

## Pilgrimage of Sorrow and Smiles

The Royal British Legion's pilgrimage to Israel proved to be a moving experience for those whose loved ones and old comrades lie buried in cemeteries in The Holy Land,

Piers Storie-Pugh, reported.

From Jerusalem to Bethlehem, to the Dead Sea, Mesada and onto Tiberius and the Sea of Galilee, the journey to honour loved ones was made by our small group of 16 pilgrims.

It was a packed programme which also took in other places of interest under the excellent care of our guide Gila - landscapes and great places from the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Crusades, World War I and World War II and the Mandate period.

The first few nights were spent in the Holy City of Jerusalem, with its many wonderful sites. Nearby on Mount Scopus lies Jerusalem War Cemetery which holds 2,178 burials, mainly men from the 53 (Welch), 60 (London) and 74 (Yeomanry) Divisions. The graves were beautifully tended by Odbe Shager and his team of Israeli gardeners. There is a solitary Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Services grave, which was photographed by our pilgrimage nurse.

We were in Jerusalem on 9 December, seventy seven years to the day that the Mayor of Jerusalem surrendered the city, initially to a couple of British Cook Sergeants, and finally to General Sir Edmund Allenby. He entered the city via the Jaffa Gate and unlike Kaiser Wilhelm, who demanded pomp and show, Allenby showed due Christian humility by dismounting from his horse.

The operations under Allenby's command in the Middle East in 1917 were described by the historian Liddell Hart as 'one of history's masterpieces'. At the battle of Har Megiddo near Nazareth (from where the word Armageddon originates), Turkish forces were defeated and the Ottoman Empire collapsed. It is also the site of the oldest recorded battle, that between the Egyptians and the Canaanites.

En route to Ramleh Cemetery, we stopped at Latrun Doar, once a British police station of the Mandate period and now the Armoured Corps Museum and Saul Amphitheatre. This impressive feature, 700 ft above sea level, has an equally impressive array of armoured vehicles: from the battle chariots of the kings



of Judah, a reconstruction of Leonardo da Vinci's tank - designed 500 years ago - to the Selencid war elephant and the Merkava, and also Hotchkiss and Centurion tanks associated with Israel's war of independence. I was pleased to see a Saladin armoured car – the type I had commanded in The Royal Yeomanry! It was the 8th Armoured Division that liberated Ramleh and Lod, the latter where St George is believed to be buried.



Ramleh cemetery holds 3,295 graves from World War I and 1,172 from World War II. There are also the graves relating to the Mandate time and the period of the Arab revolt, when 300 people were killed in Palestine. The cemetery was established in 1917 by the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Light Horse when various casualty clearing stations were located there.

The visit to Ramleh was poignant. Most of the group had never visited the cemetery before. Mrs Babs Penfold's husband Cpl Charles Penfold served with 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Battalion, Royal Ulster Rifles, and was killed in 1945. For nearly 50 years she had put off visiting his



grave: 'I was just too scared to go but my daughter and son-in-law persuaded me and today this is the most important day of my life. I feel so happy and so sad at the same time,' she said.

'I am not an emotional man' added Cpl Penfold's brother George, 'but seeing Charlie's grave after all this time completely threw me'. As the family gathered round the grave, George played If I Had My Way on the mouth organ which had been given to him by his Charles all those years ago.

Only two graves separated Cpl Penfold and Gunner Harold Yates of 71 Field Regt Royal Artillery. His widow Doris was making her third visit; Harold had been killed by a sniper on All Saints Day 1945. 'Harold was an orphan and we met at the Picture Palace,' recalled Doris with great pride and love. 'I was 15 and it was love at first sight. We were engaged when I was 16 and married in St John's Church, Sheffield in July 1945. Sadly we had only 10 days together. We had planned so much, including a honeymoon at Whitley Bay, but there was no time. I haven't been there and never shall.' On the day after the brown envelope containing the terrible news was



delivered to her, a letter from Harold was delivered. 'It all seemed so unfair' she recalled. Doris is a strong Yorkshire lady but the pain of Harold's loss was evident. At his grave she said her very final farewell.



Doris was accompanied by her friend Renee Barton who was visiting the grave of her fiancé Sgt Kenneth Welch of the Duke of Wellington's Regt. Around her neck she wore the St Christopher medallion Kenneth had given her. 'We had planned a white wedding for June 1945,' she said quietly, with the memories so clearly dancing through her head. 'I had so wanted to visit his grave and I couldn't at first believe that I was here. Ken was Ken, nobody could replace him. My love was so strong when I was by his grave. I never felt love so deep. We met at a local dance and I was so proud when my mother said that he was such a presentable young man.'

She paused as she recalled their last meeting. I was a GPO telephonist and I last saw him early May, at 11:30 p.m. outside the gates, because I was doing nights. We said goodbye there. We kissed at the gate and then I listened to his footsteps in the dark until they faded away. The office has long closed but the gates are still there and every time I walk past my heart races.' Sgt Welch, who died in March 1945, had saved the life of his good friend Donald Isles and it was an article on this story in a Yorkshire paper which brought Renee Barton and Ken Welch's sister Patricia Winter together after nearly 50 years.



