division marching by night should attack the heights known as Kavak Tepe and Teke Tepe at dawn on the 13th [August]"

The 163rd Brigade was sent forward to take enemy occupied Kuchik Anafarta Ova to the east "*and securing an unopposed night march for the remainder of the division"*

"Accordingly, at 4pm on the August 12 the 163rd Brigade advanced, the 1/5th Norfolk Regiment being on the right, the 1/8th Hampshire Regiment centre, and the 1/5th Suffolk Regiment on the left and directing the attack"

The brigade immediately came under heavy fire from artillery, machine guns and infantry but succeeded in reaching a position about 1500 yards from where they started. After an hour they were ordered to withdraw about 200 yards to better cover and the position was held for three days until they were relieved. The 5th Suffolk recorded 186 killed or wounded and three missing.

Pte Wiggin is commemorated on the Helles Memorial, Ipswich School Chapel, St Matthews Church Memorial, Worcester Cathedrals Old Choristers Memorial Window, Worcester Kings School Window & Memorial and on the Ipswich Memorial.

Image and information courtesy of Ipswich War Memorial Project
https://www.ipswichwarmemorial.co.uk/john-hervey-wiggin/

*John Chenery Wiggin was an Ipswich Pharmaceutical Chemist and pioneering photographer.

Purdis Heath Ipswich – WW1 Training Grounds Kevin Rose and David Hedges

David H : I received a call from Kevin Rose, an old work colleague, who is a member of Purdis Heath Golf Club. Kevin is keen to prepare a display in the clubhouse about the WW1 practise trenches that exist to this day around the golf course. Please let us know if you can add any information about these trenches,

Kevin Rose : I happened to come across a BBC Sounds clip about WW1 training trenches at Purdis Heath, Ipswich, Suffolk. This is a popular dog walking area and somewhere that my Jack Russell, Maisie, likes to explore.

Around the heath there are some obvious remains of WW1 training trenches. According to the Sounds clip, in 1916 the 2nd / 1st City of London Territorial Division came to Ipswich to prepare for duty in France. Apparently, many local people joined the Division during the training.

I would be very interested in learning more about this training ground, especially those who trained there, and therefore would welcome any further information that anyone can provide.

David H : Well the sound clip is from none other than our esteemed Chairman Taff and can be heard by pasting this url into a browser

https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p02b97lg

Here is the preamble to the clip on the website :-

In 1916 the 2/1st [6th] City of London Territorial Division came to Ipswich to prepare for duty in France.

Keen to prepare as fully as possible for what they were to face, they created a network of training trenches to the east of the town, at Purdis Heath.

Although now fairly overgrown, the trenches can be clearly seen, and there is now a call for them to be preserved for the future.

Location: Purdis Heath, Suffolk IP10 0AB

I checked on Google Earth and fortunately the photo was taken during a dry spell and a front line trench can clearly be seen

This photo accompanied the BBC Sounds url and presumably shows trenches in the wooded area adjacent to a fairway—where my ball will end up when I play there with Kevin

INVESTIGATING COLLAPSES AT VIMY RIDGE AND BEAUMONT HAMEL MEMORIAL PARKS

David Hedges

I braved a 3 night trip to France last week dodging virus flare ups to assist Veteran Affairs Canada (VAC) in checking various collapses into tunnels and bunkers on the two Canadian Memorial Parks. I was accompanied by Bruce Simpson, former Chairman of the WFA, Nigel Cave and other colleagues in my Durand Group.

I cannot go into any details for safety reasons as we do not want to encourage any member of the public to attempt an entrance into an underground system.

Here is a typical collapse

Collapses occur frequently and are caused by water washing the infill further down an incline creating a void that the surface material then collapses into. Bunkers, subways and fighting tunnels sometimes start with a vertical shaft but more likely an incline ramp typically at 45 degrees. During construction spoil was hauled up these inclines often using a light railway with small trolley wagons. Once finished an incline is the best way for troops to enter and leave the system. Typical bunkers and subways are 25 feet down, that from experience being the shallowest depth that can withstand all but the very biggest artillery shells. Bunkers are almost always on the side of the trench closest to the enemy line and therefore protected from incoming shellfire and have two entrances to avoid being trapped. Subways are tunnels large enough to allow troops to move up to the front line from the rear areas walking upright. Fighting tunnels are typically ninety feet down as below that the water table starts and tunnelling becomes impossible. They are much smaller and are dug to attack the enemy with massive mines, or to defend your position from attack.

