

The WW1 Portuguese National Cemetery in Richebourg, France

Adapted, with permission, from the article written in 2016 for Angloinfo

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Closely packed lines of grave stones in the well-maintained cemetery

Portugal entered WW1 In 1916, after repeated German attacks on their shipping. Eventually the Portuguese Army deployed troops to France in 1917, where they performed with distinction, despite suffering significant casualties. These losses led to a decision in 1918 to reduce the sector allocated to them but alas, before that could be carried out, they were overwhelmed by a hugely superior German force at the start of what is known as the Battle of La Lys.

On 9th April 1918, the German Sixth Army, with eight divisions totalling around 100,000 men, attacked the Portuguese line which contained just 20,000 defenders. As a result, the Second Division of the Portuguese Army was annihilated during the battle and 327 officers and 7,098 soldiers were either killed or seriously injured. Although these men fought with great bravery the odds against them were hopeless.

Those who died are buried in several locations but, principally, at the Portuguese National Cemetery near Richebourg.

After visiting several British Commonwealth cemeteries, as well as French and German ones, our car turned onto the D947 road from La Bassée – a short distance from the city of Lille. Just before the junction with the D171 we noticed two striking Memorials to our left – the furthest by some 80 metres is the renowned Indian National Memorial to their troops who have no known grave. But our destiny was the Portuguese Cemetery, whose entrance is marked by a large archway built in an unmistakably Portuguese architectural style. There is also a small Chapel to Our Lady of Fátima across the road (which was locked on the day we visited). It was very moving for us to walk along the closely packed lines of grave stones in the obviously well-maintained cemetery.



We were pleased to see the plaques commemorating the many visits to the cemetery by Portugal’s Army representatives down the years. These are sited on a wall either side of a striking Memorial which lists the regions of Portugal from which these brave men came to fight in a foreign country.

All the WW1 cemeteries my wife and I visited were different in appearance in certain ways. For example, whereas the British Commonwealth cemeteries are a mass of flowers in the summer months, their counterparts on behalf of France and Germany are largely bare grass. But there is one aspect all these National cemeteries share and that is their approach to ‘individual identity’. Every headstone or cross bears the name of the soldier who lies at rest, with evidence these are renewed when erosion makes the name illegible. There is also usually a ‘register’ of names and a Visitors Book for people to sign and express their gratitude.

Unfortunately the exception to this recognition of ‘individual identity’ is the Portuguese National Cemetery, where a considerable number of the headstones have eroded to the extent that it is impossible to read which soldier’s death in battle is marked. This sad fact is true for the great majority of the graves – and is made more poignant by the efforts of a few families to overcome this deficiency by sticking a small plastic ‘name tag’ onto the top of ‘their’ headstone. There also does not appear to be a register of those buried at the cemetery.



The loss of identity of fallen Portuguese soldiers and remedial steps taken

It was also a real pleasure to see evidence that already the new President, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, and the new Prime Minister of Portugal, António Costa have been to pay their respects to their fellow countrymen who made the supreme sacrifice. It would be wonderful if the warm and generous people of Portugal, who have made my wife and I so welcome over the last 14 years, were to decide that the very best way to mark the 100th Anniversary of their countrymen’s supreme sacrifice would be to ensure that on 9th April 2018 all who visit the Portuguese National Cemetery in France to pay their respects, are able to read the names of those fallen ancestors on their individual headstones.

Postscript by the Author

The centenary of the battle in which so many Portuguese soldiers lost their lives was marked by a significant ceremony attended by both the President and the Prime Minister of Portugal. Regrettably it was very obvious that little, if any, remedial work had taken place in respect of the headstones. Enquiries revealed this was deemed too expensive, instead it seems the Portuguese Ministry of Defence and the Portuguese Veterans group proposed that the graves should all have the aforementioned plastic name tally affixed. It is astonishing that those brave men who made the ‘supreme sacrifice’ are to be identified in posterity by a cheap plastic stick-on name tally.



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Doug Lewis joined the RN in 1958 as a Junior Assistant Writer 2nd Class. He became a Petty Officer in 1965 and was commissioned in 1968. With regular promotions he became a Commodore in 1991. His key appointments included being the first Commander ‘S’ of HMS Ark Royal, Commander of RN College Greenwich, Director of Personnel for the RN, and Director Service Personnel Policy for the UK Armed Forces. His first knowledge that Portugal had been an active participant in WW1 was when he and his wife Margaret purchased a property near Lagos in 2002, where there is a Memorial Cross in the old town main square. As Margaret’s grandfather had been part of the British Expeditionary Force that went to France in 1914, they decided to visit some of the memorials and cemeteries on the Western Front in the areas in which he fought in 2016, and also paid a visit to the Portuguese National Cemetery near Richebourg, France.