

Earlier this week I was privileged to accompany the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on a tour of First World War battlefields in Northern France and Belgium. Commemorative events marking the centenary of the war sit within the remit of my Department and embarrassingly neither myself nor the Secretary of State had been before. I've admitted on these pages before that I am ashamed how little I know about the First and the Second World War having not been taught it at school, although I know enough to not embarrass myself. However a whistle stop two day tour has really helped to not just expand my knowledge but actually begin to comprehend the scale of lives lost during the conflict. I chose my words carefully – “begin to comprehend” – I am not sure we can ever fully appreciate the millions of young men who died in battle. I took pictures of the neat rows of white head stones that, regardless of the weather, stand proud in differing environments. Some cemeteries are surrounded by the bustle of modern day life yet remain oddly peaceful while others, like the one I went to on the ridge of the Somme between the front lines of the Germans and Allied forces, stand alone in an expanse of cornfields exposed to the winds and sheltered only by a lone tree. Each cemetery or memorial tells a story of a battle within a war, a man lost and a family and community back home devastated. As we stood at the Menin Gate and listened to the Last Post Ceremony that takes place every night at 8pm I was struck by the number of people in the crowd. All ages and different nationalities stood side by side in silence. I was on parade in an official capacity and had to keep my resolve but a lump came to my throat and I looked down to the ground as the bugler played. It reminded me why it is so important that we never forget.