



Commonwealth War Graves Commission

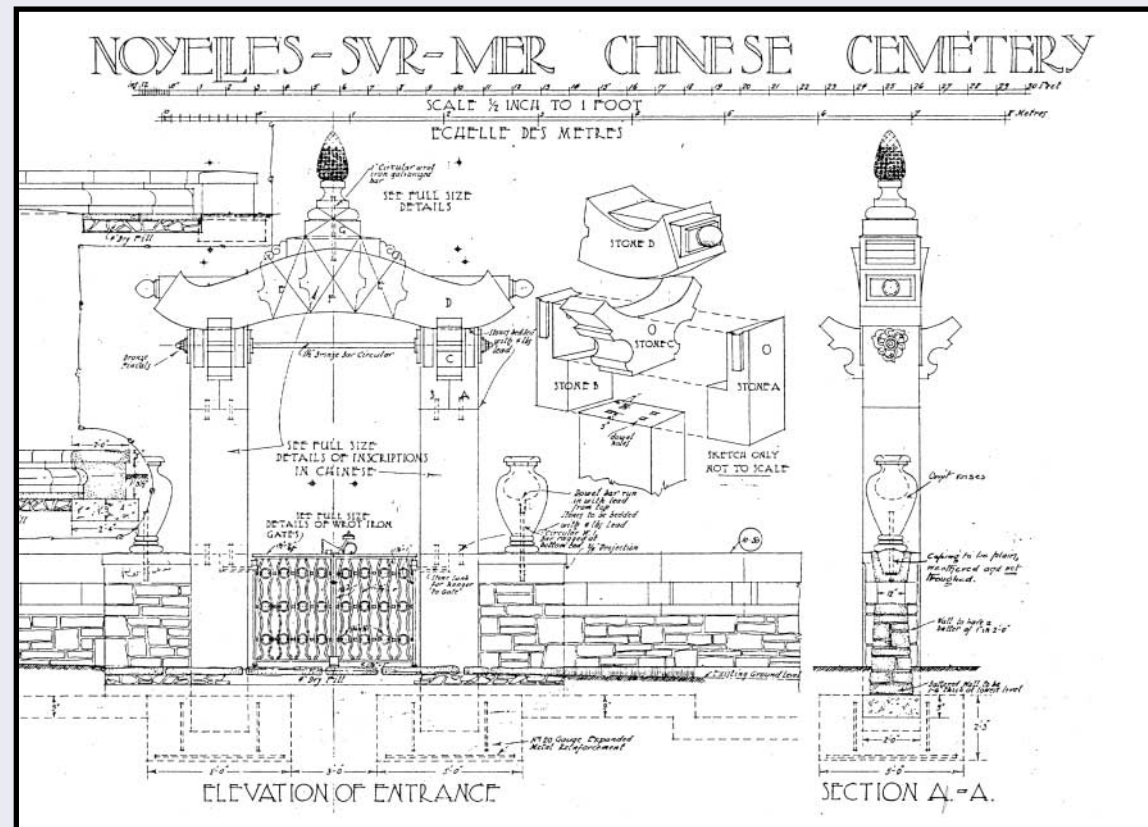
THE CHINESE LABOUR CORPS AT THE WESTERN FRONT



By the Autumn of 1916 the demand for labour to carry out vital logistical work behind the Allied lines on the Western Front was becoming critical. The catastrophic losses suffered by the British during the Battle of the Somme meant that practically every able bodied serviceman was now needed for fighting and the government had to look to her Empire and beyond to meet the ever growing need for skilled and unskilled labour to support the army. Indian labour units had been at work in France and Belgium since 1915. Other labour contingents would soon follow from South Africa, Egypt and the Caribbean and in October 1916, following an example set by the French, the British approached the then neutral Chinese government with a plan that would lead to the formation of the Chinese Labour Corps.

