

HERE AT VIMY: A RETROSPECTIVE – THE 90th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

by Lieutenant Timothy C. Winegard

There is no other place in the world outside of Canada that makes one feel so at home and as Canadian as Vimy.

— Prime Minister Stephen Harper, 9 April 2007

A few minutes before 11 o'clock on the morning of 11 November 1918, a German sniper spotted a Canadian patrol moving through the Belgian town of Ville-sur-Haine on the outskirts of Mons. He aimed at his target and fired. Private George Price of the 28th (Northwest) Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division died of wounds just as the 11 o'clock Armistice went into effect, concluding “the War to End All Wars.” Price was the last of over 68,000 Canadian soldiers who did not return to their families and friends. They lie in cemeteries under white stones proudly bearing the maple leaf or Star of David, or they are simply remembered by their names etched into a memorial, war having sequestered their bodies to an unknown grave. These numerous cemeteries and 13 memorials are scattered throughout Belgium and France in towns whose names have become commonplace in Canadian vocabulary.¹ Names such as Ypres, Passchendaele, Amiens and Vimy are but a few of those emblazoned upon the cenotaphs of

towns and cities throughout Canada, reflecting the inescapable impact the First World War had on all communities of our young nation. From a population numbering little more than seven million at the time, 620,000 Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) between 1914 and 1919.

Vimy Ridge, more than any other Canadian military battle, has become part of Canada itself. Not only through the actual battlefield, of which 250 acres was given to Canada in perpetuity in 1922 by the French, but also in the cultural fabric of our nation. It is doubtful that the first wave of 20,000 men of the Canadian Corps advancing behind the “creeping barrage” of artillery realized that they would be remembered for spearheading the “birth of a nation” on that snowy Easter morning – 9 April 1917. Nevertheless, the capture of Vimy Ridge, the first instance of all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fighting together, provided Canada with a context of nationhood and a sense of pride in an achievement not accomplished by either the French or the British earlier in the war. Brigadier-General Alexander Ross, the commander of the 28th (Northwest) Battalion at Vimy, remarked during his speech at the unveiling of the Memorial on 26 July 1936: “It was Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade. I thought then... that in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation.”

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Since that initial unveiling of architect and sculptor Walter Seymour Allward’s Memorial, made of 6000 tonnes of durable Croatian limestone, Vimy has had a number of tourists and visitors over the years. Amongst them was Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the 7th German Panzer Division, which captured the Vimy/Arras region from the British on 22 May 1940. Shortly thereafter, Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Nazi Party Headquarters personnel visited the Vimy Memorial



The Canadian Forces Contingent performed a Sunset Ceremony at Vimy Memorial on 7 April 2007.

DND photo SU2007-00 by Master Corporal Jill Cooper, CFSU(O), Photo Services

DND photo SU2007-00158-042 by Master Corporal Jill Cooper, CFSU(O) Photo Services



Vimy, France. Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, receives a Royal Salute at the Vimy Memorial.

and park on 2 June 1940. Hitler himself had fought on the flank of Vimy as a corporal during the Battle of Arras in April 1917. During the Second World War, while it was under Nazi occupation, the Memorial was cared for and the cemeteries and park maintained without vandalism. Alongside the 1917 maple leaves and Canadian names carved into the walls of roughly 15 kilometres of chalk tunnels beneath the ridge are German iron crosses and names from the Second World War.

On 9 April 2007, I was privileged to be present at the re-dedication, following significant restoration, of the Vimy Memorial, which also marked the 90th Anniversary of the battle itself. In attendance were Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and the Canadian Forces Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, among other dignitaries. Also present were Allied war veterans (none from the First World War, as there is now only one surviving Canadian), a parade contingent and pipe band from the Canadian Forces, a parade contingent from the French Forces, and over 5000 Canadian Secondary School students, comprising roughly 25,000 visitors in all. The finale of the 7-9 April celebrations took place on 9 April, Easter Monday, exactly 90 years after the victorious battle, during which four Canadians won the Victoria Cross. The re-dedication ceremony included speeches, music, Native Canadian participation,² airborne drops, artillery salutes, and a flypast by the French Air Force. Above all, standing mutely and majestically in remembrance was the solemn statue of Mother Canada, gazing down the ridge towards the coalmines of the bordering Douai Plain.