After the war inclines were filled in by use of spoil typically in the early 1920's. Some bunker entrances were deliberately blown in using explosive. In theory inclines should have been filled to the bottom but we have found instances where a block of wood or similar was jammed across the incline half way down or less and infill poured onto it. As these blocks deteriorate they can give way leading to pronounced collapses. Bunkers have the counter-intuitive tendency to rise towards the surface. As the chalk roof fails it falls to the floor. Thus the new roof is now closer to the surface and so is the floor. This process can stop naturally if the roof forms a natural dome called a bell chamber that is inherently stronger that the flat roof. Or as spoil is typically twice the volume of virgin chalk the void can fill with rubble and discourage further shedding of blocks from the roof.

You can see from the photo above that there is very little soil on the surface before the chalk is reached. Chalk is everywhere on the British Sector of the Western Front in France after leaving the clays of Belgium and chalk is an ideal tunnelling material. It can be dug into by any soldier

motivated to get himself safely underground. If the western front geology had been of a harder rock the whole outcome of the war would have been altered.

Features of this collapse you can see include a natural arch. This may have been made by the original tunnellers or the result of natural collapsing trying to form a bell chamber. It is a good sign of a viable roof for someone about to venture in. But above it you can see the chalk is fractured into lumps the size of tennis balls. This chalk is said to be in a friable state and has little structural integrity. The is caused by weathering but also artillery bombardment. As a rule the first two metres of so getting in to a system are the most dangerous. Once several feet in the roof often looks good but all the earth and loose spoil needs to be removed to check it is a viable roof and you are surrounded by good virgin chalk.

Once in you need to be continually on alert for unexploded ordnance as during battlefield clearance there was a temptation to throw viable shells and grenades into inclines, shell holes and bunkers. Grenades need to be picked up and placed carefully to one side. In addition there are hazards from caltrops and barbed wire. Caltrops are four fingered spikes used since Roman times as anti cavalry defence and used as anti personnel as well in WW1. The nearby surface is also checked as it is known there are three unexploded pieces of ordnance at Vimy Ridge in every square metre.

Another hazard is low oxygen. The natural level of oxygen in the air is 21%. At 16% to 18% it proves increasingly difficult to function and can be lethal from 14%. It is quite common for oxygen levels to be below safe limits although as a general rule subways, bunkers and souterraines tend to be OK, often mysteriously so with muttered talk of rabbit holes and other sources of ventilation. Other hazardous gases are methane from rotting wooden structures and, most deadly of all, Carbon Monoxide. Wartime gases are still a hazard with mustard gas lingering on surfaces even after 100 years.

But the biggest danger of all is the roof. When the chalk was formed earthquakes and tectonic forces put fault lines into the chalk and blocks can slab away from these lines with little warning. Bright white chalk suggesting a recent fall is a bad sign.

On assessing each collapse Nigel Cave gives it an historical perspective as to the likelihood of it going into something interesting. Safety of the public is also a big issue although many collapses are in areas not open to the public. Safety of Commonwealth War Graves personnel working on site is another consideration. Many collapses are covered up or fillrd in in various ways but all are recorded in a database and hazard marks placed on the surface if necessary to stop cwgc personnel walking, or driving a vehicle over them.

Perhaps the most famous subway at Vimy is the Grange that is open to the public, at least in normal times, and is visited by 700,000 visitors a year. It was opened as early as the 1920's but no graffiti is left that can be definitely said to be authentic WW1 And regrettably so much concrete has been added to make it safe it has lost much of its original ambiance.

We found the adjacent Goodman subway rich in graffiti in about 2005. This is not open to the public but for a feel of what a undisturbed subway is like go to www.durandgroup.org.uk, click on the videos tab and watch the Goodman videos

Idle time made available by the virus has unearthed the original newspaper articles when the Grange was rediscovered in the 1920's and opened to the public. I have reproduced these cuttings

here. The comments in red are from Lt Col Phillip Robinson, the co-founder of the Durand Group and, along with Nigel Cave, the historical consultant to Veterans Affairs Canada on the Vimy and Beaumont Hamel sites.

DAILY EXPRESS 18 October 1927

SERIAL 994

DISCOVERIES AT VIMY RIDGE.

ONLY INTACT PORTION OF BATTLEFIELDS.

MOVING SIGHT.

