Recovering The Past: A Photographic Documentary Exploring Post-Conflict Reconciliation

Ian Alderman
Photographer

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On 11 November 1918, the Armistice brought an end to the First World War. With the guns falling silent, the armies disbanded and peace once again reigned over a European landscape, destroyed through years of industrial-scale conflict. The Armistice also heralded the start of two significant major operations: the unenviable task of exhuming human remains from the battlefields for reburial in the hundreds of newly created cemeteries, and the collection and controlled destruction of the millions of unexploded shells that littered the former battlefields.

In 1920, in Flanders, Belgium, a Poelkapelle-based bomb disposal company began the task of clearing the unexploded ammunition from in and around the former Ypres Salient. Initially it was expected that the operation would be completed within three years; however, this was not to be the case. In 2015, from Flanders’ former First World War battlefields, DOVO-SEDEE, the Belgian army’s bomb disposal unit, collected 173.4 metric tons (191 short tons) of ammunition comprising 8,690 projectiles, of which 1,018 included (or contained) toxic contents. In 2016, the figure rose to...
197.7 metric tons (217.9 short tons) of ammunition, comprising 7,767 projectiles, of which 838 had toxic contents. The bomb disposal operation in Flanders continues on a daily basis, a century after the last of hundreds of thousands of traumatized men left the trenches for the final time to return home.

I am a London-based photographer whose great grandfather was shot at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. With this family history and the then fast-approaching centenary commemorations of the First World War in mind, in 2011 I embarked on developing a complex but unique photographic project to be entitled Recovering The Past. Since its completion, Recovering The Past has been exhibited both at the United Nations in Geneva and currently as a component of the centenary commemorations to the Battle of Passchendaele at the In Flanders Fields Museum, in Ypres, Belgium, as part of the Total War display.

A strong set of photographs will always be enhanced if accompanied by a strong or original narrative. It was wholly probable that a great many projects inspired by the First World War were simultaneously under production at that time so originality was a critical consideration. Despite a family connection, as I indulged my personal interest in the war itself, a broader message kept emerging, a message that transcended that particular war and clearly applied to all conflicts past, present, and in all likelihood, the future. I decided to focus my project around the theme of post-conflict reconciliation. Recovering The Past was subsequently born.

The consequences of war are many, some obvious, others less so, and often remain with us for many years. Recovering The Past is a project that brings together two separate groups of men with origins a century apart, but who are united through conflict. Each of the two stories combined within

"We thought we managed alright, kept the awful things out of mind, but now I'm an old man and they come out from where I hid them. Every night."

–Jim McPhee from Drouin, Victoria, a veteran of the Western Front
Crate Number 143 of Great War vintage ammunition awaits its destruction. Recovered from Flanders former battlefields, it is a sobering indication of the scale of the problem. Each shell is bar-coded primarily for the purpose of traceability through the complex disposal process. Another advantage of this system is that it allows the creation of a database of all types of ammunition recovered on the battlefield. The chalk circle indicates the filing point of the shells' chemical contents during its manufacture.

Photo courtesy of the author.

The unexploded ammunition's location will have been given to DOVO-SEDEE for its collection by the local police who will have verified the shell's existence beforehand. A first reconnaissance will be made by the police who will provide additional information on the type and size of the unearthed ammunition. This facilitates the intervention of the DOVO-SEDEE team. The highest percentage of ammunition recovered originates from farming and commercial development.

Photo courtesy of the author.
An eight-inch British high-explosive shell is recovered from drainage works undertaken in the back garden of a house in modern day Passchendaele. For the residents of Flanders, more specifically in the Southwest, such finds are commonplace. Photo courtesy of the author.

Two members of DOVO-SEDEE’s bomb disposal team carry unexploded ammunition from its point of recovery to their vehicle. Twice a day DOVO-SEDEE will bury and detonate conventional high-explosive ammunition recovered from around the former Ypres Salient. On average, DOVO-SEDEE will destroy circa 100 tonnes of ammunition by closed-earth detonation per year. Photo courtesy of the author.
each image symbolically represent a unique consequence of human conflict.

The project’s 25 images are a montage of my own photographs of the operations of the DOVO-SEDEE bomb disposal team, and archival images of men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). The men of the AIF made significant contributions to the fighting in many localized battles that collectively made up the Third Battle of Ypres. Their courageous efforts are acknowledged through the images of this project.

