THE LAST POST

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THE LAST POST

30,000

DAILY TRIBUTES
TO THE FALLEN
OF THE GREAT WAR

TEXT
IAN CONNERTY

PHOTOGRAPHY
PHILIP VANOUTRIVE

LANNOO


LAST POST ASSOCIATION
YPER

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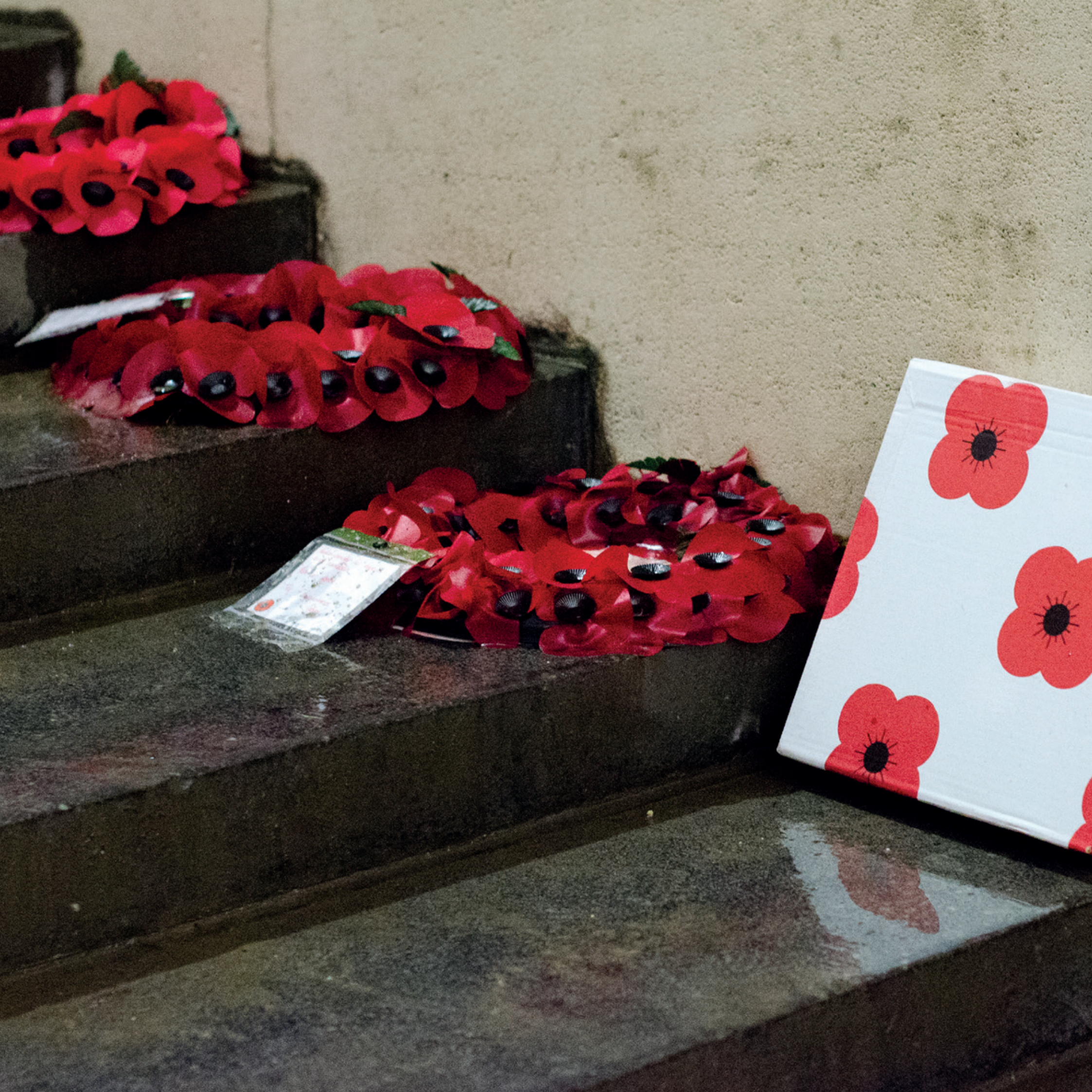

FOREWORD

During this centenary year of the outbreak of the First World War, we are reminded of the death, suffering and sacrifice which took place on an extraordinary scale across the fields of Europe and beyond. The number of casualties and level of destruction in the Great War far outstripped any other international conflict up to that point. The sacrifice our forebears made 100 years ago was one they made for us, and is one which we must always remember.

