

## **British Columbia Regiment Association Tour - Vimy (April 2007)**

Vimy Ridge was attacked, captured and held by the Canadian Corps on 9 April 1917 in one of the most successful Corps-level actions of the First World War - an action that is at the core of our idea of being Canadian. Suitably, The Dukes were represented at the 90th anniversary of the battle by one member of the Regiment, Sergeant Pierangelo Dalmagro, marching in the guard as well as five members of the BCR Association and one additional former Duke who we met on site will soon be rejoining the family.

The official ceremony of dedication was held to reopen the magnificent memorial after three years of restoration to bring the structure back to its initial pristine state. Time, weather and pollution had taken its toll since the memorial was initially opened in 1936 by King Edward VIII, and much of the beautiful limestone architecture was streaked with black soot, worn by erosion or deposited with lime, to the point where many of the 12,000 names etched on the memorial were obscured. Those names represented the brave Canadian soldiers killed in France in WWI and who have no known grave; the restoration will ensure that they will not be forgotten.

The ceremony, with the Prime Ministers of France and Canada, as well as Queen Elizabeth II in attendance, was an historic occasion that will be remembered by all who were there for a long time to come. There were 35,000 people in attendance, a 21-gun salute, four hundred-man guards representing the four Divisions of Canadians that attacked on that special day, and a fly past of Mirage III fighters by the French Air Force. This backdrop provided the appropriate solemnity, pomp and ceremony suitable for the occasion. Canadians can be proud that our memorial, the most beautiful on the Western Front, again graces with its pristine white brilliance that sacred battlefield which gave birth to Canada.

With that many Dukes in Europe, of course, things were not entirely serious for the whole weeklong tour of battlefields upon which the Regiment fought in two world wars. There was also a great deal of fun, laughter and camaraderie that always marks the gathering of Dukes anywhere.

The tour began with the advance party (Bob Hall from Lillooet) arrival on 27 March. Bob and I then spent two days in the Ypres area, visiting the familiar battlefields at St Julien, Passchendaele and Mount Sorrel, but also finding some interesting details of the fighting in areas not often visited. At St Julienne, in a farmer's field a couple of hundred meters north of the Vancouver Corner memorial, Bob found a WWI entrenching tool in quite good condition, though some of the digging blade had eroded away. We walked much of Grafenstafel Ridge and were able to find "Locality C" where the Regiment organized its famous defence of the apex of the front following the collapse of the French colonial Division on the Canadian Division's left flank.

It was during this action that Lieutenant Edward Bellew, the Battalion's machine gun officer, won the Regiment's first Victoria Cross - it was also the first Victoria Cross won by a Canadian officer in that war.

We also visited the bloodiest battlefield in the Regiment's history near Observation Ridge. More than 200 Dukes were killed in the counter attack of 3 June 1916 to retake the ridge south of Sanctuary Wood, which had been captured in a surprise attack by the Wuertembergers the previous day. The battle marked some of the heaviest fighting the Corps had seen thus far in the war, and was the first Corp-level offensive action by the Canadians - it was also the battle where the highest ranking Canadian Soldier to die in the entire war was killed. Major-General Mercer, commander of 3rd Division was visiting the Canadian Mounted Rifles when the attack started and he was mortally wounded by the initial bombardment. He died some hours later in the casualty clearing station directly behind the Canadian lines.

We then visited the site where the Dukes carried out the first major trench raid by 1st Canadian Division troops near Petite D'ouvres Farms south of Ypres. The layout of the ground is still the same as it was in 1915, minus the trenches and craters, of course! We were able to trace the whole operation, which was analyzed in detail at the time, following its superb success. The raid then served as a model for all British and Empire forces and the lessons learned were widely published.

On 1 April, Cam (Eagle Eye) Cathcart arrived from Vancouver and we drove down to the area north of Arras the next morning. We visited the British battlefield at Loos, and then drove to the crest of Hill 70, where the Canadian Corps carried out its famous offensive in August 1917 to capture the promontory and better secure the south flank of Vimy Ridge. The Dukes took the crest of the hill, now occupied by a hospital, on 15 August and, Private Michael O'Rourke won the Regiment's second Victoria Cross for evacuating several wounded soldiers under intense machine gun fire. Later that day we visited the battlefields southeast of Arras, where the Regiment helped break the Drocourt-Queant defensive fortifications on the right flank of the "impregnable" Hindenburg Line. During the storming of that heavily defended defensive system on 2 September 1918, seven Canadian soldiers won the Victoria Cross, including Sergeant Walter Rayfield of the British Columbia Regiment. Sergeant Rayfield captured a machine gun nest, hunted down a sniper and took several prisoners in his one-man tirade against the German Army that morning.

