

Mayfield students and staff tour Vimy Ridge

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This April, after one year of planning and preparation by several teachers that was led by the enthusiastic efforts of tour leader Joanne Thornton, I was extremely fortunate to be able to accompany five of my Mayfield history teacher colleagues (Joanne Thornton, Emily Baggetta, Lisa Cybulski, Jeff Kilgour, and Aris Symeonides) and 44 Mayfield secondary school students on an experience of a lifetime, as we toured Canadian battlefields and cemeteries of World War I and World War II in northern France and Belgium.

Each battle site and each cemetery had its own unique evocative ambience. To walk the beach at Puy, just outside Dieppe, where the Royal Regiment of Canada met a disastrous fate on Aug. 19, 1942, was disquieting. My feelings as I walked the beach at Puy were all the more poignant because it was here that a family friend had been captured by the Nazis and had subsequently spent the rest of the war as a POW. I once recorded an hour and a half of his harrowing tale of the Dieppe raid on tape.

We also visited Juno Beach, site of the Canadian Army's highly successful landing on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Thanks to the thoughtful contributions by the Town of Caledon and the City of Brampton, Mayfield secondary school has purchased a Juno Beach Memorial Brick which will be mounted on a pillar at the memorial site. Funds from the purchase of each brick support the Juno Beach Memorial which, until recently, did not receive government funding. The

inscription on the brick will read as follows:

We also paid our respects at Ypres and Passchendaele, and Beaumont-Hamel on the Somme; sites of major Canadian WWI battles. Yet the focus of our tour was the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in northern France, and the rededication of the Vimy Ridge Memorial after the completion of its refurbishing. The rededication was to occur on the day of the 90th anniversary of the battle: April 9, 2007.

We began April 9 with a visit to a smaller, immaculately groomed cemetery, not far from the Ridge, where many Canadians were buried after having fallen at Vimy. Here our Mayfield contingent conducted its own private ceremony of remembrance for one Private R. B. Beauderie of the Canadian Regiment, hailing from Eastern Ontario. He died at Vimy Ridge in May of 1917. A cross of flowers we had taken across the Atlantic with us was laid at Private Beauderie's marker during the ceremony and we concluded the service by observing a minute of silence.

School groups from across Canada conducted similar ceremonies to honour and remember individual soldiers at various cemeteries around Vimy Ridge. After our ceremony, we boarded the bus and drove to Vimy Ridge. Prior to the tour, I had envisioned getting off the bus at Vimy and trudging through sleet under a leaden sky towards the Vimy Ridge Monument. After all, that had been the weather on April 9, 1917, when the Canadians were attacking the Ridge. Yet this was 2007 and, according to

our guide, the climate in Europe has changed markedly over the past few years, as it has here in Canada as well. So, in contrast to my preconception, our day at Vimy was sunny and warm, the air was still.

Before the ceremony, thousands of Canadian high school students filed 10 abreast, up the shallow slope of the Ridge toward the monument, retracing the advance of the Canadians in the battle. Just off the road and walkways, the pulverization of the landscape by the artillery of 1917 has not eroded to flatness, preserved, rather, by the growth of grass and trees. Every square metre of

earth was churned up in the battle and some of the pockmarks that remain are devastatingly large. As we approached the monument, we were led in a sweeping arc around it and down the steeper slope on the far side of the Ridge. Once at the bottom of the Ridge, we were led into the grassy standing-room-only ceremony grounds in front of the monument – the monument faces the land held by the Germans in WWI. Mayfield was at the back of the ceremony grounds, right in front of the television cameras and about 50 metres from the ceremony stage placed in front of the monument. That was as close as we would

get to the monument that day as the entire area around it was cordoned off for the dignitaries.

Students representing high schools from across Canada were densely packed into the area on the grass. It was a fitting cross-section of Canadian students since the battle 90 years earlier had been the first time the Canadian Army, with soldiers from across Canada, had been brought together during the war.

By the time the ceremony began, we had already been standing for about one and a half hours. Yet despite the wait, our Mayfield students, and indeed almost all students assembled, were attentive, engaged and most respectful. Two big screens, to either side of the crowd, showed us what was going on up on stage since there was little to see over the heads of the people standing in front of us.

There were many fine and appropriate vignettes during the ceremony, but there was only one part that centred my thoughts. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's words were well-considered and delivered with a stirring sincerity. The fiddle playing of Ms. Noble atop the monument was beautiful. Queen Elizabeth II graced the day with her presence and rededicated the monument. These were all fine moments. Then there was the timing of the French Air Force Mirage jets that was spot on as they traced a perfect line across the blue infinity in the instant that the last note of the last song of the ceremony finished. In another time and place I would have been in awe of the precision and spectacle. Yet at the time I found it only mildly distracting and laudable because it was during the few minutes

before that a mist had begun to veil my eyes and my thoughts had quieted. My introspection was almost involuntarily evoked with the sounding of the trumpets that followed the Queen's address. The mournful sound of the bagpipes followed. Then the choir accompanied by Susan Aglukark sang a stirring rendition of "I'm Dreaming of Home." The song evoked a profound sense of sadness and tragedy, as well as an empathy for those who fought and those who died on the Ridge. I looked to the sky to contain the welling tears. I found it awkward to shed a tear at that time; a silly folkway. At that time and in those few minutes I had several distinct thoughts that I have both considered on my own and discussed with many people since. Here were but two directions my thoughts were taking during the singing:

Yes, Vimy was an astounding Canadian victory and of great importance for the national identity of a fledgling country. It was an astonishing story of ingenuity augmented with extreme bravery. It was the high water mark for the Canadian Expeditionary Force and one of a series of Canadian victories in the war that helped gain Canada international respect, and helped lead the young country down the road to independence from Britain by showing that we were just as capable of great deeds as the imperial powers. However, one can place the battle in a larger international, even universal, context. It was a great victory in a war recorded by history as having been won by the Allies. Yet in truth, millions suffered and died in the Great War on both sides and the peace imposed by the victors upon Germany at Versailles only helped lead to another horrific World War for Germany and the victors. Then there were the young men who participated in the Great War, often motivated by nationalistic ideals that lingered on in the twilight of the age of colonial empires; Canadian men walked arm in arm down Sherbrooke Street in Montreal singing Rule Britannia when they heard that war had broken out. The concept of war at the time did not hurt voluntary enlistment either; the war would be over by Christmas, so young men rushed to enlist so as not to miss out on the big adventure. So it was that the average recruit became a pawn in a brutal and lasting war.

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Photo by Jo Thornton
Mayfield Grade 12 student Melissa Ushtchenko places a Canadian Flag at the grave site of Mayfield's adopted Canadian soldier, Private R.B. Beauderie.



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