Like Canada, Vimy Ridge is a part of me. Not only because my great-great grandfather (gassed on 4 April 1917) and great-grandfather were uniformed participants in the battle, but also because it touches every spectrum of my emotional framework and tugs at the heartstrings of my Canadian nationality. My mom and dad took me to visit the Memorial when I was 13 years old, and, to my delight, I found a relic in the form of a “pig’s tail,” a giant corkscrew used to anchor barbed wire to the ground. I returned in 1999, then with my wife, Taleitha, and my uncle and aunt – none of whom had ever been there – to participate in the 90th anniversary

ceremonies. While at Vimy in May 1999, I wrote the following poem as a tribute to the 3598 killed and the more than 7000 wounded Canadian soldiers of Vimy:

Here at Vimy

*I see generations climbing the names on your marble back
As the son cries, revealing halos
Driven unto you.
Asleep beneath lush Maples and rolling craters,
Pockmarks cover your place;
Here at Vimy.
You died proud and lie proud.
Prouder yet would you young men be, to see me here
Armed with my understanding respect;
Here at Vimy.
As I gently drift through the whispering morning breeze
I hope you can hear the soft-steps of my sorrowed feet—beneath,
And know that you are alive in me;
Here at Vimy.
Mother’s stone face bows down the trodden slope
Towards the forever saluting town
Watching the ghosts retreat into a memory.
Not forgotten;
Here at Vimy.*

SPECIAL REPORT

The Memorial, which bears the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers who have no known grave in France (the Menin Gate in Ypres records the same for those in Belgium), is inscribed with the following dedication:

To the valour of their countrymen in the Great War and in the memory of their sixty thousand dead this monument is raised by the people of Canada.

May we, as free Canadians, cherish their memory and never forget their sacrifices.

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Photo SU2007-00159 by Master Corporal Jill Cooper, CF SU(O) Photo Services

Her Majesty the Queen stops to talk to veterans at the Re-dedication Ceremony.

NOTES

1. Newfoundland was a distinct British colony and did not join Canadian Confederation until 1949. The 13 Canadian/Newfoundland Memorials in France and Belgium are as follows: In Belgium: Courtrai – Newfoundland forces in the Battle of Lys, October 1918; Hill 62 – The Canadian Divisions in the defence of the Ypres Salient, April-August 1916; Passchendaele – The capture of Crest Farm by the Canadian Corps and the Battle of Passchendaele, October-November 1917; St. Julien – The Canadian First Division during the first gas attack at Ypres, April 1915. In France: Beaumont-Hamel – The 1st Newfoundland Regiment, the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916; Brouillon Wood – The crossing of the Canal du Nord, the capture of

Brouillon Wood and the rupture of the final positions of the Hindenburg Line by the Canadian Corps, 27 September 1918; Courcellette – The Canadian Corps during the Battle of the Somme, September-November 1916; Dury – The capture of the Drocourt-Queant Switch and the breaking of the Hindenburg Line by the Canadian Corps, 2 September 1918; Gueudecourt – The Royal Newfoundland Regiment during the Battle of the Somme, 12 October 1916; Le Quesnel – The attack by the Canadian Corps on 8 August 1918 during the Battle of Amiens, which drove the Germans back some 13 kilometres; Masnières – The Royal Newfoundland Regiment during the Battle of Cambrai, 20 November 1917;

Monchy-le-Preux – The Royal Newfoundland Regiment during the Battle of Arras, 14 April 1917; Vimy – The capture of Vimy Ridge by the Canadian Corps, 9-12 April 1917.

2. From a population numbering 103,774 Native Canadians, roughly 4,000 fought during the First World War. Approximately 300 Native Canadians were killed during the war. Ojibwa sniper Corporal Francis Pegamagabow of Parry Sound, Ontario, the most decorated Native Canadian of the First World War, won the Military Medal (MM) three times and recorded an (unconfirmed) 378 kills. Native Canadians also donated nearly \$45,000.00 to the Canadian Patriotic Fund and other war-related charities.