This commemorative book from the Last Post Association helps us do exactly that. In 1928, Ypres Police Superintendent Pierre Vandenbraambussche and his friends resolved to play the Last Post every day in perpetuity. They did this as a lasting debt of gratitude to the men who fought and fell for the restoration of peace and the independence of Belgium during the Great War of 1914–1918. Today, as a result of the unstinting and tireless dedication of the Last Post Association, the daily ceremony under the Menin Gate Memorial has taken on a broader and deeper significance, remembering all of those who have fought and fallen in combat.

This moving location was chosen because of its powerful symbolic significance: it was from this spot that hundreds of thousands of British and Commonwealth soldiers set off for the front. Many of them never returned. Those who participate in the Last Post Ceremony today are there because of the human stories that have drawn them to Flanders and Belgium; perhaps to trace long-lost relatives, perhaps to accompany veterans of other conflicts who have managed to return after many years, or perhaps just to pay their own personal tribute to those who went before them.

I can testify from my own experience to the emotional power of simply standing under the Menin Gate and listening to the Last Post. The reverent tranquillity of the ceremony provides the space to reflect on the stories of those who fought and laid down their life for their country and friends, or to consider what life was like for those left behind at home. The photographs and testimonies in this book capture beautifully the moments of reflection and visible emotion of those visitors listening to the Last Post. And, while many dignitaries have participated over the long history of the Last Post Ceremony, it is clear that it brings together people from all backgrounds and walks of life. Together all of us can listen to the Reveille, which has come to signal hope for all our futures.

The centenary of the First World War is also about providing the foundations upon which we can build an enduring cultural and educational legacy. We must ensure that the sacrifice and service of 100 years ago are still remembered in 100 years' time. The increasing number of young people who participate in the daily Last Post Ceremony is testimony to their commitment to seek to understand what happened in the past and translate it into what this means for them today.

This book includes stories and pictures of those moments over the years where young people have been front and centre at the Last Post Ceremonies. One such special ceremony was that of November 2013 when British and Belgian schoolchildren, in the presence of HRH Prince Laurent and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, marked the passage of soil from Flanders to the Flanders Fields Memorial Garden at the Guards Museum in London.

Our duty in commemorating the centenary of the First World War is clear: to honour those who served, to remember those who died and to ensure that the lessons learnt live with us forever. I am deeply and personally grateful for everything that the Last Post Association and its dedicated buglers do to achieve just that.

David Cameron

Prime minister of the United Kingdom

A CEREMONY OF HOPE

It is tempting to settle for the broad brush strokes of history. It is easy from the safe distance of our comfortable 21st-century lives to allow the past to become a distant stranger and to forget the individual sacrifices made in our name.

This book, however, is the story of an extraordinary group of men who have worked tirelessly and selflessly, with the support of their families, to ensure that we 'remember them'.

The Last Post has been played at the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres, or Ieper, since 1928. Each night the Last Post Association buglers are there in uniformed solemnity to support our homage to, and reflection upon, the almost 55,000 men whose names are inscribed on the Menin Gate.

Although the visits of monarchs, heads of state and officials are recorded here in these pages, the real power is in the poignancy of the everyday pilgrim in search of that family name.

Often I have heard these people from the UK, Australia, Canada and the far-flung reaches of the Commonwealth say simply and tearfully of the ceremony, 'It was the highlight of my life.'

How can it not be? Within this book, there is a sense of the reverential cloak of remembrance that wraps itself around all who gather at the 'Gate'. Whether pilgrim or tourist, the Last Post Ceremony asks of all who attend, 'What does their sacrifice mean to me?'

It is hard now to believe the images of the 1960s and '70s, with the buglers outnumbering the visitors. That crowds now regularly exceed a thousand says much of us, what we value and the loyal dedication of the Last Post Association and its team of buglers. That 114 notes can move and mean so much to so many of a new generation inspires a new confidence.