TO BE PRESERVED AS GREAT MEMORIAL.

CANADIAN engineers have discovered at Vimy Ridge the only portion left intact of all the battlefields on the Western Front.

It is the famous Grange Tunnel, 750 yards long, which was constructed in preparation for the great attack in April

ON THE ROAD TO VIMY RIDGE DURING THE WAR.

1917. Everything is as it was, from scribbled names to unused bombs.

The dug-outs are being permanently preserved, and the place will become the most remarkable relic of the war.

* There are of course others. Newfoundland site for one. Verdun, Vauquois and Hill 60 and other sites notably in French areas.

BACK TO APRIL 1917.

By H. V. MORTON.
"Daily Express" Special Correspondent.

VIMY RIDGE,
Monday, Oct. 17.

THOUSANDS of former soldiers are visiting the battlefields of France and Belgium in the hope of finding trenches, dug-outs, or the exact spot where they received their "blighties."

In the Ypres Salient they see nothing but flourishing fields of corn, flax, oats, and barley. There is not a trench left in Belgium except a few doubtful examples on Hill 62.

In France the scars of war are more visible, but a strenuous peasantry has filled the shell holes and has rebuilt its farms on the front line. It is amazing how swiftly the plough and the building contractor have wiped out all traces of war.

SNIPER'S POST.

I found to-day the only spot in France where a man can feel that he is back again in 1914-1918; where he can stand at a sniper's post and fit the rotted butt of a rusted rifle to his shoulder as he peeps out between the bushes towards the German trenches. The wire is still up in "No Man's Land," duck boards lie in the trenches, officers' beds, rotting and collapsed, still lie in the chalk dugouts.

Hundreds of names and many messages are written on the chalk in indelible pencil, as fresh as when they were written ten years ago. Mills bombs with the pins in them repose on ledges, cans of bully beef, tin hats—all the familiar debris of those sad days—are to be seen as they were left.

This amazing spot is the famous Grange Tunnel, on Vimy Ridge, which has just been opened up by the Canadian Battlefield Memorial Commission. It is to be preserved for the benefit of posterity as a kind of textbook on trench warfare, and is destined to become the most remarkable relic of the war.

LIVING MEMORIAL.

General Pershing visited it three days ago, and said that it was the only living war memorial in France. Every soldier who has seen it wonders why no one ever before thought of preserving a section of the front line.*

The project began a year ago as a side-line to the Canadian memorial on Vimy Ridge, which will not be completed until 1931. The stone for this stupendous shrine comes from the ancient Roman quarries round the Bay of Spalato in Dalmatia. While waiting for supplies of this stone to arrive, it occurred to the Canadian engineers that it might be interesting to try to locate the famous Grange Labyrinth—the miles of underground passages which the Canadians pushed out to within a few yards of the enemy's lines.

Map references were taken, and the entrance to the tunnel was discovered choked up with brushwood. The work of clearing the tunnel has taken a year, and it is not yet completed.

So interesting were the discoveries that the commission decided to rebuild the trenches, preserve the dugouts, and make the Grange Tunnel a permanent sight. The trenches have been lined with concrete sandbags. The concrete is poured in wet, so that when the sandbags rot the marks of the mesh will remain; the duck-boards have been cast in concrete, all wood has been taken out of the dugouts, and the passages have been reinforced with concrete and metal. The Grange Tunnel has at least a century of life before it.

I was shown around the tunnel by Captain Unwin Simpson, Royal Canadian Engineers, who is in charge of the work. On the way down is a notice: "These walls are sacred to the names of soldiers who inscribed them during their occupation in the war of 1914-1918. Please omit yours."

* Comment again. Newfoundland Memorial site actually dedicated in 1927.

No the Britsh tunnellers built them

A LABYRINTH.

We entered a dark tunnel and found ourselves in a labyrinth of passages, dug-outs and battalion headquarters cut far below the ground level in the white chalk of Vimy Ridge. It was as though we had been switched back to April 1917—that time when the Canadian divisions advanced to the conquest of Vimy Ridge. Nothing had changed.

