

'The crackle of the bullets made us feel uncomfortable'

Continued from pg. 1

"In our classroom, after these parades, we would notice empty seats, and knew that those students had enlisted. However, many of us felt that we should finish the year and have that to our credit when we returned after the war. Many of us joined the C.O.T.C. (Canadian Officers Training Corps). We drilled and attended lectures after classes... Our classes became increasingly smaller as the term continued...."

Following examinations in May 1915, he moved to Niagara Camp by boat, where he would have his first taste of the rigors and discipline of military life.

In June, through his father's influence, he received a commission as lieutenant in the 13th Royal Regiment, a militia unit, the same unit later visited by Colonel Labatt, who had returned from the battlefields of France.

Labatt was commissioned to raise a machine gun battalion and chose Williams' regiment for the purpose. They would be the first of their kind in Canada, the 86th Machine Gun Battalion.

After months of training,

Williams and his comrades were shipped overseas in May of 1916.

Joining the 6th Brigade Machine Gun Company in October, 1916, his outfit had just been moved north from the Somme front. Williams was posted as second in command of a unit consisting of four guns. The Company's front was on Vimy Ridge, which had seen bitter fighting since the outbreak of war in 1914.

For months, the Canadians trained for a spring offensive against the Germans on the Ridge, utilizing full-size models of the Ridge to show their troops what their objective was, and how to take it—a revolutionary style of wartime training.

Vimy Ridge was a piece of key military real estate that both the British and French armies had attempted to take, but failed, and by April 1917, the Canadians were ready for their turn.



TED BROWN
at Vimy Ridge

"Easter Sunday, April 8, 1917, was a warm spring day. There were no parades, so we lay about soaking in the sun. It had been a cold and wet winter. We could hear church services for the troops being held all around us, but we had no service because we were too small a unit to carry a chaplain. We knew that the big push would be next day and that there might be great changes—perhaps the end of the trench warfare—perhaps even the end of the war...."

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That serene picture would be shattered the next morning, at 5:30 a.m., when hundreds of '18 pounder' artillery guns opened up on the German lines in a sleety snowstorm.

"Suddenly, as dawn was breaking, every gun on the whole front opened up. The bark of the 18 pounders and the roar of the heavy guns was deafening. To hear one another's voices it was necessary to put both hands around the other's ears and to shout. There was no let-up; the roar was continuous."

The strategy at Vimy was the first of its type, called a creeping barrage, where the artillery fired just ahead of the advancing troops, keeping the German soldiers in their underground barracks. As the next wave of artillery fire came, the soldiers would advance to the area that the big guns had just 'softened up,' and the soldiers were right up to the enemy trenches before the German army could come back out to reset their machine guns.

"We issued the rum ration just before our zero hour (to go over the top). The men were heavily loaded with equipment. One man carried the gun, another the tripod, a heavy steel affair, and others carried spare parts, belts of ammunition and water for the guns..."

Williams and his men advanced through the mud, shell craters and countless dead and wounded soldiers as they headed for their objective. The entire area was chewed up by the artillery and he found it was nearly impossible to find landmarks, to ascertain where he was.

"When we were in training I had



As the Freedom of the City parade wound down Sunday, Barry Timleck of Georgetown did his best to accept a little appreciation from Noemie Frion of Arras, after he presented her with a Canada Remembers pin.
Photo by Ted Brown

plotted our route and had planned to pass a collection of a few houses on the Lens/Arras Road, called "Les Tilleuls" (the linden trees). However when we reached this road I was not sure that we were in the place where we had planned to be. I spotted a Military Policeman who was directing the wounded and prisoners. I asked him where Les Tilleuls was. He replied, 'You are in the middle of it, Sir.'"

Ninety years later, Dave and Gerald Williams would see that same area, where a memorial to the Canadian artillery stands. Today, the traffic meanders through that intersection at Thelus, and all the houses have been rebuilt to their former glory. Unless one looks closely at the mortar lines in the brick, where the new mortar was used to rebuild, one can get the impression a war hadn't even taken place.

As the day progressed, Lt. Williams and his machine gun crew made it to their objective by mid-morning. They set up their four guns to defend against counter-attack. The area overlooked the Douie Plain.

Later that day, Williams received orders from his colonel.

"There was a pocket of resisting Germans not far from the base of the

Ridge. He (the colonel) planned to 'clean them out' and wanted to send in a detachment of infantry to do the job. I was to take a machine gun crew to the foot of the Ridge and cover them by our fire during the attack... I left the Sergeant to take charge of the other three guns while I took the fourth gun to the Ridge (Vimy). There was a drop of about one hundred feet to the Douie Plain below, and at that point it was quite heavily wooded. We slipped and fell during the descent. The ground was rough with some underbrush. We were soon detected by a German outpost. They machine-gunned us all the way down. The crackle of the bullets as they chipped off bark from the trees made us feel rather uncomfortable..."

In spite of the machine gun fire all around him and his men, Williams made it to the bottom of the Ridge without a casualty. They arrived at an area with only the remnants of houses, only the basement walls standing. He ordered his men to set up in that area.

"I spotted part of a house wall with some window openings. Here we were high enough to fire over the heads of the infantry, and also had a good field of fire. Our gun was scarcely in place when a sniper
See 'DOC', pg. 7



Second World War veteran Del Hickling of Acton, was joined by his son Don, Sunday as they laid a wreath on the grave of John Edward Hunt, who died September 9, 1918, and was Hickling's mother's first husband. The grave, located in Sun Quarry Cemetery near Arras, France, was visited as part of the Keeping the Memory Alive—Vimy Ridge 90th anniversary Commemoration tour.
Photo by Ted Brown

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