

Sunday 4th October 2015, remembering Captain Clement Robertson, VC, and Gunner Cyril Allen, DCM

On Sunday 4th October 2015 a small group met at the Merlijn Restaurant to commemorate the exploits of Captain Clement Robertson and Gunner Cyril Allen. The day was arranged and organised by Chris and Milena Lock of The Tank Memorial Ypres Salient.

Ninety-eight years after the bravery shown by Clement and Cyril we followed in their footsteps. A super lunch was, as usual, provided at the Merlijn Restaurant. After some lively chat across the table we went outside to the Memorial Plaque. Ian Robertson, great-nephew of Clement, spoke a few words to remember his great-uncle and his brave comrade, Cyril Allen, then laid a cross with the Tank Corps badge in the centre amongst the flowers below the plaque. The collection of wreathes laid at the end of April remained in position looking remarkably good. Everyone paid their respects to Clement and Cyril before moving to the terrace at the rear of the restaurant.

Paul Foster gave a short talk on the other Victoria Crosses that were won close to where Clement was awarded his, or on the route taken by him ninety-eight years before. The Victoria Crosses remembered were Captain Harold Ackroyd, Private Paddy Bugden, Sergeant Henry Nicholas and Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Evans who won the VC for his action to the left of Clement on 4th October 1917. We also remember Brigadier General Charles FitzClarence (awarded the VC in the South African Wars) who had died close to 'Black Watch Corner' in November 1914 and where the tanks rumbled by three years later.

In the glorious sunshine Chris then led us on a tour of the battlefield beyond the crest of the hill. Ninety-eight years ago Clement lay dead on the battlefield but Cyril and the tanks continued to follow the plans that Clement had laid down. We went in the tank tracks to see how and where they achieved their objectives. Walking across the battlefield gave us all a wonderful feel of what then men in the tanks would have seen, but of course, not the conditions or experience the menace of bullet and shell.

The records give a fascinating story that Chris put together and described it beautifully. The round trip to the various points returned us to the Merlijn where we had a coffee before moving to Oxford Road Cemetery. We visited Clement's grave and commemorated both him and Cyril.

A ceremony was then held at the Tank Memorial in Poelkapelle where Chris once again gave a short address.

At the 8.00pm daily ceremony at the Menin Gate Paul read the story of Clement. Ian read the exhortation before leading the wreath layers following the silence. At the end of the ceremony Benoit Motttrie, Chairman of the Last Post Association, took Ian to meet the buglers.

With all the commemorations at an end the group went for a drink at the Kazematten. We raised a glass to Clement and Cyril.

It had been a most enjoyable and interesting day, enjoyed by all.



... lunch at the Merlijn



... overlooking the battlefield and from where Clement led the tanks, Paul gives a short talk



... Ian lays a cross at the Memorial



... Chris leads us on the tour and we are accompanied by Foxl and Axel!





... back at the Merlijn with the Memorial Table to commemorate Clement and Cyril



... at Clement's grave in Oxford Road



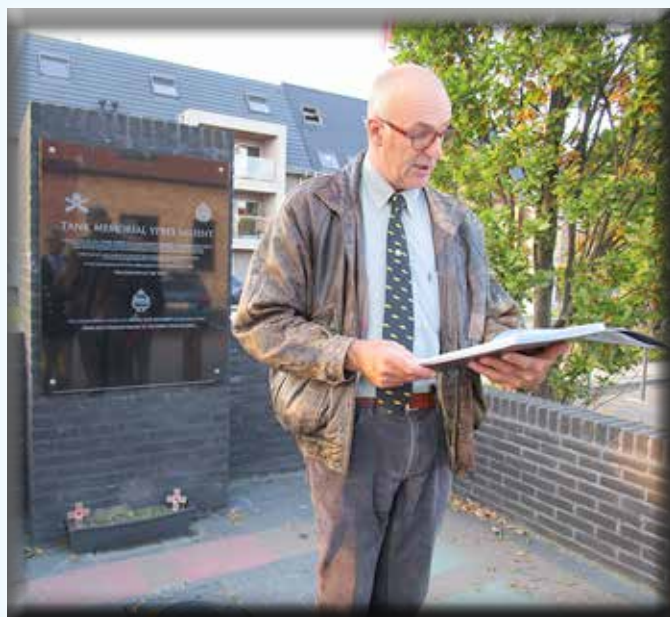
... Ian at Clement's grave



... Milena, Ian and Chris



... Ian and Paul 'sign off'



... the ceremony at the Tank Memorial



... at the Menin Gate





The cameo read by Paul at the Menin Gate

Tonight we remember Captain Clement Robertson, VC, who died on 4th October 1917 whilst serving with the Tank Corps and was the first from the Corps to be awarded the Victoria Cross. Clement was educated at Haileybury College then went up to Trinity College, Dublin, to study engineering.

Clement was working in Egypt at the beginning of the war and he returned to England to volunteer. He served with the Royal Fusiliers before being commissioned to The Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment. He transferred to the Tank Corps in January 1917. From 30th September to 4th October Clement worked without a break under heavy fire preparing a route for his tanks to go into action against Reutel. Clement finished late on the night of 3rd October and at once led his tanks up to the starting point for the attack. Clement brought them safely up by 3.00am and at 6.00am led them into action. The ground was very bad and heavily broken by shellfire and the road demolished for 500 yards, from here he led them on foot. Clement was killed, his Commanding Officer wrote: *"It is impossible for me to attempt to express to you what a splendid example he has set us all. I feel his loss very deeply myself, as he was such a splendid officer, and so popular with us all, officers and men alike."*

The citation for the Victoria Cross reads: *"For most conspicuous bravery in leading his Tanks in attack under heavy shell, machine-gun and rifle fire. Captain Robertson, knowing the risk of the tanks missing the way, continued to lead them on foot, guiding them carefully and patiently towards their objective although he must have known that his action would almost inevitably cost him his life. This gallant officer was killed after his objective had been reached, but his skilful leading had already ensured successful action. His utter disregard of danger and devotion to duty afford an example of outstanding valour."*

Today you can visit Clement's grave in Oxford Road Cemetery. Private Cyril Allen who accompanied Clement was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, but was killed on 20th November 1917 and is commemorated on Cambrai Memorial.