The smoke from the candles once set in niches to light the passages was still black on the chalk. The dug-outs and the walls of the communicating passages were covered with names carved in the chalk or written in pencil and as legible as when they were inscribed during the great battle of Arras. The maple leaf of Canada was carved with an original variety in a hundred different places, and on the walls I read at random such inscriptions as these :—

10323. James Burton, A Company, the Royal Canadian Regiment, May 8, 1917. Still alive and kicking.

67008. W. J. Auchincloss, A Company, Royal Canadian Regiment, May 8, 1917. Untouched by whizzbangs as yet.

I cannot describe the feelings with which a man in these days approaches the inscriptions written below the earth of the Arras sector. In their cheery naiveté we who have survived and can look back on 1917 with the calm unconcern of historians, seem to touch hands once more with these Canadian boys who, ten years ago, crouched in these chalk dug-outs, still "alive and kicking," still "untouched by whizzbangs," joking, laughing, waiting, quite unconscious that they were carving not only their names, but also history.

HEADQUARTERS. **

We walked for about half a mile, going deeper into Grange subway, until we came to battalion headquarters. On the wall of a dark, damp chalk chamber, which had been used as an officers' mess during the Canadian advance on Vimy, were carved the following names:—

Major McCaghey, Major Collins, Lieutenant Abbott, Lieutenant Jamieson, Lieutenant H. Cook, May 10, 1917, 52 Battalion Canadian B. Company.

In a little carved shield were the words, "Dick Swift."

We stood there, lighting matches in the dark, wondering what had happened to these men, wondering whether they still live somewhere at home in Canada, or whether they fell on Vimy Ridge. No matter whether they are alive or dead, their personalities live

PAGE TWO, COL. TWO.

** Actually about 100 metres.

DISCOVERIES ON VIMY RIDGE.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE.

beneath the soil of France so vividly that one expects to meet them round the next corner.

While we were going on towards Mine Shaft, which the Canadians drove beneath the enemy lines,* my foot kicked a small object. It was a tin of bully beef! It had been opened, but it had not been eaten, and it was ten years old! I leave to the imagination of any man who knows what bully beef was like when comparatively young to judge how this specimen looked and smelt.

"See this?" said Captain Simpson, holding up a queer grey slab. It was gun cotton, stamped 1916.

"Down there, about 100 feet below our present level," he said, "we found a dump of Mills bombs and also sacks of T.N.T. We have removed them reverently."

In the amazing collection of names written on the walls I came across two which roused by curiosity. They were:

Ship No. 7,129, 1st Section, 7th Division, U.S.M.C., Texas Leather Neck Corps.

Ship No. 3,112, G.M., 2nd Class, 3rd Division, Flagship, U.S.S., Saratoga, Asiatic Fleet.

* No! Initially by the French 15/6 Companie Genie, then from April 1916 by 172 Tunnelling Company, RE.

PROBLEM OF THE RIDGE.

What on earth were these two American sailors doing with the Canadian armies on Vimy Ridge? How did they get there? Were they deserters from the American Navy who, becoming weary of America's indecision, had joined up with the Canadians? Or were they shipwrecked mariners who had gone to Vimy in search of life?

I prophesy that books will some day be written about Grange Tunnel and the names which it perpetuates. The Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission has carved, perhaps unwittingly, a greater memorial even than that expensive shrine which the Canadian Government is now building on the crest of Vimy Ridge.

Here in this dark tunnel, and here only, do we seem to meet the men who fought and died. Here only do we seem to see again in the long chalk passages those well-known faces; here only can we read their signatures—no doubt in many cases their last written words—written with the indelible pencils with which they wrote their letters home.

Canada has, with splendid and characteristic foresight, carved a shrine which is sacred not only to her army, but also to all the Allies. Here British, French, and Belgians will gather in years to come and say: "This is how our men lived during the great war." The Grange Tunnel is, and always will be, the greatest and most touching sight on the western front.

ENGINEERING FEAT.

During the early months of 1917 eleven large subways were constructed to aid the concentration of the Canadian troops for the attack on Vimy Ridge. The largest was the Grange Tunnel, built mainly by the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade.**

Grange Tunnel had three exits for the troops, and constant streams of men, wounded and unwounded, passed through it during the battle. Its minimum depth was twenty-five feet, it had electric light and a water supply, and there were numerous dugouts, dressing stations, and ammunition dumps.

** Actually 12 to 14 subways depending on how and when counted. Also many more to the south including Arras. The Grange at 1,228m was the third longest. Goodman/ Pylons was 1,722m and Tottenham 1,408m. This of course excludes the Arras subways, All constructed by Tunnelling Companies of the Royal Engineers.

THE U.S. SAILORS AT VIMY.