Down in the Sussex market town of Horsham, Christmas was going to be extra special for Jeanette Hollingdale for she had just made the journey of her life to her father's grave. 'It was the first visit by anyone from the family and it had been my mother's very deepest regret that she never had the opportunity.' So acute was Jeanette's longing to visit that even on her own wedding day in 1958 she had wanted to send her bouquet to her father's grave. 'Now I understand why my mother felt after his death that every year was like 20 years,' she said as she and her husband Norman looked out across the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

'I have achieved my greatest wish' said Jeanette ' My father used to write to my mother about Bethlehem, Galilee and Tiberius and now I am following in his footsteps, seeing things that he



saw. In his effects were some camels carved from olive wood. At Christmas, as every year since his death, they will be by the crib with Jesus. This year, they will mean so much to me; oh goodness, now that I've seen Dad's grave and to think he bought and touched them.'

The only veteran in the group, Colonel Kenneth Timbrell CBE MC had had a life enough for two, seeing service in Palestine in 1940, Iraq in 1941, protected the boy king Hussein, he joined Montgomery's staff for the battle of Medinine (1943) and witnessed the Axis surrender in Tunisia in that May. Later he served with the Arab Legion, Trans Jordan Frontier and Sudan Defence Forces and various Special Forces. He spoke Hebrew and had a natural affinity with both Jew and Arab. He had been the friend and advisor to the rich, the very rich, the famous and the very famous; but he was also the friend of the soldier, tough but compassionate. He won a Military Cross in Normandy in 1944 which was presented to him personally by Montgomery.



Ken Timbrell visited Palestine in 1942. 'I tried to enter the King David Hotel but owing to security, was rejected. I was in good company because General Montgomery, before he became so famous, had also just been refused entry. I am delighted that our pilgrimage includes tea in the King David,' he mused as we assembled in our hotel.

He had joined the pilgrimage to honour the memory of two Royal Dragoon colleagues buried at Ramleh, one of whom was a particularly good friend. He recalled how when they were both corporals they had 'scarpered' from a restaurant without paying the bill. 'I've felt guilty ever since and would like to repay that debt,' he confessed.



Israel with its unique history offers so much to the visitor – the Old City of Jerusalem: we felt we were walking on the footsteps of Christ as we made our way along the Via Dolorosa before heading outside the walls to the Mount of Olives and Garden of Gethsemane. These experiences were somehow so intertwined with our own pilgrimage. We paid respects at the Wailing Wall before we headed south to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth. Having enjoyed our dip, we took the cable car to Masada where the Jews held out against the Romans. On the drive north we passed Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947.

We crossed the Jordan River at Bethabara where, according to tradition, Jesus was baptised, then north to Beth-Barah, scene of the Gideon Force's victory and on to Belvoir, the Crusader fortress which fell to Sal-ah-Din in 1189. As the River Jordan emerges from the Sea of Galilee, Mount Tabor, the scene of Christ's transfiguration, was on our left and the Golan Heights to our right.

The pilgrimage ended with a Service of Remembrance at Ramleh. A bugler from the Israeli Army played the Last Post, the Standard was dipped and the Exhortation recited. Veterans from AJEX, the Royal British Legion Branch (Israel), the Defence Attaché and the Embassy chaplain, were there to support the occasion. In Tel Aviv the Defence Attaché hosted a reception attended by many people, including the Ambassador. It provided Ian Cannell of The RBL National Council the opportunity to thank our hosts, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, their representatives and the RBL Israel branch.

On the final morning, in brilliant sunshine, most of the group wandered on the beach at Tel Aviv or visited Jaffa.

Six years before, Louisa Bradbury had visited the First World War grave of her husband Jack, on her 90<sup>st</sup> birthday. "Jack had one more leave before he left for Palestine and the last afternoon we had our photographs taken with our daughter Mary. Jack wrote whenever he could and sometimes I'd get a printed card simply saying 'I am well'. It was 1918 and six weeks before the Armistice was signed, when his letters stopped. I shall never forget the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. I was leaving the shop at the end of the day, it was dark and I was cycling home, when I came to the town centre where crowds were cheering, shouting and singing.

Two days later the fateful telegram arrived, Jack had died in Palestine. But I still had his child. The following day was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, but instead of the usual gifts, I had a black coat and gloves. Later I received two more letters from Jack written in a very shaky hand. He knew the war was over and said 'thank God I shall soon be home with you', but it was not to be. Little did I know that I would not visit his grave for 70 years. I had put off ever visiting Jack's grave because Mary was so ill and subsequently died.

One morning words from Danny Boy came into my head,

"You'll come and find the place where I am lying,

And kneel and say an Ave there for me.  
And I shall hear, though soft you tread above me,  
And all my grave will warmer, sweeter be"



Louisa was one of only three Great War widows who managed to travel under the MoD's War Widows Scheme that I ran for the Government from 1985 to 2010.

Israel is a remarkable land, the people equally so. They are a proud and confident people but always very much on their guard. Theirs is a chequered history with so much hardship, yet it yielded the Christian faith, built on love. Our pilgrimage also was a story of love.

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