The following Day we visited various sites on the Somme battlefield, including Beaumont-Hamel, where the Newfoundlanders fell so thickly, and the 36th Ulster Division memorial, marking the location of one of the few successes on the opening day of the Somme. This memorial is of special significance to me, as my grandfather fought as part of that Division that day, as a soldier in the Royal Irish Rifles. Our visit to Adanac cemetery, near Regina Trench where so many Dukes lost their lives, was particularly poignant. The cemetery is in a remote field seldom visited, and contains the graves of two Victoria Cross recipients, including Piper James Richardson, VC of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish), who piped his Battalion over the top from the trench parapet.

We finished that day with a visit to the New Zealand Memorial near Flers and the South African Memorial at Delville Wood on the southern part of the Somme battlefield.

The following day we visited the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux and the area of the first day of the Battle of Amiens. That battle, which marked the start of the Final Hundred Days of WWI, and was noted in Field Marshal Ludendorff's memoirs as "the black day of the German Army", was a spectacular success for the Canadian and Australian Corps, who advanced more than ten kms on the first day alone. We also visited Adelaide Cemetery on the edge of town, where the Australian Unknown Soldier, who was repatriated to the Australian WWI Memorial in Canberra in 1993, lay buried for 75 years after his death.

We visited the unusual cemetery at Crucifix Corner, where the original Canadian 2 Division battlefield cemetery was expanded after the war to include French, French Colonial, Russian and other British Empire forces. The beautiful, small cemetery at Hangard Wood was the next stop on the itinerary, where Private John Croak, VC of Newfoundland is buried. He was serving with the Black Watch when he won the Victoria Cross on 8 August 1918 in a series of attacks on machine gun nests that eventually cost him his life. The impassioned family inscription asks those who wish to thank him to get down on their knees and pray for his soul.

Normandy was the next stop on the itinerary, delayed only slightly by a navigation error north of Rouen. The lesson was: watch the Highway number! After a delightful seafood lunch in Honfleur and a quick tour of the town, we visited the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion area of operations after they were dropped into France as part of the British 6th Airborne Division to protect the left flank of the landings. We located the two bridges destroyed by the Battalion that night as well as the Memorial marker where B Company spent the night in all round defence before moving to the Battalion concentration area the next morning.

The following day we visited Pegasus Bridge, where glider troops from 6th British Airborne Division captured the bridge over the Orne River by tour de force and captured a small house just across the river, making it the first house in France to be liberated on that eventful night. We then drove past Sword Beach, where 3rd British Division landed on 6 June 1944, and continued on to the Canadian Beaches at St Aubin-sur-Mer, Courselles-sur-Mer and Bernierres-sur-Mer. The fortifications at St Aubin-sur-Mer are particularly interesting; with one of the gun casements showing more than 30 shell scars from Sherman tank shots fired by the Fort Gary Horse on its seaward concrete casing. Eventually the muzzle of the gun was hit by a Sherman gunner and knocked out. We also visited the beach in front of the "Maison du Queens Own Rifles of Canada", where more Canadians fell than anywhere else that first day of the battle of Normandy. Both leading companies took over fifty percent casualties and the battalion lost more than one hundred men killed on the beach that day.

We then moved to the Juno Beach Centre, where we carried out a rendezvous with the second party of Dukes arriving from England. Ted Hawthorne from Vancouver and retired Sergeant Bob Remple (known as "Recce Bob" for the rest of the trip) from Brighton, England arrived to renew acquaintances dating back almost 40 years! We all toured the wonderful museum at the Juno Beach Centre together, as well as the remaining beach fortifications, which have been unearthed in the area.

The entire tour then visited Arromanches and had lunch overlooking the Mulberry artificial harbour artifacts. We then proceeded to the villages of Borlon and Authie where the famous encounter battle took place between 3rd Canadian Infantry Division reinforced by 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade and 12 SS Panzer Division (Hitler Youth). That battle raged for three days with much bloody fighting and both sides stopped in their tracks. The battle marks the limit of advance inland during the initial phases of the Battle of Normandy, providing room to the north for the build up to take place.

The next stop was the Abbe d'Ardenne, a medieval monastery, where more than 20 Canadians, who had been taken prisoner on 7 June 1944, were murdered by SS troops. Le jardin des Canadiens has been established inside the walls by the French to commemorate these murdered Canadian soldiers

That evening we attended a sunset memorial ceremony in the Canadian War Cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer, where 2000 Canadian soldiers are buried. It was a delightful and moving ceremony, and the group met up with old friends, including Jean-Pierre Benamou of the Bayeaux Normandy Museum, the South Alberta Regiment (SAR) tour led by Harry Quarton and Danny McLeod, and the Mayor of Cintheaux, M. Michel le Baron.

The following day we toured the area south of Caen, including the Canadian Battlefield Foundation Belvedere on Hill 67, which overlooks the area where the Black Watch took so many casualties during their attack as part of Operation Spring on 25 July 1944. As the fog lifted we moved north and followed the line of advance of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) on that same day, and visited their Regimental Memorial in Variere to commemorate their successes that night. We then followed the centerline of 2nd Division and 2nd Armoured Brigade during Operation Totalize on the night of 7/8 August 1944. This spectacular night attack included the first ever use of Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), where surplus self-propelled guns were converted to carry infantry troops. This superb advance of six miles then ran into severe resistance the following day, when 4th Canadian Armoured Division and 1st Polish Armoured Division took heavy casualties.