AMERICAN SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE.

MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

The mystery of the two American sailors whose names, as noted by Mr. H. V. Morton in his article on Vimy Ridge, are carved in the Canadian dug-outs in Grange Tunnel, is cleared up by Mr. Robert England, of the Canadian National Railways.

"The two sailors," writes Mr. England, "were American 'Legionaries' who, with a number of others, were drafted to the Royal Canadian Regiment after having crossed the international boundary into Canada in the early days of the war. These men were remarkable for their physique. They were of splendid bearing, and, while a little obstreperous, were fearless fighters. For the most part they had seen active service elsewhere, some in the American Army, some in the American Navy.

BASEBALL HABITS.

"Most of them were soldiers of fortune. Practically all of them played baseball, and while they took kindly to most British Army customs, they were difficult to teach bomb-throwing, as they insisted on throwing bombs as they would a baseball instead of overhand, as was the rule with the British Tommies. One of these men is now a professional baseball player in America."

The company which Mr. England took over the top on that historic April day in 1917 was made up almost entirely of these American soldiers of fortune. Perhaps the most daring of them was one Montana Pete, whose speciality was daylight solo raids. These he carried out armed only with a revolver and a long knife, which he carried in his belt. Both he used to good effect.

Although a little difficult to handle at the start, Mr. England states that these "Legionaries" made excellent soldiers once they had learned discipline, and on the occasion of Sir Robert Borden's visit to Bruay they formed an imposing guard of honour. Many later became N.C.O.s, and some officers.

And finally a letter from G Birtles captain in 172 Tunnelling Company

20 Oct 1927

To the Editor of the "Daily Express."

Sir,—It was with a thrill that I read in the "Daily Express" of the discovery and reopening of the Grange Tunnel on Vimy Ridge. It does not appear to be known to your correspondent that the whole idea was an English one, and that, from the cutting of the first piece of turf to the laying of the last baulk of timber in the tunnel and in the labyrinth of galleries under the enemy lines, every bit of the gigantic undertaking was carried out by English sappers—men of No. 1 Section, 172 - Company (Tunnellers), Royal Engineers, which I had the honour to command. This unit was composed entirely of miners recruited from various parts of the United Kingdom.

The news that the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission is to preserve this wonderful tunnel is most gratifying. Many men lost their lives in the project, which was the keystone of the successful Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge.

G. B. P. BIRTLES.

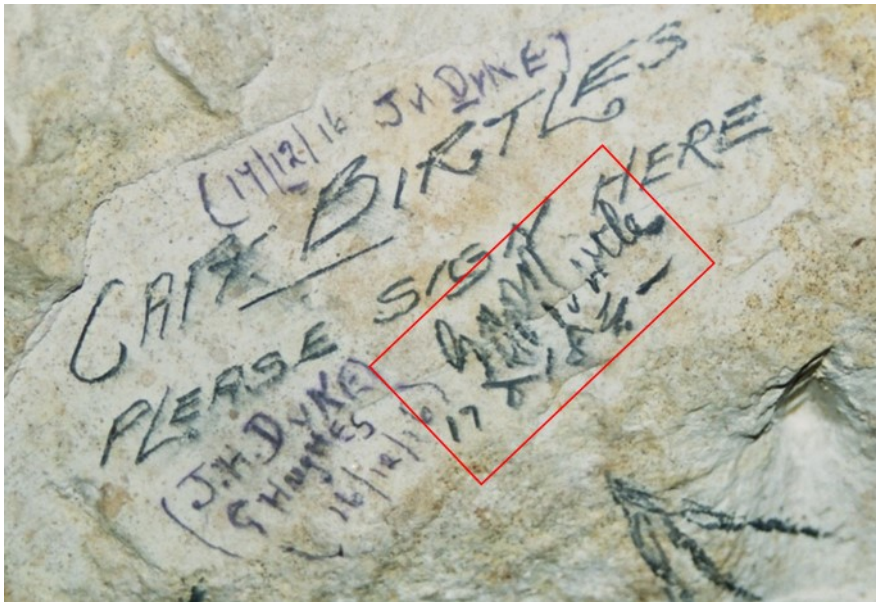
Surbiton Hill, Surrey.

Birtles had been a corporal in the Royal Engineers when he was commissioned in October 1915. He was a temporary captain 'whilst commanding a Section of a Tunnelling Coy' by the end of the March 1916.