An important inspiration came from two prominent Australian artists. Captain James Francis “Frank” Hurley took powerful images during the Third Battle of Ypres; they convey the atrocious fighting conditions endured by those who fought in that battle. But for Hurley, individual images failed to capture the scale of the event, consequently he produced several (now famed) composite images from his own negatives, which portray the battle as he himself saw it. “It is impossible to secure full effects of this bloody war without composite pictures. It’s unfair to our soldiers,” wrote Hurley.

Australian artist Will Longstaff produced the celebrated painting ‘Menin Gate at Midnight’ after attending the gate’s official opening in July 1927. Situated in Ypres, the gate bears the names of 54,896 men whose remains have never been found. Longstaff’s painting depicts the spirits of the Australian dead rising from the ground.

In adopting both Hurley’s use of composite imagery and Longstaff’s artistic depiction of soldiers, the artistic inspiration of Recovering The Past is based on elements of Australia’s artistic and cultural heritage.

Having secured the necessary authorizations from DOVO-SEDEE in 2011 to embark on this project, I made frequent trips to Flanders over a period of several years to produce the project’s master images. I accompanied the personnel of DOVO-SEDEE on over one hundred call-outs to recover ammunition unearthed by members of the public in their gardens, and more commonly from farming or construction activities.

Months of experimental preproduction work were spent developing a work-flow that enabled me to produce the photographs I needed of DOVO-SEDEE’s operations so that cohesive montages could be later produced. Once embedded with the bomb disposal team, it was crucial that I could take the required photographs in as short a time as possible at multiple locations, while causing minimal disruptions to the bomb disposal operations.

The technical challenges to be solved with producing Recovering The Past were many and often frustrating. Attempting seamless integration of an old image into new soon proved unsatisfactory. It became apparent that the only way to sensitively combine such images was to integrate the new around the old. The photographic data inherent in the archival component can be matched or reproduced within a new image; it is not possible to do the reverse. Camera height, camera angle, direction of light—all highly significant technical considerations can be established from analyzing an archival picture. This crucial data must be matched and ultimately incorporated into the new photograph while on location and all in a space of a few minutes. Patience proved essential.

The integration of the Australian men in the images is not merely one of technical correctness; it is critical to generate an all-important emotional connection, too. They must be made to engage with either an event in the contemporary photograph or with the viewer themselves. Achieving this was the most challenging aspect of the production phase.

It is impossible to secure full effects of this bloody war without composite pictures. It’s unfair to our soldiers.

-Captain Francis Hurley
Photographer Ian Alderman reviews the images of “Recovering the Past” with Belgium’s HRH Princess Astrid and Vice Prime Minister Didier Reynders at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, in December 2015.

Photo courtesy of Jean-Pol Schrauwen.

Britain’s Prime Minister, Theresa May, on her recent visit to the current exhibition of “Recovering the Past” with the photographer, Ian Alderman, and assistant curator Dominiek Dendooven, at the In Flanders Field Museum in Belgium.

Photo courtesy of U.K. Ministry of Defence.
The archival components of the photographs are all high-resolution digital scans of the original priceless, glass plate negatives, supplied for this project by the National Archives of Australia. Working with these scans was one of the privileges of this project. The image quality and sharpness of those glass plate scans can still challenge the digital files produced by a modern digital camera.

Its timely relevance notwithstanding, Recovering The Past stands alone in allowing the viewer to contemplate the consequence to society of the long-term legacies of conflict. The philosophy of the entire project is brought to a conclusion in the final image, which reverses the project’s narrative to show an inevitable future consequence of war.

Recovering The Past has significant educational value and can engage its younger viewers simultaneously in art, history, and digital manipulation techniques. It also suggests to viewers that it is possible to engage with history using modern digital technology alongside the more traditional methods. 

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The current exhibition of Recovering The Past at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, is open to the public from 3 June 2017 through 31 December 2017. For more information, please see: http://www.flandersfields.be/en/1917/flanders-fields-museum.

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Ian Alderman
Photographer
London, UK
Commercial website: www.ianalderman.com
Project website: www.recoveringthepast.com

Ian Alderman discovered and subsequently developed his passion for photography through a desire to capture the drama of the great outdoors. On graduating from the Blackpool and The Flyde photography course in 1992, Alderman worked predominantly in assisting and production roles within the corporate and advertising photography genre. Subsequent and extensive work as both a photographer and location scout have given him a broad background from which to produce projects such as “Recovering The Past.”

A complex project, over five years in the making, “Recovering The Past” has been produced with the commemorations of the First World War at its heart. With his great grandfather himself a casualty of the tragic conflict, this project represents his personal tribute to his great grandfather and all of those who lived, fought, and died in circumstances and conditions we simply cannot imagine today.