

News story: Defence Minister praises First World War heroes at reburial service

Ahead of the centenary of the First World War, Defence Minister Tobias Ellwood attended the burial of an unknown British soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers, alongside current serving members of the Fusiliers. The service was organised by MOD's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC, part of Defence Business Services) and held at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) Tyne Cot Cemetery, near Ypres, Belgium. Two unknown Australian soldiers who were found alongside their British comrade were also commemorated.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Tobias Ellwood said:

We owe these soldiers a debt of gratitude for their sacrifice and it is fitting that we can at last give them a deserved military burial here in Belgium.

As we approach the 100th Anniversary of Armistice Day, it is a poignant and timely reminder of the bravery of our Armed Forces. Throughout our country's history, they have given everything to keep us safe, and continue to do so today at home and abroad.

Tracey Bowers, JCCC said:

It is right and fitting that this Fusilier is finally laid to rest alongside his Australian comrades and they have been given a dignified burial. Although over 100 years since they paid the ultimate sacrifice we will always remember them.

The three soldiers were laid to rest by bearer parties formed from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (for the British Fusilier) and the Australian Army, which included a firing party from the UK and Australia. A band from the Australian Armed Forces performed along with military buglers from both countries.

The Reverend Stuart Richards CF, Chaplain to the 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers and Reverend Peter Friend, Chaplain (Group Captain) Royal Australian Air Force jointly conducted a moving service.

The remains of the three soldiers were uncovered during civil engineering works in May 2016, found lying side by side within what is believed to be a World War One shell hole along the Vifwegesstraat, a road leading to the Tyne Cot Cemetery. Artefacts found at the grave site included fragments from a

winter coat, shoulder titles of the Lancashire Fusiliers, service buttons, British boots, a leather belt with four cap badges attached, a smoker's pipe and a pencil with inscription from Eagley Cricket Club near Bolton, Lancashire.

Despite extensive research undertaken the JCCC has been unable to confirm the identity of the British soldier due to the Regiment losing 200 men with only a small percentage with known graves. However, JCCC's research indicated that the Lancashire Fusiliers were in the location as they engaged in the Third Battle of Ypres – the Battle of Passchendaele, which took place between July and November 1917.

The battle lasted a total of 105 days and the capturing of the village of Passchendaele (now spelt Passendale) came at a terrible cost as it is estimated that there were over 500,000 casualties, 42,000 of which were never recovered. JCCC will continue to make enquiries about the case in the hope that an identification may still be made in the future and his grave rededicated to bear his name.