In the footsteps of a VC and a DCM

The Friends of the Tank Memorial Ypres (TYMS) organised two wonderful days on Wednesday 29th and Thursday 30th April when a commemorative plaque was unveiled at the Restaurant Merlijn to Captain Clement Robertson, VC and Gunner Cyril Allen, DCM. Everyone gathered together at 11.00am on Wednesday 29th at the Tank Memorial on Guynemerplein, Poelkapelle, where the moving Annual Ceremony was held. Milena Kolarikova-Lock was the Master of Ceremonies who gave fascinating and interesting introduction to proceedings. The private ceremony attracted a large number of attendees and it was the most perfect commemoration for the officers and men from the Tank Corps who gave their lives on The Salient during World War One. The Honorary President, Lieutenant General David Leakey, CMG, CBE, (better known to many of us as Black Rod in the Palace of Westminster) gave an excellent address, followed by the Last Post, Laurence Binyon's famous words, a blessing by Father Terry Llewellyn, then wreathes were laid by many (including the British Embassy, the British Legion, Belgian authorities and army) that concluded with the two families of Clement Robertson and Cyril Allen wreathes. With the ceremonies complete we were invited to enjoy an excellent, and most generous, reception in the Town Hall in Langemarck.



Milena expertly opens the ceremony









(Left to right) General David Leakey; The Last Post is sounded; Terry Whittles, National Vice Chairman of The Royal British Legion gives the oration; and Father Lewellyn gives the blessing





The standard bearers



Clockwise from the top: Wreaths are laid by the Belgian Army veterans; the Senior Officer of the Belgian Army in West Flanders; The British Embassy; Roger Steward, Chairman of the Ypres Royal British Legion; John Sutherland; Milena Kolarikova-Lock, the Robertson family (wearing the VC) and John Allen (wearing the DCM).



The families and the invited guests gather for a group photograph at the conclusion of the ceremony





Above: The Tank Memorial

Below: Peter Amory, John Allen, Ian Robertson and Shaun Caveney



In the early afternoon we assembled at the Restaurant Merlijn, Reutel. It was the object of the mission undertaken by Clement Robertson and his tanks. From Sunday 30th September to Thursday 4th October 1917 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. He brought them safely up by 3.00am on 4th October and at 6.00am led them into action. The ground was very bad, heavily broken by shell fire and the road was completely demolished for five hundred 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."* Private Cyril Allen who accompanied Clement and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. He was killed on Tuesday 20th November 1917 and is commemorated on Cambrai Memorial. Cyril had written a letter to Clement's parents but it had not been posted. The Robertson and Allen families met at the ceremonies in Poelkapelle to unveil the Tank Memorial and the contents of the letters were shared for the first time in over ninety years.



Ian gives his moving address on behalf off both families

Ian Robertson, great-nephew of Clement, gave a moving address that told the tale of Clement and his comrade Cyril Allen and how by their bravery they did such good work and were rewarded for their bravery. Chaplain, Father Brian Llewellyn of The St George's Memorial Church, blessed the Memorial before General David Leakey unveiled it. A number of wreathes were laid by Her Excellency Alison Rose, British Ambassador to Belgium; General David Leakey; Terry Whittles, the National Vice Chairman of The Royal British Legion and by the families led by Ian Robertson and John Allen (both great nephews of the brave men). With the beautiful memorial unveiled we moved to the garden of the restaurant where a flagpole had been placed at the object of the attack. Ian Robertson and John Allen jointly raised the flag of the Tank Regiment that too will remain as a beacon to all those who visit the area.



… listening to Ian's address



The Blessing of the Memorial by Father Llewellyn













Clockwise from top left: Terry Whittles gave the oration; David Leakey unveiled the Memorial; Alison Rose (British Ambassador) leads the wreath layers. Left: John Allen and above the Robertson family lay their wreathes



After the ceremony — the families with Alison Rose and David Leakey





The flag raising ceremony

The ceremonies at Poelkapelle and Reutel were poignant and deeply moving. To be there with the families of the men, together with their original medals, was an experience of a life time. The restaurant then provided the most excellent buffet reception when we had the opportunity to over indulge and enjoy the company of the many family and friends attending the ceremonies.

The excellent day was capped by the 8.00pm ceremony at the Menin Gate where, thankfully, I was 'on duty' to read the story of 16 year old Private William Allen who had died 100 years ago to that day whilst serving with the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment and is commemorated on Panel 35 of the Menin Gate. It was a particularly moving ceremony with David Leakey leading the wreath layers, Chris Lock as Standard Bearer in the centre of the Menin Gate and Ian Robertson with Cryil Allen representing their illustrious forebears.