In 2003 we recorded his graffiti in the O Sector fighting tunnel on Vimy Ridge

" CAPT BIRTLES"

Officers rarely wrote graffiti but he had rapid promotion from a corporal and perhaps still thought himself one of the lads. He has written PLEASE SIGN HERE Why is a mystery !



Via Ferratae of the Dolomites
A legacy of the Great War in the Alps

John McCarthy

As the editor is fond of pointing out *"John knows how to show a girl a good time!"*. In the photograph above my wife is gamely crossing a modern Suspension bridge spanning a chasm on the Kaiserjagersteig which winds its way up the western flank of the Little Lagazuoi, near Cortina d'Ampezzo, in the Italian Dolomites. It follows the trail used by Austrian soldiers to reach positions on the western flank and summit of the mountain over a hundred years ago.

Fixed artificial climbing protection, such as chains and ladders, has been a feature of continental mountaineering since the boom in Alpine tourism of the late Nineteenth century. Fixed routes were created in the northern Alps in the 1870s, the Pyrenees in the 1880s and the limestone massifs of the Dolomites from the turn of the century.

With Italy's entry into the Great War in May 1915 the Alps became yet another theatre of war. For three and a half years the armies of Austria-Hungary, Italy and their respective Allies maintained a fighting Front in high altitude mountain conditions, commonly above 2000m and frequently above 3000m, on a year round basis. As a consequence a sophisticated infrastructure was created to supply, move and shelter troops in both offence and defence. With the end of hostilities in 1918 the whole network became redundant and began to decay.

Under the Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye in 1919 the South Tyrol including much of the Dolomite range was awarded to Italy. In the process 1.2 million German speakers found themselves on the wrong side of the Austro-Italian border. From 1922 until 1973 the mountains became the scene of a persistent insurgency by local separatists against rule from Rome. As a result much of the area was effectively off limits to walkers and climbers. In those years much of the remaining infrastructure in the mountains, including refuges and shelters were destroyed by the Italian security forces in an effort to deny them to the insurgents.

Since the mid nineteen-seventies the bones of that Great War infrastructure have been co-opted, developed and expanded into a network of protected walking routes comprising fixed cables, ladders and even suspension bridges by the Italian Alpine Club (CAI). In addition there is a network of mountain huts facilitating spectacular traverses of otherwise inaccessible terrain. Suitably equipped mountain walkers can enjoy these routes in relative safety.

Many of the routes put up by the CAI respect routes pioneered in the First World War, passing through tunnels and emplacements dating from that time. Some are accessible as part of a moderately strenuous mountain walk, such as the 2,300m plateau of Monte Piana, the decapitated summit Col di Lana and the route of the 52 galleries to the summit of Monte Pasubio. Others such as the 3,343m Marmolada, with a city of ice emerging from beneath its melting glacier, is a serious alpine ascent requiring ropes, ice axes and crampons. And there is every shade of difficulty in between.

I have detailed below a selection of via ferratae with particular historic resonance.

Via Delle Trincee – La Mesola

What could be more First World War than a route called 'Way of the Trenches'? The route traverses a sharp, two Kilometre long, ridge of volcanic rock between two summits, La Mesola (2,727m) held by the Austrians at the western end and Padon (2,512m) occupied by the Italians in the east. About half the ridge was in Austrian hands and the rest held by the Italians. As you climb along the ridge from west to east a number of emplacements and trenches are passed. The final part of the route passes through some Italian built tunnels. The start of the route is the most physically demanding with a steep haul up a thirty metre high slab to the ridge crest. It is a good example of how every piece of strategic ground was contested regardless of difficulty.

