

Going back— 90 years back

Today is Good Friday, a day that is typically associated with Easter and Holy Week.

It's the day that Christ died.

But this year, the Easter weekend holds a different significance for me. It's a time to think about many others who died 90 years ago.

By the time you read this, I will be on the first leg of an adventure—a pilgrimage to another time and place— following in the footsteps of soldiers of The Great War, who sailed to Great Britain to fight in the trenches of Belgium and France, in defence of king and country.

This tour will trace the routes of those veterans, as we land in London, then travel across the English Channel to experience the old battlefields of France and Belgium, and witness first-hand the places where, from 1914 to 1918, approximately 650,000 Canadians served, of which nearly 69,000 died.

I will be at Vimy Ridge on Easter Monday, commemorating the sacrifices of the Canadian soldiers, exactly 90 years to the day, when Canada faced her enemy for the first time under Canadian military leadership.

Interestingly, it too was Easter Monday 90 years ago, when the early morning barrage of Allied artillery opened up on the German trenches, softening them up for the Canadians to go over the top and face that deadly hail of machine gun fire from the batteries of Maxim machine guns on the German side.

I'll walk the trenches of Beaumont-Hamel, the place where our Newfoundland brothers were nearly slaughtered July 1, 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. That day, the Newfoundland Regiment fought its first engagement in France, its costliest of the entire war. At the time, Newfoundland was still a colony of the British Commonwealth, joining Canada in 1949.

The losses sustained by the 1st Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel were staggering. Of the 801 Newfoundlanders

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who went into battle that morning, only 68 were able to answer roll call the next day. The tally showed 255 dead, 386 wounded and 91 missing. There wasn't a family in St. John's who wasn't affected by that battle.

During this pilgrimage, I will walk the streets of the old cities of France and Belgium, those same cobblestoned roads where our grandfathers and great-grandfathers laughed, drank, marched, and sometimes died, as they left the security of their homes in Canada, to face an enemy on the other side of the globe, who was threatening their king and country.

There is also a personal agenda in my going on this trip— my grandfather was a veteran of The Great War.

Through two years of intensive perusing of his war service records from the National Archives of Canada, through countless hours of researching, reading, piecing together and at times, using intuition, I have been able to pinpoint a few places I know for certain he was stationed during his time overseas.

If possible, I hope to place myself in those same locations, to look around, and try to take myself back 90 years, and imagine what a 20-year-old farm boy from Canada felt as he left that same farmhouse in which I reside today, to face uncertainty in another world.

A world we now refer to as The Great War.

(Ted Brown can be reached at tbrown@independentfreepress.com)

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