

## **‘Christ of the Trenches’ - Neuve-Chapelle (1918)**

*By Mark Crathorne*

I first saw this picture below in the small military museum at Almeida, which marked me. It then dawned on me that this was an image of the battle-scarred crucifix of ‘*O Cristo das Trincheiras*’ from the 1<sup>st</sup> World War battlefield of Neuve – Chapelle, the original of which is on display in the Chapter House of the Monastery of Batalha, at the head of the ‘Tomb of the Unknown Soldier’.



**‘*O Cristo das Trincheiras*’ - ‘Christ of the Trenches’**

Situated in the Nord-Pas de Calais region of France, Neuve - Chapelle was one of the most strategic and most fought-over regions of France during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War of 1914 - 1918, partly on account of its famous ridge which lies to the east of the village. The region suffering more damage than any other part of France during the four long years of war. It was captured from the Germans during the bitterly-fought Battle of Neuve - Chapelle on the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 1915.

The sector between Lacouture and Neuve - Chapelle in Flanders was part of the sector defended by the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps during the 1918 German offensive that almost destroyed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. In the church there was a metal crucifix of Christ nailed onto a wooden cross. Although this image of Christ was not Portuguese, it was to become part of the heritage of Portugal's military past, after the heritage of Neuve - Chapelle was virtually obliterated. For on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1918, during the last-ditch 'Spring Offensive' of the German Army, a barrage from massed German artillery at dawn pulverised the village of Neuve-Chapelle, reducing it to rubble, erasing it from the map.



**The ruins of Neuve-Chapelle after the German barrage of 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1918**

Surrounded by the Allied mangled dead and dying, which included nearly 7,500 Portuguese from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division of the CEP, miraculously the image of Christ was left standing, albeit also mutilated, as the deadly fighting had resulted in Christ's legs being blown off, as well as his right arm, and a bullet had pierced his chest. Despite the ensuing carnage and chaos, a group of Allied soldiers rescued the badly-damaged image of Christ and carried it to safety behind the lines.

In 1958, the Portuguese Government informed the French Government of its desire to take possession of the mutilated Christ, as it had become a symbol of Portuguese Faith and Patriotism - now known as '*O Cristo das Trincheiras*' - 'Christ of the Trenches', which was to be reproduced in several period photographs, such as these two:



The crucifix was accompanied from France by Portuguese veterans from the ‘Great War’ living in France, and also a delegation of French Members of Parliament, led by Colonel Louis Christian. Fittingly, the image arrived in Lisbon by air on Easter Friday - the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 1958. Thousands of Portuguese paraded before the image in Lisbon the same day it was driven to the Monastery of Batalha. The official delivery took place on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1958, and at 11.00, in the presence of numerous military and civilian dignitaries, including the Portuguese Ambassador to France and the France Ambassador to Portugal. The guard of honour was from by Regiment No. 7, from Leiria.

‘Christ of the Trenches’ was taken to the Chapter Room by 1<sup>st</sup> World War veterans from the ‘Liga dos Combatentes da Grande Guerra’, where it was mounted at the head of the ‘Tombs of the Unknown Soldier’. After prayers, the French Military Attaché laid two ‘Croix de Guerre’ medals on the two tombs and buglers from the No. 19 Infantry Regiment from Chaves played ‘The Last Post’, followed by a minute’s silence and then a salvo of 19 shots from the Light Artillery Regiment of Leiria.



More than being just another episode of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, ‘Christ of the Trenches’ symbolises the faith that helped the Portuguese soldiers survive on the front line during two long years, with virtually no leave, ill-supplied, and feeling abandoned by those who had sent them to fight for a cause which the majority failed to understand.

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*This article was written by the Vice-Chairman of the Society, Mark Crathorne, who has been the Editor of the Society’s Annual Report for the last six years.*