

Their Names Liveth for Evermore

By Michelle Cooper

On a windy afternoon in November 2006, my husband, a friend and I sailed to Calais to embark on our second weekend of research for the Dover War Memorial Project. On the first occasion we had visited cemeteries and memorials in Flanders and the Somme, including the unforgettable memorials at Arras, Thiepval and the Menin Gate. This time we were heading south to Rouen as we had a personal mission to complete as well as the task of finding and photographing the last resting places of Dovorians whose names had been supplied by Maggie Stephenson Knight.

We set out the next morning to begin our quest. First we visited the British Cemetery at Namps-Au-Val to locate the grave of Corporal G F Street of the 2nd/4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment. This small cemetery was set in farmland on the outskirts of the village of the same name. Designed by Reginald Blomfield, it has a classical entrance gate of brick and stone. At the start of the German offensive in Picardy in March 1918, three casualty clearing stations came to the village. Most of the burials were carried out at this time but nine graves were brought in at the end of the war from Conty French Military Cemetery. There are also sixteen French graves and one from the Second

World War. With information obtained from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's website (www.cwgc.org.uk), it was easy to find Corporal Street's grave. This time we had brought small cards which outlined the project and gave its contact details. The cards are part of the Dover War Memorial Project's 'Dover Remembers' scheme, and show that someone had visited the grave and the person's bravery and sacrifice had not been forgotten in his native town. We left one here, and on the other graves we visited, in the hope that relatives or anyone with further information on the casualties would make contact.

We drove to Rouen to the St Sever Cemetery and Extension, which contains the graves of casualties from several nations. The war graves are at the far end of this large city cemetery. Whilst there was little combat in this area during the First World War, Commonwealth camps and hospitals were set up in the outskirts of the city, together with a base supply depot and the 3rd Echelon of General Headquarters. Most of the 16 hospitals and convalescent depots remained in Rouen for the whole of the war. The great majority of those who died in these hospitals were buried in the St Sever Cemetery and it was soon

necessary to begin the extension. The Cemetery contains 8,346 Commonwealth burials of that war. Only ten of these are unidentified as the hospital would have held records of the servicemen being treated. The area served a similar purpose in the Second World War and there were a further 328 burials in the extension. Alongside those of Commonwealth soldiers there are graves of Red Cross workers, French and Polish soldiers, Indian and Chinese labourers and two areas containing the graves of French and Belgian North African Colonial troops buried according to Muslim tradition. These graves are marked by tall metal memorials bearing either a sword or a pillar featuring the star and crescent moon of Islam.

Here, together with those of six



Grave of Private Horace Stokes

Dovorians, we located the grave of Lance Corporal William Cooper of the 9th Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment. This man from Longton, Stoke on Trent, who died on 20th May 1918, was my husband's great uncle. We had only found out about him recently, following research work undertaken for the Dover War Memorial Project. My husband had checked the details recorded in his father's family Bible and found them to match. He had never been told about his great uncle and to his knowledge we were the first members of the family to visit the grave. We laid a spray of poppies on it and spent a few moments in quiet contemplation in the wintry sunshine.

Looking at the row upon row of identical slabs of Portland stone in places such as this, it is difficult to appreciate fully the numbers of servicemen laid to rest within the sanctity of its walls. It is much easier to relate to the smaller cemeteries like Namps-Au-Val, perhaps because such large scale loss of life is too much for us to comprehend. Finding individual graves and reading the inscriptions, especially those at the foot of the grave chosen by the family, makes the whole experience so much more personal and gives it a sense of purpose, rather than being just a passive observer. One such grave we found was that of Private Horace Stokes. The inscription at the bottom reads:

*Also in memory of his brother
9535 Private C. Stokes
East Yorkshire Regiment
3rd February 1915. Age 25*

He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Menin Gate. We found his name on our visit there in May. It is difficult to imagine the grief of that family, losing two sons in such a short period. Sadly this is a familiar story; Dover's War Memorial commemorates several sets of family members.

The following day we visited the Ste. Marie Communal Cemetery in Le Havre. Le Havre was one of the ports at which the British Expeditionary Force disembarked in August 1914. It was No. 1 Base and the site for five hospitals and four convalescence depots. Hospital ships and other naval vessels filled the harbour. The cemetery has 1689 First World War Commonwealth burials in

five separate divisions. We had graves to find in three of them. These neat grassed pockets were in sharp contrast to the civilian graves and memorials surrounding them, each forming a small oasis amongst the large dark stone tombs and monuments to French families, some long forgotten and falling into a state of disrepair. Surprisingly, plot 62 was arranged in a different way from the other cemeteries we had visited and we had to abandon our search by grave number and check every headstone. We located two graves but Engine Room Artificer George W P Richards of *HMS P26* still eluded us. Eventually we found his name on the memorial to those soldiers, nurses and merchant seamen lost when the hospital

ship *Salta* and her patrol boat and the hospital ship *Galeka* were mined, and the transport ship *Normandy* was torpedoed. Also in Division 62 there is an area where three rows of graves record the month of death as January or February 1919. We came to the conclusion that these casualties died as a result of an epidemic in the hospitals or ships, probably Spanish influenza that claimed so many lives after the war.

The stories of some of the servicemen whose graves we found can be found on the Dover War Memorial Project web-site (www.doverwarmemorialproject.org.uk). We feel very privileged to undertake these visits and play our part in recording the histories of Dovorians who fell in the two World Wars.



Nampes-Au-Val Cemetery