Via Ferrata Bepi Zac – Cresta Costabella

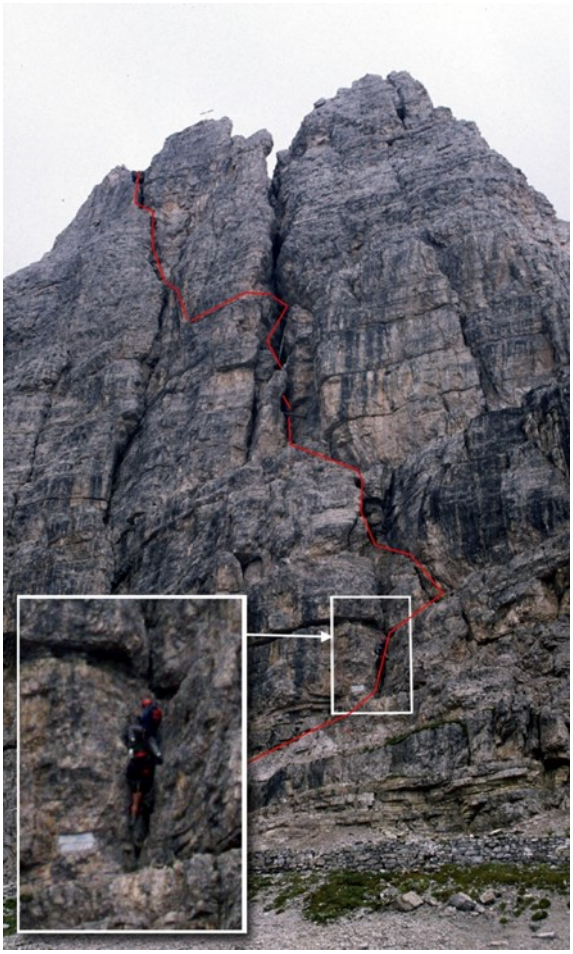
The Austrian emplacements along the Costabella ridge which commands the San Pellegrino pass are reached by VF Bepi Zac. The fortifications were developed to deny the Italians access to the strategically important Val di Fassa. The ridge is reached by an impressive reconstruction of an original wooden ladder. Once on the ridge the route passes an observation post and several bunkers all hewn from the native rock. I remember looking out of one bunker directly down onto the scars of Italian Trenches several hundred metres below.

Left: A group gaining the ridge crest on Via delle Trincee (The Way of the Trenches)(2003).
Right: Reconstructed wooden ladder on Via Ferrata Bepi Zac on the Costabella ridge (2003).

Via Ferrata Delle Scallette – Torre di Toblin

The Toblin Gap is a narrow saddle linking the northern and southern halves of the eastern most mountain group of the Dolomites, the Sexten Dolomites. In 1915 the Austrians occupied the range to the north of the gap and the Italians the peaks to the south. As the only bridge between the two front lines the Toblin Gap was the main focus of military activity by both sides in this sector.

The Torre Toblino, or Toblinger Knoten, is an isolated summit some two hundred metres above the northern side of the Toblin pass. It was used by the Austrians as an observation post between 1915 and 1917. Initially it could only be reached in the hours of darkness by a steep path in full view of the enemy. By way of a solution to this problem of enemy observation, a set of ladders was erected in a cleft in the near vertical north face, out of sight of the Italians. VF Delle Scallette was erected up this line in the Seventies. When the group I was with climbed it sixteen years ago a few remnants of the original wooden ladders were still in place.



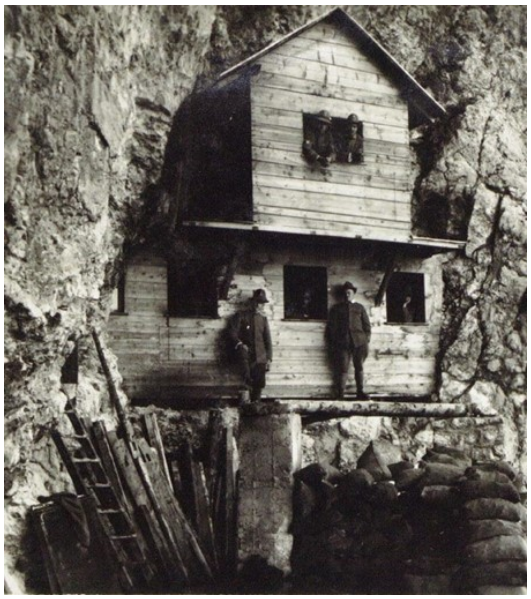
Left: The north-face of Torre Toblino showing the route of VF delle Scalette (in red). The inset picture shows two ferrataists on the route giving an idea of scale (2004).
Right: Ascending VF delle Scalette passing the remains of an original ladder (2004).

The Kaiserjager Path and the Lagazuoi Tunnels

The Falzarego pass was the scene of particularly intense military activity between May 1915 and October 1917. If the pass had been forced the Italians would have been able to cut the main railway supply route into the Austrian South Tyrol via the Pustertal. A museum dedicated to the fighting in the area is housed in the old Tre Sass Fort above the pass. It is at the centre of a vast open air museum and a network of paths and via ferratae.

