Lest we forget

Its six thirty in the morning but the city is already awake and on its way to work. I bump and rattle over the cobbled streets that lead through the old docks before entering the industrial flatland that stretches from Antwerp to Rotterdam. Cars race past me on their way to work as we drive through a never-ending vista of docked ships and cranes, grain silos and train marshalling yards, oil refineries and chemical plants. Out of the pre-dawn darkness my particular refinery emerges, radiant and resplendent like an uninhabited mini-Manhattan. Others can be seen in the distance, adorned with white lights, red lights up their stacks and crowned by defiant gas flares high in the night sky. It’s a sight that still excites, even after a quarter century of industrial practice and its good being part of it. I’m here to do 80 asbestos medicals on some of the four and a half thousand contractors drafted in for the refinery’s shutdown. Some of the medicals are conducted in English, others in French but the majority through an interpreter. The contractors I see are mainly eastern European, something increasingly familiar in the last 10 years, whether it is chicken factory workers in East Anglia or pottery workers in the West Midlands. The manager tells me that the Czechs and Slovaks are more reliable than the UK workers who often disappear before the contract ends. He laments all the older workers who have contracted lymphoma and malignancies which he attributes to oil and chemical exposures.

At least the environmental and engineering controls are better now he says. Before each round of medicals I hear the toolbox safety talk in English and Czech. In the afternoon I go to the Magritte museum in Brussels. Walking through the city it strikes me how we are actually governed from this place. A strange concept for the UK, only a couple of hours drive away but somehow still on the margin of Europe. The politicians of Brussels are probably the reason why I am carrying out these medicals but also why health and safety controls and practices have improved. It is easy to overlook the good that comes from Belgium; it is less easy to ignore the bad that has happened in Belgium. Half an hour down the road, 300 000 European men fought each other at Waterloo and another hour to the west a hundred years later, the same number of British and Commonwealth men died defending the Ypres Salient. In Ieper, the massive Menin Gate is inscribed with 55 000 names of the 90 000 soldiers who were never found or identified. There was not enough space and the other 35 000 names are inscribed at Tyne Cot 10 km away. Named after the first aid post that still remains and surrounded by row after row after row of white grave stones, Tyne Cot is the largest war cemetery in the world. Wandering amongst the headstones it is hard to find any inscribed with names. ‘Lest we forget.’

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