We then found the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders new memorial, commemorating their capture of Hill 195 on the night of 11 August. This hill was the initial objective of the 28th Armoured Regiment (BCR) two nights previous. We then visited the Canadian Cemetery at Cintheaux and paid our respects to our fallen comrades. We also visited the Polish Army Cemetery 1 kilometre south.

Our next stop was the British Columbia Regiment and Algonquin Regiment Memorial on Hill 111, marking that fateful first battle fought by the Regiment in the Second World War. We marked the visit with a minute of silence and a discussion of the bravery and sacrifice symbolized by the Memorial. The site is in good condition and is visited often by locals and tourists alike.

We then drove out to the site of the battle on the northeast slopes of Hill 140 and walked out to the copse of woods on the site, where various pieces of shrapnel and shell casings were found.

We then followed the advance of Operation Tractable from 14 August 1944, over the bridge at Rouvre, and through the town of Falaise to Trun, where we visited the 4th Canadian Armoured Division plaque on the town's War Memorial.

Our next stop was the SAR Memorial at St Lambert-sur-Dives, where Major David Currie won the Victoria Cross leading his combined-arms Combat Team during the closing of the Falaise gap. We then visited the 1st Polish Armoured Division Memorial at Mont Ormel, marking their valiant stand during the battle.

At that point the BCR tour advanced on two fronts, with Ted and 'Recce' Bob taking the northeastern route through Ypres and the rest of us taking the northern route to Dieppe. On arrival at Dieppe we visited the cemetery where most of the 800 Canadian soldiers killed that day are buried, and moved on to the left flank beach at Puys where the Royal Regiment of Canada landed in broad daylight against hundred meter cliffs and heavy machine gun fire covering the only draw off the beach - over half the battalion was killed or wounded and the remainder surrendered when they ran out of ammunition and no landing craft arrived for their evacuation.

The next day we visited the main beaches and paused at the RHLI Memorial to think of the dreadful casualties the battalion suffered on that beach, along with the Essex Scottish and the Calgary Tanks. We also visited the beautiful Memorial Park on the south end of the Dieppe beach where so many plaques and memorials have been placed over the years to mark the tragedy of 19 August 1942.

We then drove to the right flank beach at Pourville where the South Saskatchewan Regiment and the Cameron Highlanders landed. The bridge where Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Merritt won his Victoria Cross is still in the same place and is appropriately marked. The Memorial placed in the village by the two Regiments to mark their sacrifice is also in good condition and is a suitable tribute to their fallen.

Enroute to the Vimy area we visited two battlefields from a historic era: Crecy and Agincourt, both significant battle sites of the Hundred Years War of the 14th and 15th Centuries.

The next day the two main bodies of the tour carried out a second successful rendezvous in the Place des Heroes in Arras and claimed a ringside seat for the Freedom of the City ceremony at a table at an outdoor café overlooking the square. The ceremony was wonderful, with four Guards representing the four Divisions that fought at Vimy, an inspiring speech by the Prime Minister, and the Canadians marching through the streets with bayonets fixed, Colours flying and drums beating.

The BCR Association then established "Corps Headquarters" at their table and entertained dozens of soldiers from across Canada. 'Recce' Bob, acting as Orderly Sergeant, lived up to his name when he spotted a rare decoration on one of the fine looking members assembled for the parade - a Companion of the Order of the Red Tab. The only trouble caused that day was not unexpected, when Corporal Carl Gustav of the Seaforth Highlanders caused a bit of a row.

The next day was spent at the Vimy Memorial site, where the Tour added a member when Gauthier Hebbelynck joined the Association and the Tour at the same time. Gauthier is a welcome new member of the BCR Association, and an old friend of Sergeant Tony Harris. He is from Gent, Belgium and has been a keen student of Canadian military history for most of his life. We were delighted to have him join the group.

In the course of the day, in a farmer's field not far from the Memorial Park, the group found a WWI armoured trench shield, believed to be of German origin. Both sides in WWI used shields of this nature. The shields were embedded and camouflaged into the parapet and the firing slit used for sniping. With all members of the group playing a role in the recovery party, the trench shield is on its way to Vancouver for display in the BCR Museum.

This narrative now leads back to the beginning with the Canadian Ceremony of dedication of the restored Vimy Memorial. All in all, it was a fine trip, with minimum casualties, a wonderful sense of our Regiment's history and a great deal of fun. The solemn ceremony ending the tour was a wonderful tribute to fallen comrades and the soldiers represented by the names etched on the Memorial. They stand for the 110,000 Canadian troops who still represent their country in Cemeteries and on Memorials in six countries in Europe.

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.

*Col (Ret'd) Keith Maxwell  
Brussels. Belgium  
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