I have had the privilege to stand under the Menin Gate for the Last Post on many occasions, ranging from a sub-zero New Year's Eve with a handful of others, to the thousands flocking to the 11 November ceremonies. I find myself always looking up to the names – young men whose lives are silent witnesses to the future they have given us. Each one reminds us of what was lost. But as the Last Post plays, in that loss is a reminder of the most fragile yet powerful of human emotions – hope. I always leave the ceremony recommitted to the belief in a better future and to the idea that there are some truths by which we live that are worth working to defend.

A century after the cataclysm that gave us the Menin Gate Memorial and then the Last Post Ceremony, within this book lies another gift these men gave us in their bloody sacrifice. They have brought us together nightly – from many nations, including former foes. What we need most is one another and a common understanding. To the Last Post Association which has made this possible, we thank and pay a special tribute to you.

Dr Brendan Nelson

Director of the Australian War Memorial
Australian Ambassador to Belgium, NATO and the EU 2010-2012

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM

On 1 July 1928 the haunting notes of the Last Post were sounded under the Menin Gate Memorial for the very first time. This was the opening ceremony in what was destined to become a long and proud tradition of daily commemoration, a tradition that will reach the historic landmark of 30,000 performances on 9 July 2015.

Right from its earliest beginnings, the purpose of the ceremony was made clear by the organising committee: it was intended to express the gratitude of the Belgian people to the 250,000 soldiers of the British Commonwealth who died in defence of the Ypres Salient during the Great War.

86 years and almost 30,000 ceremonies later, the Last Post Association still holds the ceremony with this same objective in mind. It is a solemn yet moving tribute to the soldiers who died for our democratic freedoms and the restoration of peace.

Now that the last representatives of that golden generation are no longer with us, it is the task of associations such as ours to keep their memory alive and to pass on the lessons of what they experienced to the younger generation, cognisant of the fact that 'those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it'.

For this reason, we feel it is appropriate to mark the 30,000th ceremony and the 86th year of our volunteer organisation with a book that outlines the history of the Last Post Ceremony in words and images. From its modest origins, our ceremony has grown to achieve worldwide fame. The progress of this remarkable journey is charted in a rich selection of photographs and explanatory text.

We also highlight the lives and deaths of 20 of the 54,628 soldiers whose names are engraved forever on the walls of Sir Reginald Blomfield's fine memorial. They stand as representatives for all who fell in Flanders' fields and their stories explain why so many hundreds, often thousands, of people still congregate each evening at the Menin Gate to hear the bugles blow. Without their sacrifice, without their courage and devotion to duty, the world today would be a much worse place for us all to live in. This we must never forget.

Benoit Mottrie

Chairman, Last Post Association

R. L.
A.

E SERJEANT
LLS C. E.
ER G. B.

SGT. E. E. JONES.

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THE ORIGINS OF THE LAST POST CEREMONY

The living owe it to those
who can no longer speak
to tell their story for them.

CZESLAW MILOSZ

Between 1914 and 1918 almost 200,000 soldiers of the British Commonwealth fell in defence of the Belgian city of Ieper, or Ypres. More than double that number were wounded. This was bloodletting on a scale never before witnessed in recent times and led Winston Churchill, who was then Secretary of State for War, to declare in January 1919: 'A more sacred place for the British race does not exist in all the world.' To give concrete expression to these sentiments, Churchill even suggested that the city should be left in ruins, as a permanent memorial to the heroism and sacrifice of the armies of Great Britain, its colonies and its dominions.

However, the city was equally 'sacred' to another group of people, albeit a much smaller one. These were the pre-war inhabitants of Ypres and for them the city was home. Most of them had spent the war years as refugees in Great Britain, France or Switzerland – but now they wanted to return to what they believed was rightfully theirs. Surely the war had been fought to defend their homes and their rights as free people? Were these things now to be taken away from them by the British?

Photo: The Menin Gate in 1919, with the ruins of Ypres in the background.

The Belgian government was in something of a quandary. The rights of the Belgian people and the territorial integrity of the Belgian nation were non-negotiable. Yet at the same time, the government was mindful of its ally's efforts during the war and was anxious to express its gratitude in some other appropriate form.

