

Hamilton pilgrims in France a sign of the enduring power of Canada's 'coming of age battle'

The Spectator's Jon Wells explores the impact of a battle that still stirs the hearts of Hamiltonians at home, and those observing its centennial at Canada's largest overseas national memorial.

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The monument was dedicated in 1936, 18 years after the end of the First World War, its soaring white limestone pillars atop a ridge overlooking the Douai Plain in northern France, near a town called Vimy.

Back then, veterans and families from Hamilton and beyond who made the weeklong voyage across the Atlantic for the unveiling of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial were called pilgrims.

The word pilgrimage suggests an arduous journey undertaken as an act of religious devotion. For Hamiltonians in France this Sunday marking the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge — including those who had grandfathers who fought there, and 130 students from six high schools — the journey was not nearly as long.

And yet a sense of pilgrimage still endures for the battle that began on a cold Easter Monday morning in 1917.

Time has only elevated the legend, far beyond that of a successful but deadly military campaign. Vimy, fought 50 years after Confederation, is often called Canada's coming of age, or "the birth of a nation" — a phrase first attributed to Canadian Brigadier General Alexander Ross long ago, and repeated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau last year.

That symbolism, the notion of creation rising from sacrificial bloodshed, carries a near religious ring to it.

But as with any religion, one's commitment to the tenets depends in part on the historical record, but also on faith.

Canada had been at war with Germany two years and eight months. The U.S. had been at war one day, joining the fray April 6.

. . . Thousands of Canadian troops gathered in tunnels near Vimy Ridge; a seven-kilometer long escarpment, 60 metres at its peak elevation, 175 km north of Paris.



SOURCE: MAPBOX, OPENSTREETMAP

THE CANADIAN PRESS

Germany had taken the ridge early in the war and fortified its defence with tunnels and trenches and heavily armed soldiers. Previous Allied attempts to take it back resulted in more than 100,000 soldiers killed or wounded.

But the attack strategy was different this time, and planned for months; Canadian troops moved to front lines near the ridge six months earlier.

Instead of sending waves of troops charging German machine gun positions, the plan called for advancing behind a "creeping barrage" of heavy artillery.

The original launch date was Easter Sunday, April 8, but French officials requested a delay so it wouldn't fall on that holiest of Christian days, that marked the resurrection of Christ.

The first shots were fired in the snow and sleet at 5:30 a.m. on Monday, April 9 as the first wave of 20,000 Canadian soldiers attacked.

At Vimy, for the first time in the war, all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought together, about 100,000 soldiers, under the command of British Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng.

The fight lasted four days, but on April 10 the Spectator wrote: "The Canadians are now in complete occupation of the famous Vimy Ridge, even the eastern slopes of the ridge having been cleared of Germans."

The victory led to more territory and prisoners captured than in any previous British offensive in the war, and two of the key Canadian officers in the battle, Gen. Arthur Currie and Maj.-Gen. Edward Morrison (who had once been city editor at the Spectator) received knighthoods.

But some historians are critical of the mythology surrounding Vimy.

It was a significant battle, but just one part of a larger British offensive from April 9 to May 16 known as the Battle of Arras, in which Allied forces suffered enormous casualties.

(As part of that offensive, Australian soldiers fought at the First Battle of Bullecourt on April 11, with more than 3,000 casualties, in what came to be known among Aussies as "the Blood Tub." In a second attempt fighting for the same ground three weeks later, 18,000 Australian and British troops were killed or wounded.)

Triumph at Vimy Ridge did not turn the tide of the war, did not signal the beginning of the end.

The war raged another 19 months.

"There was no breakthrough, no cavalry squadrons surging through the hole torn in enemy lines," wrote historian Jack Granatstein.

But he argued the battle had a "nationalizing impact" on Canadian soldiers, even though the majority of them were born in Britain.

"A nation exists because its people accomplished great deeds in the past and believe more can be accomplished in the future. The taking of Vimy Ridge was one of the greatest of those deeds."

