

Vimy 100th Anniversary Some Memories – April 2017

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I was honoured to be selected as the Governor Generals Foot Guards Regimental Association representative for the VAC trip and, as there was no official Canadian Engineer representative, I assumed that role.

The official Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) Vimy 100th Anniversary delegation, totalled over 140 with delegates, caregivers and support staff. The delegates consisted of the VAC Minister (Honourable Kent Hehr), the Deputy Minister (General (Retired) Walt Natynczyck), representatives from Veterans Associations (Legion, Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans, Nursing Sisters, etc), Regimental/Unit Associations and a Youth Delegation representing all provinces and territories. We departed from Ottawa for Lille France on 05 April on board a CC-150 Airbus.

This was my third trip to Vimy, each one different and each one leaving a deeper and more profound impact. The first was as a young officer with 4 CER as part of a 4 CMBG professional development battlefield tour. This consisted of “re-fighting” the Vimy battle through numerous presentations on site and in the surrounding area leaving an in-depth understanding of the ebb and flow of the battle. The second visit was with my wife on my second Germany posting and this was a “more touristy” look at Vimy. This third visit, aided by age and the previous visits, was more sombre and reflective driving home the extent of the sacrifices made and the horrific conditions before, during and after the battle.

The tour commenced the following day with a visit to the Vimy Memorial site where we were guided through the trenches and some tunnels and the new Interpretation Building. While the older crowd was limited to the nearby near-surface tunnel, the more agile youth delegation was treated to a tour of the deeper tunnels holding the many chalk carvings and galleries. The incredible engineering feat to carve out these tunnels was largely the work of Welsh miners but Canadian engineers were

instrumental in improving them and maintaining both the tunnel and trench systems that the Canadian Corps occupied. In this day of mechanization and increased “horse-power to man” ratio of today’s Army, it is amazing that most of the work was done solely with manual labour and techniques.

Later that afternoon, we visited the first of the many cemeteries where a commemoration ceremony was conducted by the Youth Delegation at each. Ironically, the first cemetery was the Neuville-Saint-Vaast German Cemetery. The site contains in excess of 44,000 graves of known German soldiers, four soldiers per each cross.

The French memorial at Notre-Dame de Lorette was also visited during the trip. The cemetery contains over 40,000 known French graves from WW1 battles in the area as well as an ossuary with the bones/bone fragments for over 16,000 unknown soldiers.



The site is also home to the “Ring of Remembrance” inaugurated in 2014 to commemorate those lost on the Nord-as-de-Calais region from 1914-1918. The steel

and concrete ellipse has a perimeter of over 345m consisting of 500 3m panels inscribed with over 576,000 names from over 40 different nationalities in alphabetical order without regard to rank or nationality.

A number of Commonwealth cemeteries were visited and ceremonies performed. These include the Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery, the Tyne Cot cemetery in Belgium and the Canadian Cemetery Number 2 on the Vimy site. As with all the cemeteries we visited, the sheer number of graves was sobering and at the same time appalling. It was particularly telling in the Commonwealth cemeteries by the disproportionate number of unnamed graves, marked identified only with “A Soldier of the Great War” and the inscription “Known unto God”.

The trip also included a number of special events. These included the official opening of the Canadian War Museum’s exhibit: *Witness – Fields of Battle Through Canadian Eyes* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Arras France followed by a sound and light show depicting Canada contribution to WW1 at the Place des Héros. As well, there was an Indigenous Sunrise ceremony at the Vimy memorial and attending the Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium. The Menin Gate contains the names of the Commonwealth losses in the Ypres battles including members of the Canadian Military Engineers.

Of course, the main ceremony was the 100th Anniversary commemoration ceremony at the Vimy Memorial on 9 April. The ceremony, attended by the Governor General, Prince Charles, Prince William, Prince Harry, Prime Minister Trudeau and the President of France, was at the same time stunning and sombre.



Fortunately, the weather for the ceremony was much better than that on the day of the battle. Instead of cold rain and snow, it was bright, sunny and warm. We were amazed at the sheer number of people attending the ceremony, particularly the number of young people from Canada. The delegation included one member who, at the age of 13, had attended the unveiling ceremony of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial with his father (a Vimy veteran) in 1936. He had had so many visits to the Memorial that he had a specific spot where “he always stood” during the commemoration of the battle. One feature of the ceremony was the pairs of combat boots, each with a poppy, placed on the grass on and around the memorial. This provided a stunning reminder to those who were lost during the days of battle in the taking of Vimy Ridge.

The trip provided an opportunity for all those attending a chance to reflect on the sacrifice, courage and commitment of those who fought during the battles for Vimy Ridge as well as all the battles of during and since WW1. We were reminded of the horrors of war, the long-lasting effects on the survivors and the families of both those



lost and those who survived these battles and, at the same time the responsibility of the living to remember and commemorate those who answered the call to preserve our way of life and freedom.