It was against this background – and after much discussion – that Whitehall and Brussels eventually agreed that Ypres should be returned to its inhabitants and rebuilt, but that the city should also become the site for a major British monument. And so the idea of the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing was born.

Photo: The Menin Gate under construction.

Photo: The Hôtel Britannique, circa 1935. It was here that the idea of the Last Post Ceremony was first discussed.

Rebuilding

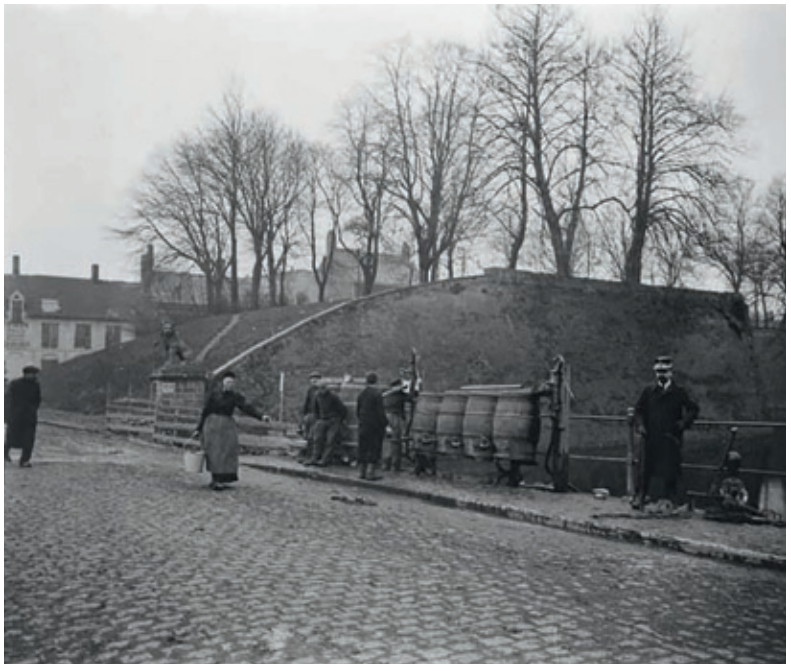
As the 1920s progressed, the citizens of Ypres gradually returned to their shattered city. At first, they were housed in temporary wooden structures, known locally as 'barracks', but the work of rebuilding more permanent accommodation soon began.

Priority was given to housing and commercial premises, since this was the fastest way to re-establish 'normal' life in the city and such buildings were the quickest and easiest to construct. The great historic buildings, such as the Cloth Hall and St Martin's Cathedral, required much more time and effort to be restored to their former glory. (Both were reconstructed to their original designs; the cathedral was largely completed by 1933, but the finishing touches were only applied to the Cloth Hall as late as 1966.) This meant that the largest and most immediately impressive construction project in the city during the 1920s was the building of the new British memorial at the Menin Gate.

The Menin Gate was the obvious place to build the memorial. This was the opening in the city ramparts through which many hundreds of thousands of British and Commonwealth soldiers had marched on their way to the front, many of them never to return. The foundations were laid in 1923 and construction started in 1925. Just two years later, the memorial – bearing the names of almost 55,000 soldiers of the British Commonwealth who were killed in the Ypres Salient before 16 August 1917 and have no known grave – was ready for inauguration.

The progress of the building work was a subject of obvious interest in a city that was still very much dominated by the aftermath of the war. Many of Ypres' leading citizens came together regularly for 'aperitif hour' in the Hôtel Britannique on the Market Square. Here they discussed matters such as the payment of damage compensation to local people, the increasing flow of British pilgrims and the wider commemoration of the war dead, as expressed by the construction of a growing number of cemeteries and monuments around the city. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the Menin Gate was also a frequent topic of conversation at the Britannique.

Photo: Crowds throng the Frenchlaan during the inauguration and dedication of the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing on 24 July 1927.



