



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BRAVE. ECCLES TO PLAY ARMY IN SOMME 101 COMMEMORATION.

Last Sunday nine U18 players from Eccles Rugby Football Club returned from France, where they undertook a week long expedition, travelling from Salford to the Somme WWI battlefields, as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award.

A year ago, on 1st July 2016, the group participated in the City of Salford's centenary commemoration of the Battle of the Somme. This event inspired the young people to spend the last 12 months researching the forgotten heroes of their club, who volunteered to fight in the First World War, many of whom did not return to play again.

As a tribute to that sacrifice, the group set themselves the challenge of retracing the footsteps of the Salford Pals battalions of the Lancashire Fusilier regiment, who had made the same journey 101 years before them.

The Eccles young people travelled by ferry, train and foot; camping along the route and walking an average of 30km a day over 5 days, from the French coast to their final destination of Thiepval, where last Saturday 1st July, they attended a memorial ceremony.

Here the group met with dignitaries from Great Britain and France and laid poppy wreaths and tributes from the City of Salford and the Fusilier Regiment that they had carried with them on their epic sun-burned-thunderstormed journey.

Lord Llewellyn, Her Majesty's Ambassador to France, commented on his twitter account *"Congrats to @DofE Gold group @dofe_ecclesrfc, walking in the footsteps of the brave. Honour to meet them at #Thiepval for #Somme101"*
<https://twitter.com/EdLlewellynFCO/status/881472381809807361>

Mr Steven Blackburn Lancashire County RFU President *"I would like to congratulate the Eccles RUFC Members who are attaining the D of E Gold award. The amount of work the young people have put in, physically in the retracing of the Salford march, and the amount of historical investigation is a credit to all involved. Lancashire are very proud of the achievements of this group and a special mention should also be made to the volunteers mentoring these young people, their commitment is echoed in the achievements of the group."*

Andy Brunt, President of Eccles RFC commented *"We're very proud of this year's Gold Group who have shown outstanding determination and commitment to meet this challenge. The young people have represented the city and their club with great dignity and respect. We hope their expedition to France will be seen as a fitting tribute not only to the Eccles players and the Pals battalions of 101 years ago, but also as a testament to the enduring spirit and character of rugby and the community that Eccles RFC belongs to."*

In recognition of the young people's efforts a team from the 1st Bn, Royal Regiment Fusiliers will play Eccles RFC in a commemorative pre-season friendly on Saturday 14th August.

Before the game there will be a Ladies rugby open training session for women and girls, where there will be Lancashire County and International players in attendance.

Following the game there will be refreshments and a big screen presentation in the clubhouse. All are welcome to attend.

If you would like to know more about this story please contact:

Mark Baines, Chairman of Eccles RFC DofE baines.mark@virginmedia.com 07850 082122

Images and posts from the expedition can be seen here: [@dofe_ecclesrfc](#) [@EcclesColts](#)

Background notes

- Eccles Rugby Football Club were established in 1897. We offer rugby for all and currently field senior men's and ladies teams, colts, and junior teams from U7s through to U16s.
- Eccles RFC were the first rugby club to offer the Duke of Edinburgh award programme to all young members and have done so since 2011.
- Britain declared war on Germany on August 4th 1914 and within a month rugby fixtures were abandoned in Lancashire. Many of the Eccles players men enlisted straight away in regiments including The Lancashire Fusiliers, The Manchester Regiment, The Duke of Lancaster's own Yeomanry and Seaforth Highlanders. Many were to receive commissions.
- Eccles RFC eventually recommenced fixtures in October 1919 with a team formed in the main of servicemen who had survived the war, many who had suffered injuries.
- The Pals battalions were formed from groups of friends, teammates and workmates who enlisted together and fought together.
- The Salford Pals battalions were formed from recruits in Salford, Irlam, Eccles, Swinton, Worsley and Walkden in Autumn 1914; spent one year training in Britain and arrived in Boulogne in November 1915; transferred by train to Abbeville and then marched to the front, passing through Longpre, Bourdon, Flixecourt, Coisy, arriving in Albert, December 1915, and then moved up to the trenches at Authuille for the final attack on Thiepval.
- EcclesRFC DofE group of 17 and 18 year olds are from these very same areas and took this same journey, as a tribute to the former players they had each researched.
- On the 1st July 1916, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Salford Pals Battalions of the Lancashire Fusiliers saw action at Thiepval, where they suffered heavy losses in the first hours of the Battle of the Somme, wiped out by machine guns as they attacked the village. Of the 24 officers and 650 men from the 1st Salford Pals who attacked Thiepval, 21 officers and 449 men became casualties.
- The Thiepval Memorial commemorates the 72,246 missing British and commonwealth servicemen who died in the 4-month Battle of the Somme, with no known grave.