The Corps was to be non-combatant but part of the British army and subject to military control. They would carry out mainly manual tasks in the rear areas and lines of communication, building and repairing docks, roads, railways and airfields, manning ports and railheads, stores and ammunition depots, and working as stevedores and crane operators unloading ships and trains. In time, skilled mechanics would repair vehicles and tanks and later, after the Armistice, the Corps would undertake much of the dangerous and unpleasant work of battlefield clearance.

The call for volunteers was spread by public proclamation and by British missionaries in the field. The rewards offered were tempting enough to encourage thousands of men, mainly poor



Architects drawing for the gate at Noyelles-Sun-Mer Chinese Cemetery

peasants from the northern provinces of Shantung and Chihli, to offer themselves for three years' service in an unknown country on the other side of the world. In addition to a daily rate of pay much higher than most were used to, food, clothing, housing and medical support would be provided, and the labourer's family would receive a regular separation payment until his return.



At the recruiting depots, the volunteer labourers (or gangers) were formed into companies of between 300 and 500 men under the charge of a British officer with each company organised into platoons and sections under British and Chinese NCOs. Before departure, the companies were drilled and exercised, route marched and paraded: those who displayed most discipline would be rewarded with the best berths on the long voyage to Europe.

The first transport ship carrying 1,088 labourers sailed from the main depot at Wei-Hai-Wei on 18 January 1917. The route took them across the Pacific to Vancouver, where they boarded a train for the week-long journey across Canada to Halifax on the east coast. There another ship took them across the Atlantic to Liverpool, and from there to France. In all the journey took three months.

By the end of 1917 there were 54,000 Chinese labourers with the Commonwealth forces in France and Belgium, some of whom had been recruited from the resident Chinese populations of Canada and other Allied countries after China had entered the war that August. The Chinese quickly earned a reputation for hard work, ingenuity and

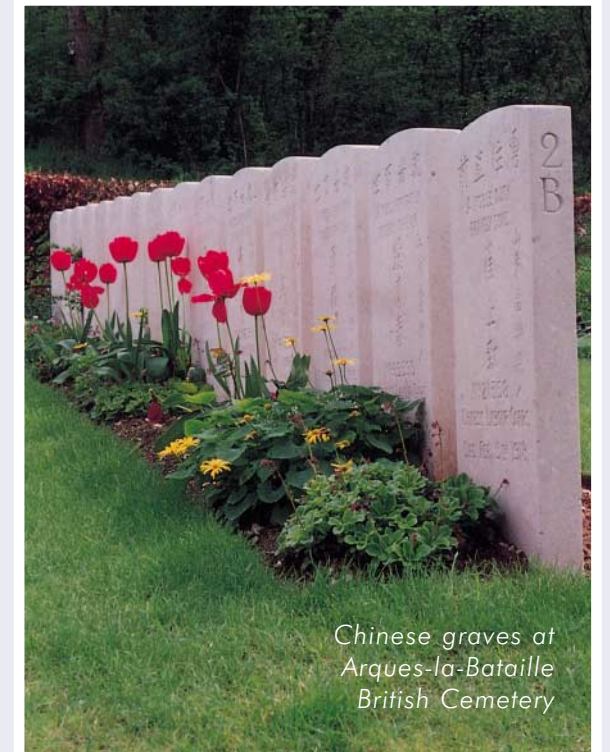
improvisation. By the beginning of 1918 special efforts were being made to bring over more mechanics and skilled men but in March the Admiralty declared itself no longer able to supply the ships for transport and the British government were reluctantly obliged to bring recruitment to an end. The men already serving in France completed their contracts and at the Armistice, the Chinese Labour Corps numbered nearly 96,000 (with a similar number serving with the French) and in May 1919 as many as 80,000 were still at work.

The Dead

Though concentrated behind the Front, the work of the Corps was not without danger. Sea ports and depots were targets for air raids and long range bombardment, and there were many accidents associated with the handling of unstable shells and explosives. In all, nearly 2,000 men from the Chinese Labour Corps died during the First World War, some as a direct result of enemy action, or of wounds received in the course of their duties, but many more in the influenza epidemic that swept Europe in 1918-19.