Canada's military prowess was widely applauded: "No praise for Canada can be excessive," declared an editorial in The New York Tribune. "They answered the call of Human Freedom."

The cost was terrible: 3,598 Canadian soldiers killed and 7,000 wounded. This, in a war that in the end was Canada's deadliest ever, with 60,000 soldiers dead, including more than 2,000 of those who served from the Hamilton area — two per cent of the local population, which would equal more than 10,000 dead today.

On Sunday, those attending Vimy Ridge centennial ceremonies in France will all feel it differently.

Last fall, Steve and his wife, Barb, who live in Waterdown, were exploring vacations to take. They heard about a Vimy Ridge Centennial trip offered by a travel agency.

Barb's grandfather, Fearman, served in the First World War and received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) medal.

"What was he awarded the DSO for?" Steve asked her.

"For his service at Vimy Ridge," she replied.

"That's it. We're doing the Vimy trip."

All through the fall Oliver plunged into research, reading up on the battle, scouring Fearman's attestation papers online, even knocking on the front door of the home on Caroline Street where Fearman had lived, meeting the current resident, and telling him the story.

"You imagine this young man, and so many others in Hamilton, ordinary guys heading overseas," says Oliver. "Hamilton has its own story at Vimy, it's at our fingertips."

Oliver carried a khaki haversack made available to those who took the Vimy trip. It is, he said, similar in style to the type Canadian soldiers carried.

Canadians served at Vimy in battalions that no longer exist, but which are "perpetuated" by regiments like the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, and the Argylls — such as the 19th Battalion, that Fearman served with, in the Canadian Second Division.

Fearman, who joined the Argylls when he was 14, also served at fierce battles at the Somme and Passchendaele, but survived the war and was ultimately twice named commanding officer of the Argylls. He died in 1974 at 85.

In a coffee shop next door to the armoury, Oliver spreads a map on a table, showing the lay of the land around Vimy Ridge in 1917.

Sitting beside him is Rick Fearman, Herbert's grandson. Rick's father, Herbert Fearman Jr., served in the Second World War.

Rick is taken aback at his brother-in-law's enthusiasm. He is not similarly engrossed, but there are different ways to carry a torch. That winter scarf he wears, Argyll colours, he never washes. It belonged to his dad and still bears his scent.

Steve Oliver admits his Vimy crusade got a bit obsessive. It was like the buildup to the trip turned a key inside the retired salesman, inspiring him to unwrap the history, find his place in it.

He could not stop thinking of the young soldiers; the camaraderie, teamwork, iron bonds formed, what that would have been like. He never had that, not in his working life, not in his youth.

He can dig, though; read, research. And imagine.

The Vimy Foundation website calls the battle a turning point in Canadian history. Clearly Canada's international profile was elevated. In 1919, Canada secured an independent seat at the League of Nations (doomed to last just 27 years) because of its war contribution, of which Vimy was the most lionized battle.

But some argue that Vimy Ridge should never have reached such heights in the culture.

Tim Blackmore, a communications professor at Western University, believes Vimy Ridge is an example of men killing other men for an unworthy cause. Remember the dead, he says, but be ashamed at how it came to pass.

"And to explain such a massacre as necessary to nation-building and co-operation seems like a brutal joke," he writes in an email, "like some kind of Monty Python sketch where the greater number who die in greater pain makes everyone else feels that much better."

The message of the battle, reads the The Vimy Foundation's website, "is one of bravery and sacrifice."

Sacrifice is a loaded word, its traditional meaning suggesting an offering to God, or at least a willingness to give.

Blackmore: "To attach heroism to such a graveyard as Vimy, suggests that Canadians would consider repeating it. Would the parents of today agree to surrender their sons and daughters, age 18-26, for such a similar 'honour'?"

Perhaps it's unfair to look at beliefs and actions from 100 years ago through a modern lens.

Summarize [give a brief statement of the main points of (something)]:

In 100 words, or less, summarize what this article is about. Feel free to use bullets, or dot jots, to get your points.

*Hint: It might be helpful to highlight sections of the article's text that you think are key points.