

Pilgrimage to Europe honors memory of Canadian war dead

By Oksana Buhel

When Al Fraser, of Limehouse, fully immerses himself in his hobby, anyone who sees him may think Fraser is a visitor from a bygone era.

Fraser can tell you what the weather was like when Canadian soldiers fought the battle at Vimy Ridge, in which World War I battles Canadians figured most prominently and describe the strategies of these battles. He owns an authentic World War I uniform, mess kit, firearms and other equipment. It would be fair to say Fraser, in his own way, has become a figurative captive of the Great War.

Fraser is a member of the Museum of Applied Military History (MAMH), 20th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Forces. "We recreate uniforms and movements," Fraser explained.

Individual wars are studied in great detail by the members of the museum. As well as focusing on World War I, Fraser belongs to the World War II group of the museum. The Boer War and the Revolutionary War are also analyzed by museum members. Fraser explained interest is growing in the Korean War and there is a strong possibility it will be a topic for museum members to research. "People don't realize the extent of Canadian participation in the Korean War," Fraser insisted.

To collect information, MAMH members comb through books, documents and speak with people involved in the wars. Fraser's battalion did its research by visiting the sites of battles of both World Wars in which Canadians made a profound impact.

Fraser flew to France Nov. 1 with two other local battal-

ion members - Brian Cox, also of Limehouse and Fred Vansickle of Acton. The men were joined several days later by 10 other MAMH members and together they visited battlefields across France and Belgium.

The weekend before Remembrance Day, the battalion was at Vimy Ridge to honor the Canadian soldiers killed in the battle. "It was the largest gathering of Canadians in uniform since 1918," Fraser boasted. Foreign dignitaries, soldiers and members of the public were on hand to honor the fallen.

"It was cold and there was a little bit of snow blowing," Fraser recalled. "One of the members was making a presentation and he told us this was very much like the day of the battle of Vimy Ridge - we were all overwhelmed."

The official ceremony was similarly moving, Fraser said. "It was inspiring to see such a beautiful monument on such a large piece of Canadian land." (Although the property is in France, 250 acres surrounding Vimy Ridge has been designated Canadian land.)

The battalion then spent three days in Ypres, Belgium, site of the Mennin Gate. "Mennin Gate was the symbolic passage of soldiers to the western front," Fraser explained. Every evening at 8 p.m., streets around the gate are closed and the sentinel plays "Last Post." The gate itself is inscribed with names of 58,000 soldiers who died in battle.

The 20th battalion visited numerous cemeteries and left small Canadian flags on the tombs. "Sometimes the tombs didn't even have the name of the soldier, only a circle with a small maple leaf in the corner and the inscrip-

tion 'Soldier of the Great War,'" Fraser said.

"The tombstones really tell a story," he added. "Most of those soldiers out there were 17-18 years-old."

The eight-day tour ended in Mons, Belgium, where the battalion participated in the 75th anniversary of Armistice Day. On November 11, 1918, the last shots of World War I were fired in Mons. The battalion proceeded to St. Synphorien Cemetery just outside the town, where the last Canadian soldier who was killed, two minutes before the 11 a.m. end of the war, was buried. "It's quite a dubious honor," Fraser pointed out.

After the visit, the battalion had lunch with the mayor of Mons. "It was held at the City Hall," Fraser said, "right in the square the Canadian soldiers marched into."

On November 12, the battalion returned to Canada. "The whole trip was one big



The Museum of Applied Military History's 20th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Forces, visited Vimy Ridge Nov. 7 to honor Canadian soldiers who died during World War I. Front row, from left: Ed Anderson, Rob Greive, Dan Moreau, Gavin Watt, Al Morrow, Fred Vansickle (Acton) and Brian McLaughlin. Back row, from left: Gary Crocker, Al Fraser (Limehouse), Bruce Cane, Doug Lawrence, Ron Atkins, Jim McCrae and Brian Cox (Limehouse). photo submitted

research project," Fraser explained. Asked if he had plans for upcoming similar trips, he stated he is "still recovering from this one."

"When you're in the cemeteries, it's hard not to view war as an extreme waste," Fraser said. "I try to look consider the battles at their own value and not make any profound comparison."

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