The labourers who died were classified as war casualties and great pains were taken to mark their graves in an appropriate way. All headstones, which are of the Commission's standard war pattern shape, bear inscriptions in English and Chinese characters and were carved by men of the Labour Corps who stayed behind in France on the expiry of their terms to do so. In addition to the labourer's name and date of death, each carries one of five standard dedicatory inscriptions.

The dead of the Chinese Labour Corps are buried in numerous cemeteries in France and Belgium. Those listed overleaf are perhaps the most significant.



Chinese graves at Arques-la-Bataille British Cemetery



The graves of Gangman Yan Chin Chu and Coolies Wang Heng Fu, Chang Hsiao Chih and I Tsan in Charnes Military Cemetery, Essegney, France

Noyelles-sur-Mer Chinese Cemetery and Memorial

Noyelles-sur-Mer was the base depot for the Chinese Labour Corps in France, the site of their largest camps and the location of No 3 General Labour Hospital. The cemetery was used between April 1917 and March 1920 and contains more than 800 Chinese graves. The memorial in the cemetery commemorates 40 more who died on land and sea and whose graves are unknown.

The design of the cemetery, which was approved by the Chinese Ambassador, reflects its national character and the gateway, in the form of a pailou, bears a Chinese inscription to honour the dead and monograms bearing the meaning of eternity.

Noyelles-sur-Mer is on the Somme estuary. The cemetery is at Nolette on the road to Flibeaucourt.

Ruminghem Chinese Cemetery

Ruminghem was the headquarters of No 11 Labour Group and a Chinese hospital was also stationed there. The cemetery was begun in August 1917 and used until July 1919. It contains 75 Chinese graves, half of them transferred from a Chinese cemetery at St Pol-sur-Mer after the war.

Ruminghem is a village between Calais and St. Omer. The cemetery is to the west of the village, a little north of the road to Muncq-Nieurlet.

St Etienne-au-Mont Communal Cemetery

No 2 General Labour Hospital was here from 1917 to 1919. Most of the cemetery's 170 burials are Chinese.

St. Etienne is approximately 2 km south of Boulogne. Leave Boulogne on the N1. At Isques take the D940 from the large roundabout signposted 'Le Touquet' Cross the Pont-de-briques and continue for 1. 7 kilometres. The cemetery is on the right hand side.

Les Baraques Military Cemetery

Les Baraques is to the west of Calais and was an important depot and hospital centre during the First World War. This large cemetery has more than 200 Chinese graves grouped together in Plot 9.

The cemetery is on the western side of Calais, just off the D940, the road to Sangatte.

Arques-la-Bataille British Cemetery

The South African Native Labour Corps had their camp at Arques-la-Bataille where No 1 General Labour Hospital was also established. Most of the graves in the cemetery are South African but there are more than 70 Chinese buried in Plot 2.

Arques-la-Bataille is 6 km south-east of Dieppe on to the Dieppe Neufchatel-en-Bray Road. The cemetery is at the end of a winding country track signposted from the D51, the road from Martin Eli to St Aubin le Cauf.

The graves and cemeteries stand as permanent reminders of the Chinese Labour Corps' presence in Europe during the war years but there are others too: it was Chinese labour that built the ferry ports at Calais and Boulogne and even in England, at Orford Ness in Suffolk, there remains a sea defence built to protect an important airfield and military base - locally, it is still referred to as the Chinese Wall.

Services Available to the Public

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible for marking and maintaining the graves of those members of the Commonwealth forces who died during the two world wars, for building and maintaining memorials to the dead whose graves are unknown and for providing records and registers of these 1.7 million burials and commemorations found in most countries throughout the world.

Enquiries about the location of individual burials or commemorations may be directed to the office below or to the Debt of Honour Register - a search by surname database at the Commission's web site at www.cwgc.org

For further information contact:

Commonwealth War Graves Commission
2 Marlow Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
SL6 7DX
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1628 507200
Fax: +44 (0) 1628 771208
E-mail: casualty.enq@cwgc.org