

# Over the Top

*Memory, Commemoration, & the Centenary of the First World War*

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As far as farmer's fields go, this one was packed. It was just past seven in the morning and a large crowd of people was quietly milling around the edges of the Lochnagar Crater near La Boisselle in northern France. On July 1st 1916, a mine was detonated under the German trenches at this site to launch the British offensive on the Somme. The explosion left a ninety-meter wide, twenty-meter deep hole. I stood in the crowd, along with a few dozen other participants of the Historial de la Grande Guerre's annual colloquium and graduate summer school. The academic proceedings were on hold for the day so that participants could observe two ceremonies commemorating the Battle of the Somme.

The eminently eloquent Professor John Horne of Trinity College Dublin acted as our guide for the day. In prefacing our visit to the Lochnagar Crater, Professor Horne explained that what we were about to witness was a relatively new ceremony. The explosion left an imposing scar and, after the war, debates vacillated between filling the hole to reclaim the farmland or leaving the devastation

as a reminder of the war's destruction. The decision was settled in 1978, when the small corner of land was purchased by British advertising agent Richard Dunning, who was compelled to visit the site after reading about it in John Masefield's *The Old Front Line*. Since 1979, Dunning and the 'Friends of Lochnagar' have organized an annual ceremony at the lip of the crater. The ceremony has grown in popularity over the decades, with the crater's official website boasting up to one thousand attendees. I'm not sure if there were a thousand people present on this July morning, but the crowd certainly numbered in the hundreds.

The landscaping around the crater evoked life in the trenches. The fence surrounding the property was styled to look like stakes propping up a wire entanglement. The footpaths resembled duckboards or trench mats. A few small wooden crosses stood in a corner with rusting helmets, some with bullet holes, resting upon them as imitation grave markers. At 7:28, the commemorations started with a bang. Three firecrackers flashed into the air and popped, replicating the detonation of the mine. Whistles blew, mimicking the order that sent soldiers of the





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*(above) British troops run along the lip of the Lochnagar mine crater, October 1916 (Imperial War Museum Q 1479). (previous page) Lochnagar Memorial ceremonies, July 2014. (right) Thiepval Memorial, France.*



Lincolnshire Regiment 'over the top.' Everything was explained. When the whistles stopped, a few speeches were made. A lengthy procession of wreath layers followed. As individuals placed their wreaths at the foot of the large wooden cross that overlooks the crater, many felt compelled to address the crowd and explain their participation. Some spoke of a grandfather, uncle, or other distant relative who had died during the First World War. After the wreaths were laid, an evangelical pastor gave a sermon explaining the importance of remembering and commemorating this battle to counteract the influences of our "morally bankrupt society." Every part of the ceremony was emotive and explicitly symbolic. Everyone who spoke made it clear why they were there, and why everyone else should be there.

After the ceremony at Lochnagar, we boarded the buses and drove to the Thiepval Memorial to observe a second ceremony. The Thiepval Memorial bears the names of British and white South African soldiers who were killed in the Somme sector but had no known grave. Soldiers from other nations of the British Empire are commemorated on separate national memorials (Canada's were engraved on the Vimy Memorial). In the fashion of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the grounds surrounding the memorial were kept with the smooth symmetry of an English lawn. The ceremony at Thiepval was more like the Remembrance Day ceremonies I was used to. A band marched in leading a procession of flag bearers who lined the base of the memorial. Official dignitaries made solemn speeches, a few wreaths were laid, a bugler played the 'last post,' the crowd observed two minutes of silence, the flags were dipped, then raised, then everyone marched off. Both ceremonies followed the same basic outline, but this second ceremony was brief, sedate, and almost unemotional.

The contrast between these two ceremonies demonstrates two different traditions of memory and commemoration. The ceremony at Thiepval followed a template that has been rehearsed and repeated for almost ninety-five years. These rituals are carried out without explanation because these motions and movements were originally performed by veterans and family

members whose memory of the deceased needed no explanation. With the First World War now a century away, the meaning behind the ceremony at Thiepval is not as self-evident as it used to be. In the coming years, there will no doubt be many attempts to relate this cataclysmic experience to a new generation of Canadians and breathe new life into old traditions to instil primary and secondary students with a sense of personal loss through replicas or re-enactments. This was the goal of the ceremony at the Lochnagar Crater. It was initiated by a man who was drawn to the site by curiosity rather than tragedy and attended by visitors trying to re-acquaint themselves with a distant relative that perished in the war. Every word and action has to be infused with meaning. The physical reminders of replica duckboards and imitation wire entanglements surrounding the crater are paired with the emotive, explanatory prose of the commemorations to relate, retell, and recreate the experience of the Somme for an audience that has no immediate personal connection to that event. The effect, however, can be as artificial as setting off a few fireworks to replicate the detonation of twenty-four tons of explosives or as tasteless as placing a bullet-riddled helmet on a pretend grave marker. It all seems a little over the top.