A classic route in this area takes you to the summit of the Little Lagazuoi (2,778m). The route up is by way of the Kaiserjager (Austrian Mountain troops) path, a difficult mountain trail with stretches of fixed wire for protection. The way down is through a network of some 2km of tunnels built by the Italians inside the fore-summit or anticima of the mountain. The approach to the tunnels crosses the rim of the crater made by the last of a dozen mine explosions which radically altered the face of the mountain. An excursion at the bottom of the tunnels takes you out onto the narrow Martini ledge where the Italians constructed a series of shelters to maintain themselves on the side of the mountain all year round.

The Little Lagazuoi - Approaching the shattered remains of the Anticima (2014).



The Little Lagazuoi - Martini Ledge
Right: Original photograph 1915-17.
Left: Reconstructed buildings (2014).

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LEST WE FORGET Kelvin Dakin

Captain Edwin Gerald Venning, 1st Battalion, Suffolk Regiment

Edwin Gerald Venning was born in Southsea, on 7th June 1883 – he was the son of the Reverend Edwin James Venning and Amy Venning.

He was educated at St Edmunds School in Canterbury and afterwards took up acting. From about 1911 he travelled in the provinces with touring companies playing important parts and when war broke out in August 1914 he was acting at Brighton. He at once volunteered and enlisted in the Royal Sussex Regiment in September [as Private No 3764]. He was Gazetted as a Lieutenant in the 3rd Battalion Suffolk Regiment on the 1st January 1915. He arrived in France on the 4th May 1915 to join the 1st Battalion at Ypres just before the Battle of Frezenberg Ridge. The War Diary for the 9th May 1915 mentions that Lt Venning was one of the officers meeting a draft of men newly arrived from Felixstowe that day. On May 10th he is briefly 2nd in command of the Battalion and on the 15th in command of "B" Company.

The battalion took part in two attacks on the 24th/25th May at Witte Poort Farm with Lt Venning leading his company. In a letter to his sister, reproduced in *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (author Laurence Housman) Edwin describes these two attacks:

"I remember a certain two days during which we attacked incessantly in the open, and I had to lead two bayonet charges. You can't really gather what that means, and I can scarcely tell you. There was an open field between ourselves and the Germans and I had to get my men to the edge of

it (having lost Lord knows how many from shell fire) and we started a fire fight with rifles and machine guns at about 5 yards. After some time of this I saw the right move and gave my orders accordingly; it was my first charge, my first real big fight. We tried to spring across that field, but the fire was one solid block of lead. Literally I could see no chance for a fly in it…"

After trying to rally his men the battalion was ordered to fall back and taking cover in a ditch he continues:

"...I was too sick and tired to move, and just lay among the wounded, smoking innumerable cigarettes; in two or three hours came the order for another attack in a different place, that was worse. We attacked at dawn; the poor old C.O. was killed among many others. At the end of it I came near to blowing my own head off with my revolver, but a wounded Northumberland officer saved me, and I carried him off the field in a coat."

He was Gazetted as Captain on the 8th June 1915.

On June 12th, the battalion had taken over trenches near St Eloi and in July they moved again to Ridge Wood.

From the Battalion War Diary:

August 5th [1915]
The battalion moved to the trenches at 7-15pm and relief carried out successfully about 11-30 pm. Battalion Head Qrs were at T Farm. Battalion reserve at NEWPORT dugouts.
August 6th
Night 5th & 6th in trenches quiet. At about 7 am Capt E G Venning left No15 trench to observe from a point just in rear and was shot through the neck and killed at about 7-15 am. The whole battalion mourned the loss of a good officer. The body was conveyed to LOCRE and buried about 11 pm in the village churchyard.

Sgt Major Utting, writing to his sister, said **"*Your brother, Capt Venning, was my company officer, and he has treated myself, and the men of my company, in such a manner that he has gained a respect that will last as long as there is a man of the present B Coy alive*"**

He is commemorated on the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane Memorial as "G Venning" and on the St Edmunds School, Canterbury, Memorial. He also has an entry in De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour.

Captain Venning's headstone in Loker Churchyard (II B 18)

THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD ….

Talks at the Norwich Branch

Postponed for the Duration !!

Our next month's talks

Postponed for the Duration !!

Please send any contributions for the ***Branch Briefing*** to:
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Next Committee meeting: tba
Approach a committee member if you want any issue raised.