Inauguration of the Menin Gate Memorial

These conversations intensified as the date of the memorial's inauguration – 24 July 1927 – drew nearer. The inauguration itself was an impressive spectacle by any standards. It was attended by no fewer than 15,000 pilgrims, led by King Albert I of Belgium, who had commanded his nation's army during the war. The memorial was unveiled on behalf of the British people by Field Marshal Lord Plumer, the architect of the British victory at the Battle of Messines in 1917 and commander of the British Second Army during the Third Battle of Ypres. In a moving speech, Field Marshal Plumer summed up the feelings of all those present, particularly those whose lost loved ones had no known grave, when he commented: 'He is not missing – he is here.'

But the climax of the emotional ceremony was undoubtedly the playing of the Last Post by the buglers of the 2nd Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, followed by a heart-rending one minute's silence, which was finally broken by the strains of the Reveille. This was the part of the ceremony that most people seemed to remember afterwards, and it certainly made an indelible impression on the local commissioner of police, who was attending in his official capacity. His name was Pierre Vandenbraambussche.

Photo: Commissioner of Police Pierre Vandenbraambussche inspects the public pumps at the Menin Gate on 22 April 1915, just hours before the first German gas attack.

Commissioner Pierre Vandenbraambussche

Vandenbraambussche was one of the 'regulars' at the Hôtel Britannique, where the city's leading citizens had pondered the question expressed by the local newspaper: 'How can we show our high regard and respect for the fallen, our gratitude to the great and noble British race?' There was a growing feeling that the city must do something, but what exactly? Vandenbraambussche thought he had the answer: why not hold a daily ceremony of remembrance built around the playing of the Last Post, which had made such a dramatic impression at the Menin Gate inauguration?

There is no reliable record of the proper sequence of events, but there is little doubt that it was Pierre Vandenbraambussche who took the initiative to gather around him a group of like-minded friends from the Britannique circle to explore his 'Last Post' idea further. This group included Remi Boucquet, Aimé Gruwez (chairman of the local Ypriana brass band), Richard Leclercq (director of the local telephone and telegraph service), Hector Vermeulen (a local brewer and a key figure in the local chamber of commerce), Florimond Van de Voorde (a future burgomaster), Arthur Butaye (a lawyer), Armand Donck (another brewer), Henry Sobry (the burgomaster) and William Perrott (a British Army captain who had remained in Ypres after the Armistice). These were all influential men in the rapidly developing town and were more than capable of providing the necessary financial, logistical and political support to allow the new ceremony to take place. There was just one last problem that needed to be solved: where to find the buglers.

The buglers

Although the reconstruction of Ypres was making good progress and the city's commercial and business activities were starting to pick up, by 1927 the population had only risen to around 10,000, in comparison with a pre-war figure of some 25,000. Perhaps as a result, local social and cultural life had not yet returned to the flourishing levels of 1914. It soon became apparent that there were only two realistic possibilities for finding musicians who might be both willing and able to play the Last Post under the Menin Gate: the first was the Ypriana Band, whose chairman was Aimé Gruwez; the second was the local fire brigade, under the leadership of its commandant, Maurice Vergracht. The choice was quickly made. Ypriana did not at this stage have 'real' buglers among its ranks, only trumpeters,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PRIVATE
WILLIAM VANGHELUWE (SERVED AS G. VEMEL)