Chris Lock leads the walk along the road Clement Robertson led the tanks

The day would have been complete as it was, however, it was to continue the next day. We met at *'Joist Farm'*, Oude Kortijkstraat, just along to the road from the Black Watch Memorial at Polygon Wood, and opposite the Memorial to Sergeant Henry James Nicholas, VC. Here we met Chris Lock, Founder of the TMYS, and Honorary Chairman of The Friends of The TMYS, an expert guide who gave us the most wonderful on the spot running commentary walk covering the ground that Clement Robertson and Cyril Allen had trod in 1917. The road was there in 1917, but submerged by mud but if the tanks kept to the tape and followed the road it was good enough for them to trundle over. The tanks came from the area near *'Stirling Castle'* on the Menin Road and began their attack from *'Joist Farm'*. In Clement and Cyril's footsteps we walked along the road and to the spot where Clement was killed and Cyril badly wounded. Here, on the ground, the actual place, where the Victoria Cross was awarded to Clement the Distinguish Conduct Medal to Cyril. Ian took out the Victoria Cross that was presented to Clement's family that he proudly owns. As we looked about us we were reminded of the two other Victoria Crosses awarded within yards of where we stood, Sergeant Henry Nicholas and Brigadier Lewis Pugh Evans VC, CB, CMG, DSO & Bar, DL (then a Lieutenant Colonel) in two different actions.



Ian Robertson holding the VC on the spot where it believed that Clement died



We completed the walk along the road back to the Restaurant Merlijn and after some refreshment left for Oxford Road Cemetery. Clement was killed in the action and is buried in the cemetery, but Cyril survived only to be killed in action at The Battle of Cambrai on Tuesday 20th November 1917 and is commemorated on Cambrai Memorial, Louveral. In the most brilliant sunshine a moving ceremony was held at Clement's grave and for the first time since the award of the Victoria Cross it was laid on his grave thus reuniting the recipient with his medal, in addition, Cyril's DCM was laid on the grave too. This unique ceremony was so moving, not only to the families of the men but to all of us lucky enough to witness the event. It was an event that should, in my opinion, have been shared by so many more if it had only been possible.

Without Chris and Milena Lock, Ian Robertson, John Allen, David Leakey and many others, none of this would have been possible. I cannot thank them so much for inviting me to the event, two of the most moving days of my life.







The ceremony at Clement Robertson's grave in Oxford Road Cemetery



Clement Robertson



Clement was born in Maritzburg, Natal, on Friday 15th November 1889 fourth son of Major John Albert Robertson (late Royal Artillery), and Mrs Frances Octavia Caroline Robertson (née Wynne), of Struan Hill, Delgany, County Wicklow. He was educated at Haileybury College and went up to Trinity College, Dublin where he graduated with an engineering degree. Clement went to work in Egypt. He enjoyed playing golf and was founder member of the Delgany Golf Club, County Wicklow. Clement returned to England at the outbreak of war and joined the University and Public School Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. He transferred to the Tank Corps in January 1917. A memorial was erected in the parish church in Delgany, County Wicklow, with the inscription: *"In memory of Captain Clement Robertson, V.C., Tank Corps, killed in action 4th October 1917. Faithful unto death."* He is also commemorated at Delgany Golf Club.

Clement's citation for the Victoria Cross, London Gazette, Friday 14th December 1917: *"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."

200195 Private Cyril Sheldon Allen, DCM

'A' Battalion Tank Corps

Died on Tuesday 20th November 1917

Commemorated on Panel 13, Cambrai Memorial.



Cyril's citation for the Distinguished Conduct Medal:

"For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. On the night of October 1, 1917, he volunteered to accompany the commander of another section to assist in taping a route from Observatory Ridge to Polygon Wood. He was blown up by a shell, but, despite his shaken condition, he still carried on. On the night of October 3, 1917, he again volunteered for this duty and assisted in taping a route from Polygon Wood to Black Watch Corner. A heavy enemy barrage was encountered, but he continued to assist in laying the tape, running from shell-hole to shell-hole with his officer. On October 4, 1917, he remained with the section commander and accompanied, on foot, the tanks into action. His officer was killed while leading the tanks in front of the infantry. In spite of the enemy being within a few yards of him, this man collected all maps and papers from the body of his officer and took them back to his company commander."





