In the footsteps of the French soldiers

Vic-sur-Aisne - Saint-Christophe-à-Berry - Nouvron-Vingré - Berny-Rivière

On 12th September 1914 the first Battle of the Marne had just come to an end. The Germans were forced to retreat northwards and cross the river Aisne. Its banks are dominated by high plateaux above underground limestone quarries called "creuttes". The quarries are located just behind the front line and offered excellent shelter for the soldiers. Both armies were instructed to hold their positions and the French were first to dig trenches to protect themselves from German shelling. The plateau of Vingré is where trench warfare properly started.

**ON THE ROUTE**

1. Pacifist inspired war memorial at Saint-Christophe-à-Berry
2. Monument dedicated to the soldiers executed to set an example, and the cellars where they would have spent their last nights before the executions in Vingré.
3. On outskirts of Berny-Rivière, “Villa du poilu” written on wall of house at side of the road
4. Go through the village. Pass by memorial to executed soldiers on left-hand side (don’t miss the cellars in which condemned men wrote their last letters) and turn right to the wayside cross. Go uphill, carry on right.
5. At the Broken cross memorial (see information panel for explanation of its symbolism), turn right away from the plain and cross the plateau.
6. Facing the wood, turn right.
7. Off route: the Quarries of Confrécourt, open on guided tours only. Get in touch with the Tourist Office for any enquiry.

**NEARBY**

- Confrécourt quarries at Nouvron-Vingré

**TOURIST INFO.**

Retz-en-Valois Tourist Office
Tel. +33 (0)3 23 96 55 10

**CREATION AND UPKEEP OF ROUTE:**

Communauté de Communes Retz-en-Valois

**Route card taken from www.randonner.fr the Aisne walking / hiking website**

**Join us on www.facebook.com/randonnee.aisne**

**Est. time:** 5hr  
**Length:** 14,1km  
**Lowest point:** 43m  
**Highest point:** 140m  
**Level:** Quite long walk with two slopes  
**Waymarking:** Yellow & green

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**Acces to the walk:**

Go to Place du Général de Gaulle (main square) at Vic-sur-Aisne (carpark, shops, restaurants).

Facing the château, turn right towards Saint-Christophe-à-Berry. Walk 800m along Rue St-Christophe, then turn right into Rue de Presles. After 100m, turn left towards Berny-Rivière (country lane). After 300m take first track on the left, going towards a wood. At second fork, bear right for Chapeaumont.

After a gentle climb, go through chicane gate (private property on both sides of track). Follow the white pegs for 500m. Pass nearby Lieutenant Colonel Reboul’s former command post (structure built of local stone, half buried below the ground). Turn left twice, towards the Fontaine Ste-Anne. Leave through gate on left-hand side (view of fountain on the right). Go down 300m towards St-Christophe. At bottom, before the road, turn right for 100m, then left.

When level with the church of Saint-Christophe, stand in front of war memorial depicting grandfather and grandson grieving for their lost ones, then turn right towards Berry.

After 800m, take track on the right before the bridge. After 1 km turn right towards Vingré.

Go through the village. Pass by memorial to executed soldiers on left-hand side (don’t miss the cellar in which condemned men wrote their last letters) and turn right to the wayside cross. Go uphill, carry on right.

At the Broken cross memorial (see information panel for explanation of its symbolism), turn right away from the plain and cross the plateau.

Facing the wood, turn right.

Off route: the Quarries of Confrécourt, open on guided tours only. Get in touch with the Tourist Office for any enquiry. At the junction, turn left onto track leading to Berny-Rivière.

Going downhill, take path on the left leading to village.

When level with the Mairie, take street facing you and carry straight on towards Vic-sur-Aisne. On the outskirts of Berny, on left-hand side, the walls of a house have been carved by soldiers (“Villa du poilu”, thoughts, someone’s profile, etc...). Return to centre of Vic.
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Everyday history

SHELTER FOR SOLDIERS: THE “CREUTES”

A special feature of the Soissonnais front can be seen in its remarkable underground remains. Old underground stone quarries, called “creutes”, were used as shelters and quarters by French and German soldiers. Varying in size from one site to another, these tunnels housed command posts, kitchens, barracks, even medical facilities, as in the Confrécourt quarries. The entrance to the main quarry was surmounted by the insignia of a colonial regiment, the 1st Zouaves. A neighbouring quarry, called the “National Franco-American Museum of Blérancourt” housed a first-aid station. It was less than a kilometre from the French front lines.

A story of martyrs

EXECUTED AS A WARNING TO OTHERS

In the first months of the war, faced with an army that had not yet proved itself, military justice was extremely harsh. On 27th November 1914, at Vingrè, 24 men were accused of desertion in the face of the enemy after they withdrew. They explained that they had been following orders from their second lieutenant but he denied this and blamed them.

On 3rd December 1914 a war council condemned 6 of them to death.

The Martyrs de Vingrè, as they came to be known, were rehabilitated by the Court of Cassation on 29th January 1921. Opposite the memorial in their honour stands the cellar where they waited to be shot. The names of the “martyrs” can be seen on houses in the village. Their photographs and last letters have been recently added.

A story of women

GUARDIAN ANGELS FOR THE “FLATTENED” LANDS

In 1917, Anne Morgan, daughter to the very wealthy American banker J.P. Morgan, creates the CARD (Comité Américain pour les Régions Dévastées), the first non-profit organization of the 20th century, dedicated to help the French civilians living in war zones.

The CARD, directed by Anne Morgan and Anne Murray Dike had its headquarters into the château of Blérancourt. An outpost was established in Vic-sur-Aisne. The committee was composed by American female members only: nurses, nutritionists, dentists, doctors but also drivers and mecanics, helping and cheering up those living in the «flattened lands».

The members of the CARD also aimed «to help people help themselves by providing material assistance» according to Anne Murray Dike’s own words. The comitee acquired 30 tractors and sold seeds at cost price, enabling the replanting of 3,000 hectares of fields and vegetable gardens.