

ÉTAPLES MILITARY BASE, HOSPITAL COMPLEX AND CEMETERY

During the First World War, the area around the small fishing village of Etaples, close to Boulogne, became the largest British Military base in the world. Commonwealth army training and reinforcement camps and an extensive complex of hospitals occupied the sandy plains, dunes and fields. In May 1915 this site was consecrated as a cemetery for men and women who died in hospital or while serving at Etaples base. More than 10,700 First World War personnel from Australia, Canada, India New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom are buried here, representing all branches of the service. Over 660 German soldiers are also laid to rest here, most have been evacuated from the battlefield only to succumb to their wounds.



This is the final resting place of twenty women, including nurses, army auxiliaries and civilian volunteers of the YMCA and Scottish Church Huts organisations, who were killed in air raids or by disease. By the latter part of the war, more than 2,500 women were serving at the Etaples base. Hailing from many parts of the British Empire, as well as France and America, they included ambulance drivers, nurses, members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) and those employed by the Women's Army Auxilliary Corps in roles such as baker, clerk, telephonist and gardener.

Close to the channel ports and with excellent railway links to the battlefields of Belgium and France, Etaples became a crucial base for the Commonwealth armies. Royal Engineers expanded railway capacity and built sidings for the loading and unloading of men and supplies and between 1915 and September 1917 alone more than a million officers and men passed through the base. At its peak, Etaples had nearly 40 infantry depots for both British and Dominion Divisions, each housing around 1,000 men.



Local French workers, labourers from China, India, and Africa and German prisoners of war helped to construct and maintain the camp infrastructure, which largely consisted of canvas tents and wooden huts. Life for soldiers in the depots followed a familiar routine of early morning parades and inspections followed by training exercises in dedicated areas to the north of the complex, known to soldiers as the 'Bull Ring'.



Training was physically demanding and monotonous, overseen by sergeants nicknamed 'Canaries' because of their distinctive yellow armbands. Instruction was given in bayonet combat, gas warfare, bomb throwing and target practice on rifle ranges, as well as lectures on trench warfare. Recruits were often shocked by the rigour of the process by which they were 'toughened-up'. In September 1917, grievances with conditions in the camp contributed to a mutiny by several hundred troops.



Stretching from Dannes-Camiers to Paris-Plage, the Etaples base hospital complex hosted as many as 20 hospitals by 1917, providing over 20,000 beds for sick and wounded men, along with specialist consultants and increasingly sophisticated treatment regimes. In March and April 1918, during the Germans spring offensive, the hospitals at Etaples became more like casualty clearing stations, receiving men still wearing field dressings, hardly having time to re-bandage wounds before putting them on hospital ships to England.

Those who could not be saved were buried on the hill facing the Channel and home. Of the vast complex of huts, roads, tents, rifle ranges, training facilities, ambulance parks, operating theatres, offices and cinemas that made up the Etaples base only the cemetery remains.

21834 Gunner William Pellett of Tillington is buried here.

