

## Menin Gate

*"Who will remember, passing through this Gate,  
The unheroic dead who fed the guns?"*

Siegfried Sassoon

The memorial at Menin Gate in Belgium was the British tribute to the 350,000 dead of its armies, who had perished in the great battles fought at Ypres between 1914 and 1918. Ypres is the French name for the Belgian town also known by its Flemish name of Ieper, and Ypres was the name used by the allied forces in World War I. Nearly 13,000 Australian troops gave their lives in the battlefields around Ieper, and almost half of these have no known grave. The names of these missing men are enshrined on the walls of Menin Gate, along with the other missing soldiers from the Dominions, from Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa, as well as England, Ireland and Scotland. They are listed unit by unit, the individual names carved on stone panels that cover the walls of the great arches nearly 15 metres high, stretching up two side stairwells to loggias on either side of the great monument. The total number of the British forces who went missing in the surrounding area was over 56,000, including the more than 6,000 men from the 5 divisions of the First Australian Imperial Force, an entirely volunteer army. All 60 infantry battalions of the 1st AIF fought at Ieper, and all these units lost men there. Of the 330,000 Australians who fought in the 1914-18 War nearly 60,000 were killed and 174,000 wounded. In 1918 the population of Australia was 5 million. At the Australian War Memorial in Canberra there is an index to the Australian names on Menin Gate, arranged by locality, which shows that virtually every war memorial in Australia's rural districts, country towns and city suburbs, has the names of men who died in the battles in Belgium, and who are also recorded on Menin Gate.

Although completely devastated in World War I, the town of Ieper, in neutral Belgium, was never taken. The region around Ieper was known as the Ypres Salient, which projected into German lines. The mud in the low-lying Flanders countryside was often waist-deep, and the nearby Passchendaele marshes have been described as the most desolate and terrible of all battlefields. The fields of Flanders were originally below sea level, and the water table is so high that when heavy shelling destroyed the drainage dykes the area was reduced to a bog. Conditions were at their worst in 1917 when there was an abnormally heavy rainfall, the fighting intensified and gas was used again, poisoning not only men but the earth, air and water.

The gateway to Menin was the chosen site for the memorial as it was the way through which all the allied armies marched from the old walled city, along Menin Road and out into the battlefields of Ypres. Two stone lions that dated from medieval times, had been situated either side of the gate. During the war they were stored in the great Cloth Hall, (Lakenhalle, ca. 1300), and symbolized Ieper's former prosperity. After being recovered from the ruins of the Lakenhalle, the lions were presented to the Australian War Memorial by the Burgomaster of Ieper, in gratitude for the part which Australian soldiers had played in the defence of that town.

The Australian artist Will Longstaff was at the unveiling of the memorial in 1927, and later, back in his London studio he was inspired to paint the celebrated 'Menin Gate at Midnight'. It was said that he painted while under the deep psychic influence of the horrendous death-toll at Ypres. The long years of war had left huge numbers of bereaved relatives and friends, many of whom sought solace in spiritualism, which remained a significant influence throughout the 1920s. The painting, 'Menin Gate at Midnight', seemed to make the dead more tangible to them. It was purchased by Lord Woolavington in 1928 for 2,000 guineas, and immediately presented to the Australian government. After being displayed at Buckingham Palace, then taken to Manchester and Glasgow, it was sent to Australia and shown in several of the major cities, including a three-week long exhibition at the Melbourne Town Hall in February 1929, which was seen by thousands. It now hangs in a room on its own in the Australian War Memorial. Reproductions of this painting were made and thousands of copies were sold throughout the country during the 1930s despite these being the years of the depression.

After the war the Ieper Police Chief suggested that the Last Post should be sounded at Menin Gate on every night at eight o'clock throughout the year. Since then there has only been one break in the tradition, between May 1940 and September 1944, when German armies occupied the town.

Longstaff's painting was in our home, and has been part of my life for as long as I remember. Menin Gate, the great monument to the dead, remains overwhelming in its ageless poignancy.

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