



Hill 60

Sixty metres above sea-level may not seem much, but on the First World War battlefields of Flanders, it meant the difference between life and death. Conflict archaeologist **Matt Leonard** explores another grim military landscape.

Hill 60 is not really a hill; it was artificially created using the spoil from a railway cutting, and it formed a man-made hell in the demonic landscape of the Ypres Salient. Today, what is left of the hill rests between housing and a small café museum typical of the area. Sheep stroll lazily around the remains of shell-holes and concrete bunkers, unaware of the turbulent nature of the landscape that remains live with unexploded ordnance.

When the British checked the German advance outside Ypres in 1914, this man-made hillock became a violently contested battlefield. The Germans originally took the hill from the French on 10 December 1914. The British recaptured it on 17 April 1915, but in May of the same year, after a massive attack using chlorine gas in large quantities, the Germans retook it and quite literally cemented their position there.

From its peak, they were able to range heavy artillery by sight onto the Medieval market-town of Ypres, almost wiping it from the face of the earth. Despite bitter fighting, the Germans held

the hill until June 1917, when they were ejected from their trenches and deep dugouts during the Battle of Messines. As so often in the Great War, however, the gain was short-lived.

The Germans re-captured the hill in 1918 during their great *Kaiserschlacht* offensive and held it until finally, on 28 September 1918, the British took it for the last time.

A three-dimensional battle space

What makes Hill 60 such a fascinating piece of First World War material culture is the fact that it was a truly three-dimensional battle space. Fighting raged on, over, and most importantly, under this bloodthirsty Flanders field. The overwhelming violence that was inflicted there is demonstrated by the Caterpillar Crater, which lies in a small wooded area, just to the south of the hill.

The Caterpillar was originally another spoil-heap from the railway cutting and was so named due to its elongated shape. This high ground allowed the Germans to dominate the area and defend Hill 60 from British attacks. Today, there is nothing but a vast, water-filled crater in place of the caterpillar-mound. It reveals a glimpse of the secret war that raged beneath Hill 60. For it is what lies in the sub-surface archaeological layers that tells the most visceral story.

From 1915 onwards, mining and counter-mining was carried out beneath Hill 60 at a ferocious rate. Despite extensive operations by both the British 175th Tunnelling Company and the 3rd Canadian Company, it is with the Australians that the battlefield is most associated.



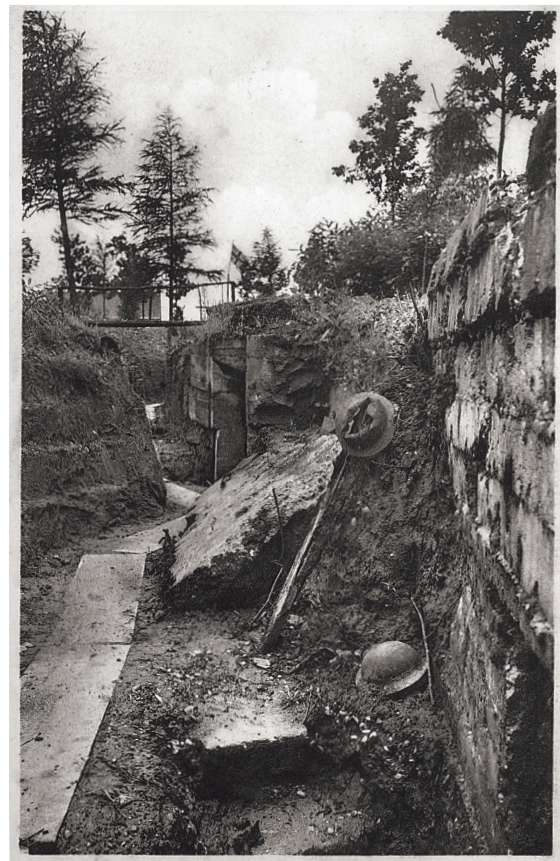
Above The memorial to the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company represents the men that perished at Hill 60. The Australians are inextricably linked with the mining activities at Hill 60, although the French, Canadians, and British were also involved in operations there.



Right A secret war waged underneath the hill, where tunnels collapsed, detonators exploded, and men suffocated.

Far Right What remains of Hill 60 still shows the scars of battle. Bunkers, scrap, and chunks of beaten concrete still occupy the battlefield.

Bottom Left The Caterpillar Crater is the result of a massive subterranean mine which blew the small hill apart. Its destruction allowed the British to successfully attack Hill 60.



On 7 November 1916, the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company (1 ATC) took over the Hill 60 mining sector. Their work culminated in a multiple-gallery tunnel complex, known to the soldiers as 'The Berlin Tunnel', as it seemed so long that it might end up in Germany. After months of digging, boring, mining, and counter-mining, huge charges were placed in the tunnel and blown on 7 June 1917, signalling the start of the Battle of Messines.

Between 9 November 1916 and 7 June 1917, approximately 30 men from 1 ATC lost their lives at Hill 60. The worst incident occurred on Anzac Day, 25 April 1917, when a detonator exploded and collapsed an underground headquarters, killing three men outright and suffocating seven others.

The archaeology of a subterranean war

After the war, the detritus from years of battle lay everywhere. Tunnel and dugout entrances were open, and the stench of death from the many rotting corpses filled the air. Almost immediately, a small café opened up, offering refreshments and guided tours. It also acted as a small museum, displaying objects from the battlefield. Local guides took pilgrims and visitors into the troglodyte world beneath the small hill, enlightening them on the dark landscapes of subterranean warfare.

This allowed the locals, recently returned, to generate an income with which to rebuild their shattered community. This early commercialisation of the war was commonplace in Belgium and Northern France, and at Hill 60, just as at so many other places, it contributed to the contested interpretation of the post-war battlefield.

Today, the collapsed tunnels and deep dugouts are the final resting-place for many soldiers of all nationalities. Retrieving their bodies in the maelstrom of battle was not possible and exhuming them at the end of the war proved to be too dangerous

an undertaking. These long-resting soldiers and the shattered remains of the battlefield share the same space as locals living on the fringes of the small village of Zillebeke. They, in turn, share it with the hundreds of schoolchildren and tourists who visit the site every year. Together, these elements create a multi-faceted landscape that is, at once, mass grave, monument, memorial, tourist attraction, and modern village.

A contested heritage

Though Hill 60 now seems calm on the surface, its contested nature is as strong as ever. From the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company Memorial, the iconic spires of Ypres (or Ieper) can be clearly seen. The vista allows Hill 60 to be viewed in context. The importance of the hill, with its clear line of sight to Ypres, is abundantly clear. But in 2009, the City Council of Ieper granted planning permission for a large family house to be built opposite the memorial, blocking the view of the town and diluting the historical resonance of the site. The building on the old battlefield has been vehemently opposed, but, despite legally lodged objections, work started on the foundations for the house earlier this year.

Modern conflict landscapes are always dynamic and multi-vocal; their contested nature does not stop once the fighting has finished. The artefacts from the original museum were recently sold, and can now be seen at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper and at the Passchendaele Memorial Museum in Zonnebeke.

The removal of these items from their original location and the building of yet more houses on the battlefield all contribute to the confused nature of this 20th century conflict landscape. However, a walk past the Caterpillar Crater and a visit to what remains of Hill 60 still reminds the visitor of the overwhelming violence that is unleashed by modern industrial warfare. 