

# NEW ZEALANDERS deep underground in Arras

**A**T the time of the Great War, New Zealand, still a British colony, had a population of just over a million inhabitants. As a consequence, it was difficult for the British to enlist a large number of men for the front. It was decided, therefore, only to make use of those with specific professional expertise. Tunnellers fell into this category. The country's coal and silver mines had turned a good number of inhabitants into outstanding sappers; because of this, five hundred New Zealanders found themselves in Arras in 1917 to dig underground tunnels that would save the lives of thousands of men.

November 1916, the military headquarters of the French army: General Nivelle is preparing the Chemin des Dames offensive. The operation is planned for the spring of 1917 and a diversionary plan is developed. A few days before the general assault, British troops in Artois would need to attack the German lines. The plan was a controversial one but ended up being adopted. However, the situation in Arras was disastrous: the town had withstood daily bombardment since October 1914, was almost completely destroyed and only a thousand or two inhabitants, managing to survive amid the ruins, remained.

## Deep underground

In order to attack the German lines, the British had on several occasions tried to cross the two or three kilometres of destroyed land that separated the two camps, but had suffered huge losses every time. It was then that they came up with an ingenious plan. Instead of trying to cover the distance above ground, why not pass undiscovered beneath ground and then appear right under the noses of the Germans? Digging was the key, but with French, English and Scottish miners already at the front, the call went out to New

Zealand, who sent five hundred sappers from the other side of the world to Arras.

## Six months of work

The region's sub-stratum was already full of wells, caves and cavities, dug by stonecutters since the Middle Ages. Consequently, what the New Zealand sappers needed to do was to connect up this underground network, dig new quarries, create new sectors etc. After six months of toil, they had managed to create a 20km-long network with a barracks that included a kitchen, chapel, showers, a 700-bed hospital, railway lines for supplies etc... and all with electrical power and running water.

In total, 24,000 men could be billeted here – similar to the population of Arras before the war! “This was a work of

art unique in the entire history of the British army,” comments Alain Jacques, the director of the archaeological department for the town of Arras.

## The Wellington quarry

To ensure ease of communication inside the underground galleries, the New Zealanders and British named the various sections in honour of towns and cities



The walls of the quarries have preserved their graffiti – historical testimonies that time and humidity have been unable to remove.

Photo: J. Poulle



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In total, the 'Kiwis' dug an underground network nearly 20km in length beneath the Arras.

in their respective countries. The main quarry was known as Wellington. Even today, some of these adopted names can still be seen on the stone, and the drawings and prayers of soldiers are still visible on the walls of the quarries.

A few days before the battle, planned for Easter Monday, the bombardment began. At the start, only half of the gun batteries were used – there was no point in revealing the Allies' full artillery power. The 24,000 men remained in the cold and damp galleries and quarries for eight days. Each pillar was numbered and allocated to a company.

## The surprise attack

At 5.30 in the morning on 9 April 1917, the British army appeared suddenly just in front of the German lines. In their trenches, manned only by lookouts, the enemy was taken by surprise, and there was no time for a warning to be sent to their troops. The British soldiers found their German counterparts in their pyjamas in the houses around Tilloy-lès-Mofflaines and in various shelters. The first three days of the battle were a great success for the British, as the Germans were forced to withdraw. However, the arrival of reinforcements resulted in violent counter-attacks lasting for six weeks. Four thousand men a day lost their lives here...

## A war cry

The New Zealanders were given the responsibility of maintaining these tunnels until 1918, when the group rejoined the combat units in the south of the Pas-de-Calais and further north. The sappers even went on to take Le Quesnoy with the help of ladders, just like in the Middle Ages. Some lost their lives there but the majority returned home. The archaeological department in the town of Arras is currently searching for their families as it is hosting, along with the Wellington museum, an exhibition on the decoration and graffiti of the trenches, entitled “Le Cri de guerre” (The War Cry), which will undoubtedly be a very moving experience for all who view it.



Photo: RSM collection. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.

9 April 1917, D-Day... British troops head off to attack enemy lines. Thanks to the work of these five hundred New Zealanders, thousands of lives were saved.

In 1914 the population of New Zealand was a little over one million. In total, 120,000 New Zealanders served during the Great War, 103,000 of them overseas. 18,500 Kiwis died during or just after the conflict (12,500 on the Western Front), and 50,000 were wounded.