

A Journey of Remembrance

Description

Honouring fallen Canadian soldiers at Vimy and Ypres

By **Catherine Richards**

Previously published April 8, 2017

April 2017 will be the 100th Anniversary of the battle at Vimy Ridge during the First World War, and preparations are already well underway in France to mark the occasion. However, I have a jump on the tourists who will be visiting – I was there last September.

For many years the Vimy Memorial has fascinated me, especially after reading Jane Urquhart's engrossing novel *The Stone Carvers*, based on the creation and construction of the memorial. After WWI, France donated the Ridge and the land around it to Canada in recognition of the importance of the victory there. Our government commissioned Canadian sculptor and architect Walter Seymour Allward to build a memorial on the site. Allward searched years to find suitable stone for the work. He finally found what he wanted in an abandoned Roman quarry on the Adriatic Sea, in present-day Croatia. The limestone was brought to the site in France, and the figures were carved where they now stand. The monument took 11 years to build and was officially dedicated in 1933 – ironically, only 6 years before the start of WWII.

Two thousand fifteen was an important year for me as I reached a milestone birthday. My daughter had suggested a family trip to France to celebrate, as she knew I had always wanted to see the Vimy Memorial. Also, my father fought in the 2nd battle of Ypres in April 1915 and we could easily visit both places. Vimy and Ypres are less than two hours apart, Vimy in France and Ypres just over the border in Belgium. The planning took many months but finally, from various parts of Canada and the U.S., eight of us converged on Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris.

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We started our adventure at Vimy, made our headquarters in the nearby town of Arras and stayed in a 17th Century seminary that enjoys new life as a hotel. One can see the Memorial for miles around, dominating the flat landscape with twin pylons dramatically reaching for the sky.

Canadian University students, well-informed and enthusiastic, staff the visitor center and provide tours of important sites around the battlefield. Skies were dark as we started on a guided walk, and after about 20 minutes thunder crashed, lightning streaked and heavy rain pelted down. Our guide hurried us back to shelter but lightning had caused a short circuit in the tunnel lighting and we never did get to see the famous underground tunnels.

At the beginning of the war Canadians were split up among various British units. Eventually they fought together as the Canadian Corps, and the unity and camaraderie among the soldiers was apparent in the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge. Both the British and French forces had tried for 2 years to displace the Germans from this important stronghold, and failed. Historians say that the Canadian victory there was our 'coming of age' as a nation. Preparation for the Vimy attack took more than a year. Work included digging miles of tunnels to protect the troops from artillery fire. The finished system was about the size of a small town, concealing 24,000 troops, their supplies and medical stations. Pierre Burton's superb book *Vimy* provides a fascinating account of the preparation and the battle that began April 3rd, 1917.

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In spite of everything I had read about the Memorial, nothing had prepared me for the emotional impact of seeing it for myself: its amazing beauty, strength and simplicity. Walking around the massive structure is a humbling experience. There was such a mixture of emotions whirling in my head: admiration for the soldiers' dedication and bravery, and sorrow for the thousands of young men who would never return home. One approaches from the back, a very impressive sight, and most photos are taken from that angle. However, the perspective is completely different from the front. A cloaked figure, the largest of the sculptures, stands at the front of the monument overlooking the slope up which the soldiers struggled, behind a creeping artillery barrage, facing machine gun fire from above. This sorrowing woman represents Canada – a young nation mourning its dead. Today, sheep graze peacefully in the fields, but it was not hard to imagine the struggle that took place almost 100 years ago.

From Vimy we drove to Ypres and stayed at a hotel on the edge of town. After supper we went to the Menen Gate for a memorial ceremony that takes place every evening at 8 pm. It is a 'must' for visitors. An honour guard marches to the spot, a lone trumpeter plays the haunting *Last Post* and wreaths are laid by anyone who wishes to do so. Hundreds gather for the solemn ritual that has been enacted every night since 1919.

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Next day we all settled into a van for a daylong tour of the various battle sites around Ypres. I had told our guide about my father's involvement in the war, and at one point we stopped along a rural road. He said, "This is where the April 23rd battle took place, when the Germans used poison gas for the first time in warfare." My father was captured and spent the rest of the war in German prison camps. He never talked about his experiences. The only information we had was that he escaped from camp twice and was recaptured twice. But he missed the bloody battles of the next three years and so survived the war.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae

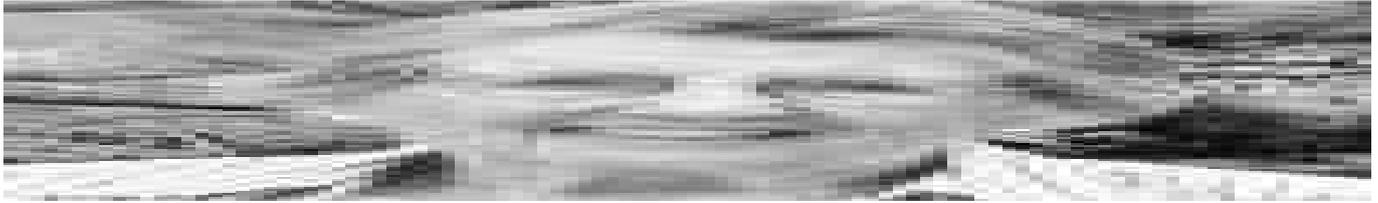
IN FLANDERS FIELDS WAS WRITTEN AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES ON 2 MAY 1915, WHEN McCRAE WAS BRIGADE-SURGEON, 1ST CANADIAN FIELD ARTILLERY.

We

drove to another site and stood before a large bronze plaque on which was embossed Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae's famous poem *In Flanders Fields*. He had scribbled the words on a scrap of paper at that spot after his close friend was killed in battle. Our guide asked my brother if he would like to read the poem aloud. Bill said he couldn't, he was too choked up. I couldn't do it either. So Bill's daughter read those well-known words as we stood in silence in the chill and the rain, a fitting setting for our thoughts. Along another road we stopped at The Brooding Soldier, a memorial erected by Belgium in honour of the Canadian forces, very moving in its stark simplicity. We walked through several reconstructed trenches, but of course nothing could replicate the actual conditions that the soldiers had to endure for months on end. Even today, live artillery shells are being dug up in the fields known as the Ypres salient where the same tracts of land were fought over time and again as one side, then the other, gained a few yards.

For the second week of our trip we travelled by train to Provence. Halfway there the sun came out, and blue skies were welcome after the constant clouds and rain. However, we realized that the gloomy weather we had experienced was very appropriate for our journey of remembrance.

Images: courtesy of Catherine Richards



Catherine Richards grew up in Ottawa, moved to the Montreal area and raised a family. She earned a B.A. (Honours) as a mature student. She has worked as a professional writer in advertising, promotional and speech writing and in Communications for provincial politicians at Queen's Park, Toronto. She now lives in NDG, participates in outdoor activities both summer and winter, and enjoys music, bridge and travel (and other fun stuff).



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Date Created

November 2018