

We Shall **NOT** Forget

The tangled routes

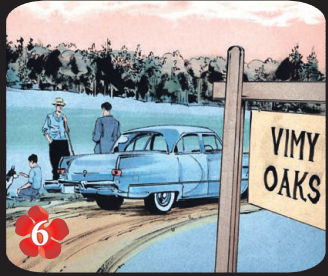


Illustration by Kagan McLeod,
story by Jim Coyle, *The Toronto Star*

Days after Canadians took back the ridge in 1917, a soldier walking the barren battlefield pocketed a few acorns from a shattered oak. He mailed them home to Scarborough where they were planted on the family farm. Now, 100 years and some surprising twists later, Vimy oaks, descended from those very acorns, will once again rise over the site of Canada's remarkable Great War victory.

(1) From the tower of a ruined abbey, just days after Canadian soldiers seized Vimy Ridge from the Germans, April 9 to 12, 1917, 28-year-old signalman Leslie Miller looked out over a blood-soaked wasteland. It was, the erudite country boy from just outside Toronto wrote in his diary, "by far the worst sight I have ever seen."

(2) Canadian forces had been ordered to seize the seven-kilometre-long ridge in northern France — with its commanding view of allied lines and a complex system of tunnels and trenches housing enemy machine-gunners.

The attack began on Easter Monday. After four days of fierce fighting, the ridge was in Canadian hands. But the toll was horrible — nearly 11,000 Canadian casualties, 3,600 of them fatal.

(3) Leslie Miller left the abbey to walk a battlefield still smoking and reeking of death. In the diaries he kept, he often remarked on the fine old trees of France.

(4) Now, he saw a landscape from which they'd been utterly stripped. And as he walked that day, Miller gathered a handful of acorns from a shattered oak, acorns he would mail home to his family in Canada asking that they be planted there.

(5) In 1919, after the First World War ended, Lt. Miller returned to the family fruit farm in what is now the Toronto suburb of Scarborough. There, on the 24 acres he was allotted, he built his own house, farmed and tended the oak saplings that had grown from those Vimy acorns he had sent home two years earlier.

(6) After Miller married, he and wife, Essie, named their farm Vimy Oaks. And on a summer day in the early 1950s, a chance encounter with visitors set in motion an unlikely chain of events that would eventually give new life to those acorns in ways beyond Miller's imaginings. Six-year-old Monty McDonald was out for a family drive. His father, Sandy, a teacher and WWII veteran, saw the "Vimy Oaks" sign at the laneway of the Miller farm on Kennedy Road. Intrigued, McDonald drove in. The two old sol-

diers, 20 years apart in age, hit it off right away. Soon, they were regularly spending weekends together working on the farm.

(7) "My brother and I used to go along with them from time to time and just sort of play around," Monty McDonald recalled. "But we soon got involved in planting potatoes, planting corn." The boy would help Miller, who never had children of his own, pick and spray apples, arriving at the farm in the cool of the evening right after supper. Later, "I'd drive the team of horses with the big tank sprayer and he would be going in among the trees with his big gun, spraying all the apples."

(8) The Millers sold the farm in the mid-1960s and moved into an apartment not far away. Monty McDonald continued to visit Miller at Sunnybrook hospital's veterans wing in the last years of the old man's life. "We talked about a lot of things, about the war, mostly humorous things," McDonald said. "But we never talked about the Vimy oaks at all." Miller died in 1979 at age 90.

McDonald, meanwhile, had graduated from university in chemical engineering, began a career in the petrochemical industry, married and had children. He often took his own kids back to the overgrown old property that had been the

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