



BELGIUM

**EXHIBITION
"PASSCHENDAELE 1917-2007
THE BELGIANS HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN"**

OFFICIAL OPENING

**REMARKS
BY**

**HIS EXCELLENCY MR. J-M VERANNEMAN DE WATERVLIE
AMBASSADOR OF H.M. THE KING OF THE BELGIANS**

MONDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 2007

Embassy of Belgium
17 Grosvenor Crescent, London SW1X 7EE
Tel. +44 (0)207 470.3700 - Fax +44(0)207 470 3795
E-mail: london@diplobel.be Website <http://www.diplomatie.be/london>
Diplomat in charge : P. Grégoire (+44.(0) 788 978 7554)

Your Royal Highness,

*It is an honor to welcome you at the Belgian Embassy.
Your presence reminds us of the warm relations between our two
countries and Royal Families.*

*These excellent relations have been again highlighted last July
when HM Queen Elisabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh visited
Belgium and, together with Their Majesties King Albert the
Second and Queen Paola commemorated the Battle of
Passchendaele in Ypres and at Tyne Cot.*

Your Royal Highness,

On the 31st of July 1917, one of the most important battles of the Great War was launched in Belgium, out of the Ypres Salient, by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig's army. Its aim was first to take the German submarine bases of Ostend and Zeebrugge on the Flemish coast and than to roll up the German front and advance through Belgium towards the German border. Added to it was the idea of relieving pressure on the French army, in the throes of mutiny after the disastrous Nivelles offensive.

However, the combination of a strong German defense system and torrential rain, which together with the enormous artillery barrages transformed the whole area into a gigantic muddy swamp, in which many men and animals were to sink and drown, caused the attack to bog down almost immediately.

Instead of reaching the objectives within three weeks, only a line passing through the small village of Passchendaele, literally within walking distance of the departure lines, was captured after three months.

Ironically, the Germans retook Passchendaele and the surrounding ground in their great offensive of 1918 and after this attack petered out it was the Belgian Army, in the offensive of November 1918 who finally took what was left of the small village.

As it happens, my own grandfather was a regular officer in the Belgian Army and fought from the beginning till the end of World War One, only a few miles north of Passchendaele. His fiancée, my grandmother, waited for him, with only occasional news, in occupied Belgium, only to hear he had been severely wounded in the 1918 offensive. His helmet and sword are also exhibited here.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1917 tens of thousands of soldiers from every part of the British Empire, passed through the hell of Passchendaele.

The cost in human lives was horrendous. 100 days of hideous fighting left half a million soldiers dead, wounded or missing on both sides. Today bodies and war refuse, including live shells, some with poison gas, are still unearthed on a regular base in this part of Flanders.

Today, ninety years later, the memorials of Flanders, the rows of war graves, the fields where to this day missing men still lie, remind us all of the duty we hold to remember and pass this memory on to new generations.

But it also reminds us of how fragile freedom, peace and democracy are.

Peace, democracy, prosperity, respect for human rights and for the weakest should never be taken for granted, neither 90 years ago, nor today nor within the coming next 90 years...

The creation, after the WWII of the European Union, has come to create a secure, peaceful, prosperous and stable Europe thanks to the reconciliation of the European nations.

As said earlier the Battle of Passchendaele was movingly commemorated back in Belgium last July. However the Belgian Embassy in London also wished to do so. **Today and here, in London, capital of a nation that has heavily paid the full price for liberty and democracy, the Belgians remember the British and other Commonwealth soldiers who twice last century, fought and died to keep Belgium free from aggression and occupation.**

Our intention in organizing this exhibition was not to duplicate what can be much better remembered in the war cemeteries or appreciated in many other places on location, or, for that matter, in all the museums that helped us, neither of course to reopen old wounds, but to pay tribute in London to all those brave young men from many nations on both sides who paid the ultimate price and, together with their families and friends, suffered untold misery.

1917-2007: the Belgians have not forgotten, neither will they forget.

**Your Royal Highness,
Excellencies,
Worshipful Lord Mayor of Westminster,
Mr. Representative of the Belgian Defense Minister,
Mr. Representative of the Flemish Government in the UK,
MMrs Directors generals of Bovington Royal Tank Museum, of the
Imperial War Museum, of the National Army Museum, and
Curators of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele and of the
Royal Belgian Army Museum,
Ladies and Gentlemen;
Dear Friends,**

This event could only have been possible through the valued support and cooperation with the internationally renowned museums and institutions I just mentioned.

I warmly thank and – congratulate – their respective management and staff for helping us making it happen with a special mention for Christophe Blickx who worked very hard at setting up the dioramas you will see: the dug out with the German prisoner behind me, and the British headquarters in a Belgian château in the room over there.

I also must mention two artists – a British and a Belgian one – whose works you will be able to see in the main room: the multi-awarded photographer Michael St Maur Sheil, who has extensively toured and beautifully pictured the Passchendaele area of today and Rik Ryon, a passionate Passchendaele sculptor of the Great War and of its lost souls, who uses scrap metal found on the battlefield to movingly recreate the drama that took place there.

And finally, my thanks to all of you for attending this opening.

Your Royal Highness,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Before leaving the floor to Mr. Bostyn, Curator of the Memorial
Museum Passchendaele, I propose a toast to Her Majesty Queen
Elisabeth II: **To THE QUEEN**

JMV