16th Company, Canadian Machine Gun Corps

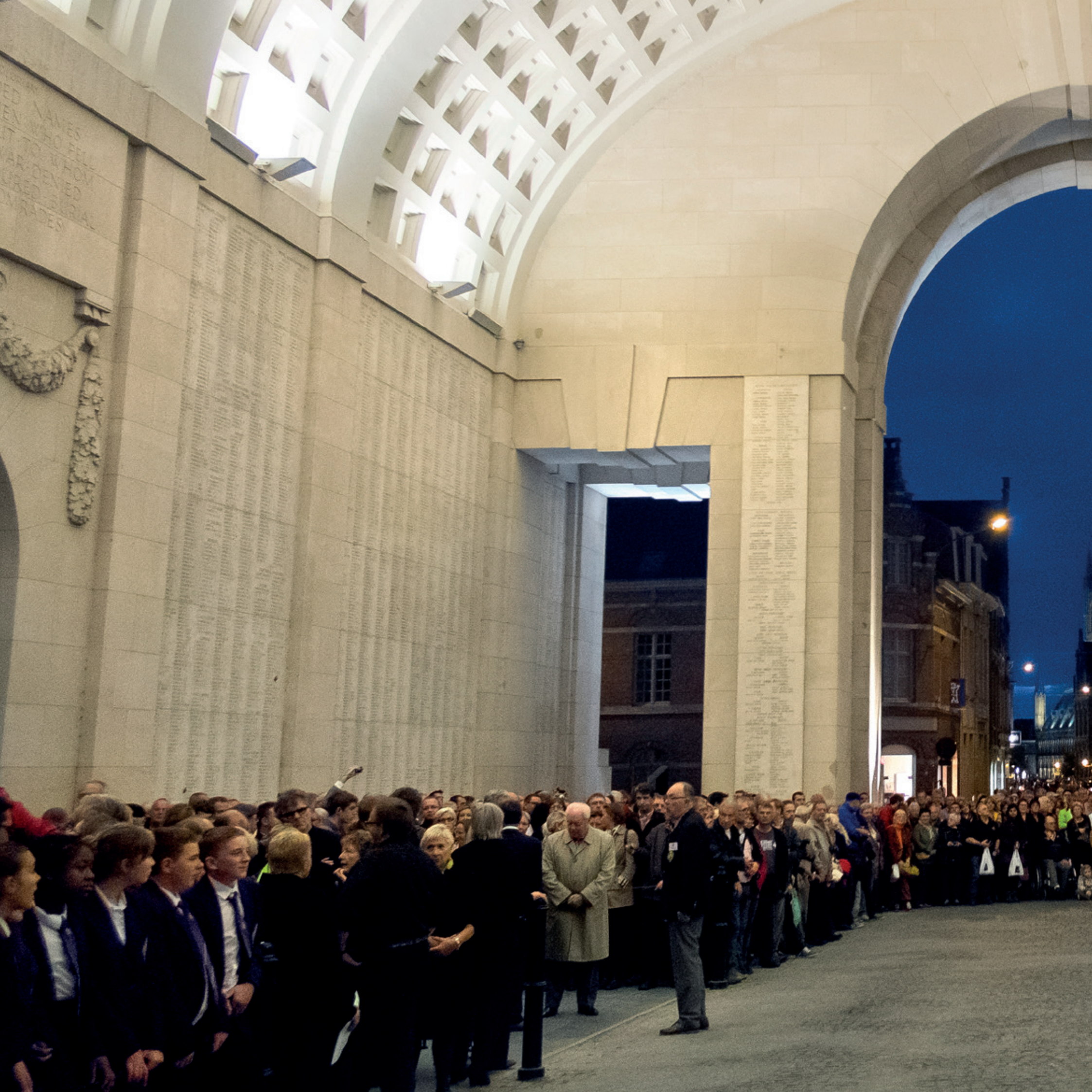
Panel 32

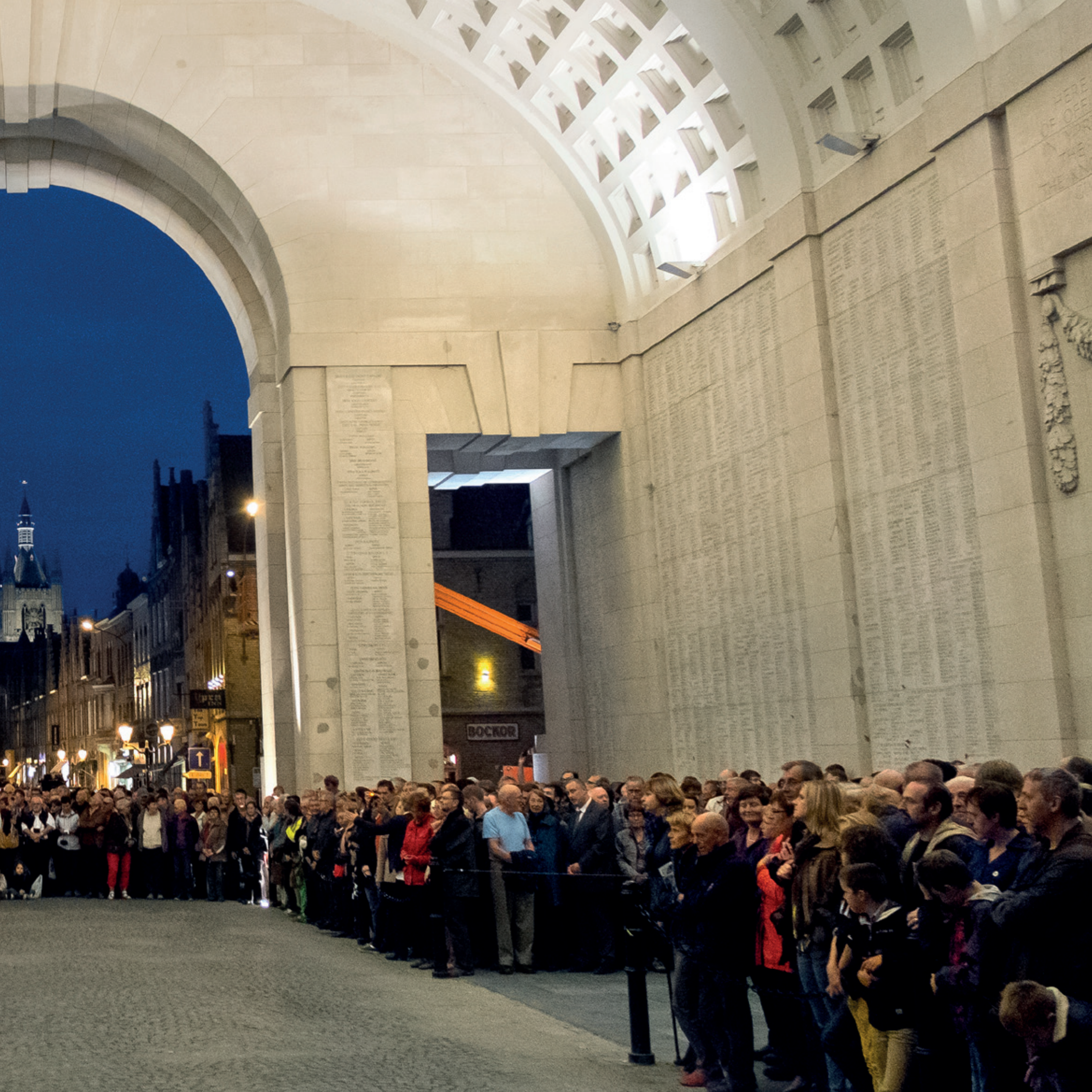
William Vangheluwe was born in 1888, the son of Belgian parents, Bruno and Marie Vangheluwe of Roeselare. Like many young men of his generation William left to find a better life in the New World. We do not know where he settled – his surviving enlistment papers make this unclear – but when the Old World he had left found itself at war he was quick to volunteer to return. He enlisted in the Canadian Army and by 1917 he was serving in the 16th Company of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps.

As chance would have it, his unit was engaged in the offensive known as the Third Battle of Ypres, a battle that had among its objectives his home town: the strategically important railway junction at Roeselare. Unfortunately, neither William nor many thousands of other Canadians ever made it to Roeselare. In fact, for all their courage they didn't even get close, stranding in the desolate wastelands around Passchendaele, where William was killed.

The precise details of his death are not recorded, but one of his comrades in the 16th Company, Private Reg Le Brun, left a description of the appalling conditions in which men fought (as detailed in They Called It Passchendaele *by Lyn MacDonald): 'They pushed the machine guns right out in front. There was nothing between us and the Germans across the swamp. Three times during the night they shelled us heavily, and we had to keep on spraying bullets into the darkness to keep them from advancing. By morning, of our team of six, only my buddy Tombes and I were left. Then came the burst that got Tombes. It got him right in the head. His blood and brains, pieces of skull and hair, spattered all over the front of my great coat and gas mask. I stood there trying to wipe the bits off. It was a terrible feeling to be the only one left…'*

Photo: The Menin Gate dominates the new skyline of Ypres, while work on the cathedral (bottom left) and the Cloth Hall (centre) is still far from complete.

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