

Vimy relived through soldier's letter

By ALISON LANGLEY
Osprey News Network

Sitting atop a grassy hill in the summer of 1915, the young soldier looked down on a small church in Canaples, France.

Paint brushes and easel in hand, the Niagara Falls native painted what he saw before him.

Almost 90 years after Col. Charles Vandersluys put brush to canvas, his daughter Sally Hastings travelled to France to find the spot that had so inspired her father.

Armed with a photocopy of her beloved watercolour, Hastings and her daughter talked with local residents, hoping the church was still standing.

It was.

"We sat on the hill in the exact spot he sat when he painted," she said.

Mother and daughter opened a bottle of Champagne and raised a glass to toast the colonel.

"It was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life. I still come to tears when I talk about it," Hastings said of the trip she took several years ago.

The quaint little church is not far from Vimy Ridge, where Vandersluys and his younger brother Jack participated in one of the most celebrated battles of the First World War.

A member of the 44th Lincoln and Welland Regiment, Charles Vandersluys arrived in Europe in 1915 and fought alongside fellow soldiers with the 4th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

In April 1917, he was in northern France preparing for what would become known as the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Four Canadian divisions began an assault on the gently sloping hill 90 years ago today.

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Remembering our heroes from Vimy

Today is a monumental day in Canadian history.

Many will argue that although Canada got its independence from Great Britain on July 1, 1867, it was on a faraway battlefield on April 9, 1917, that Canada became its own nation.

Canadian troops entered the Great War, the war to end all

The seeds of a nation were sown upon the backs and sacrifice of Canada's soldiers

wars, fighting for the British. But the four divisions of the Canadian Corps stubbornly stuck together in the early years of the war.

By April 1917, things were not going well for the Allies. Casualties were piling up and there was little progress in beating back the German threat.

A French plan to defeat the Germans targeted a small escarpment in northern France, fortified by a series of German pillboxes, dugouts and trenches since the fall of 1914.

Previous attempts by French and British forces to take this ridge resulted in 190,000 casualties — but no success. The Germans held strong.

After the French and British failures, the task of securing Vimy

Ridge was handed to the Canadian Corps. What ensued was a well-planned and executed military operation of 100,000 soldiers, a tactical strike that is perhaps Canada's greatest moment on a field of battle, if not our history.

The artillery barrage on Vimy Ridge began April 2 after extensive preparations for the attack.

Over the course of a week, almost 1,000 Canadian guns consistently rained more than a million shells — 50,000 tonnes of explosives — on the German troops entrenched atop the ridge.

Then the infantry attacked.

In the early morning hours of April 9, Canadian soldiers streamed up the hill, following a path cleared by gunfire and hand grenades. Four Canadian soldiers were awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions that day — three of them posthumously.

By the evening of April 9, a large portion of Vimy Ridge was in Canadian hands. Within three days, the Canadians had taken the entire thing.

The toll: 10,000 casualties, including 3,598 dead.

They all fought for Canada, for our freedom. Many of them were young men at the time, some still in their teens, but upon their backs, upon their sacrifice, the seeds of a nation were sown.

We are eternally grateful.