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The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour 2001

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The 2000 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour

Friday, May 25

On the plane. I have so many expectations. I can't believe I'm going to be at Vimy Ridge, Dieppe and the places I have heard and read so much about. I'm thinking of all the times I've explained to visitors [of the Canadian War Museum] the significance of Vimy and how it was won, or the Second World War vets that I've met and the stories they have told me. I just hope I can soak as much up as possible and make the most out of it. I have such high expectations of this trip and I know that I'll gain so much important knowledge impossible to gain elsewhere.

Marie Eve Vaillancourt
Carleton University

Saturday, May 26

After ten hours of travelling the 12 of us finally reached Paris. For weeks I had been anticipating the trip and now it was finally beginning. I realized that I would finally fulfill the promise I made to myself as a proud Canadian, to visit

The Group in the garden of the Abbaye d'Ardenne - l.to r.: bugler from the Queen's Own Rifles, Marc Milner, Dan Mader, Bobbi Milner, Jen Goertzen, Andrew Theobald, Edward Gidzinski, Arlene Doucette, Marie Eve Vaillancourt, Claire Wren, Paul Collins, Céline Garbay, Maryanne Lewell, Aaron Plamondon, drummer for the QORs, Rod Holloway.

and pay my respects to Canada's fallen. I don't know how I will react to visiting these sites. I don't know how emotionally draining the trip will be or how it will affect me.

Edward Gidzinski
University of Toronto

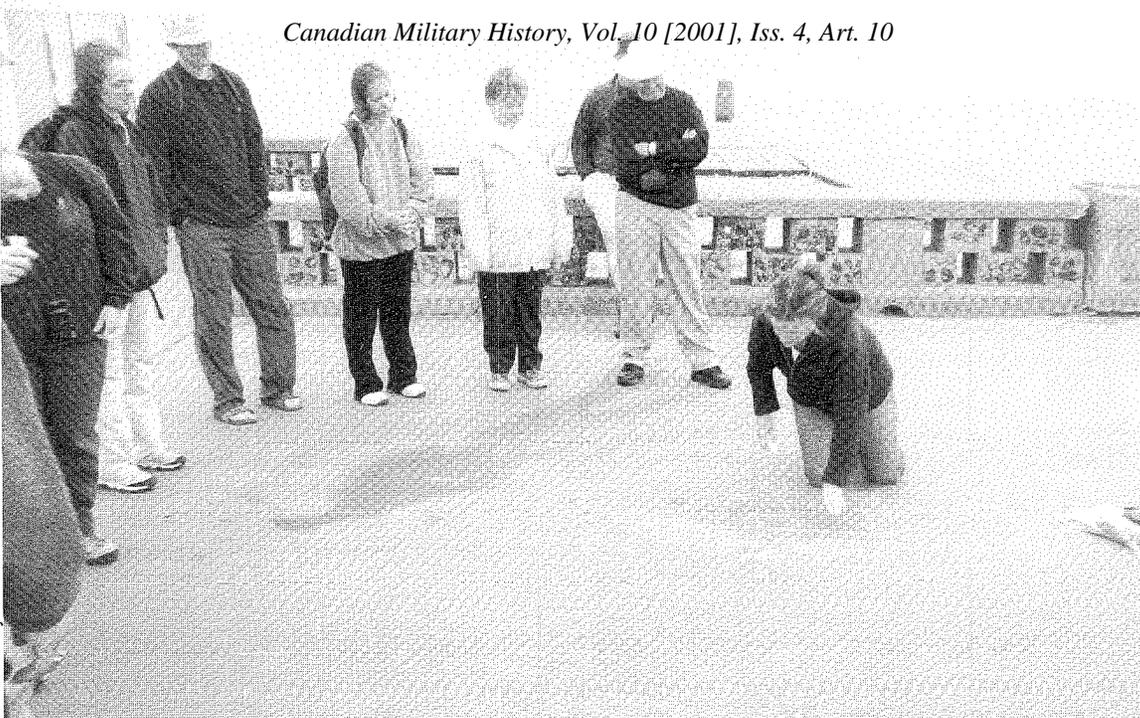
Vimy is an awe-inspiring place. The monument has soaring white columns which are beautiful and do justice to the sacrifice and achievements of the Canadian soldiers. Vimy is now a place of peace and there is a solemnity to both the location and the memorial which enhances the remembrance of what the Canadians accomplished here.

Rod Holloway
Queen's University

The rest of the day was spent at Vimy Ridge. This was, for obvious reasons, one of the most anticipated events of the tour... We first explored the tunnels dug in the chalk by the Canadian soldiers; how they lived, communicated, and prepared for battle. The sheer lack of space



Photo by Bobbi Milner



Mapping out the RHLI landing at Dieppe: Arlene Doucette sketches out a map for her briefing while Céline Garbay, Jen Goertzen, Andrew Plamondon, Claire Wren, Bobbi Milner and General Belzile look on – and Dave Patterson holds up the wall.

meant that the soldiers had to constantly be able to adjust to their environment. Moreover, the fact that the ground topside was still full of craters from shelling, after almost a century, was difficult for me to grasp....The monument itself was spectacular. Set in a cleared field, beautifully maintained, it proudly stood for all to explore. Even stepping onto the landscape filled me with pride when I suddenly became aware that I was standing on Canadian soil. The actual size of the entire monument was dizzying, and each statue deserved patient analyses.

Aaron Plamondon
Royal Military College of Canada

Sunday, May 27

Today, the Somme. It sounds so ambitious when phrased that way. We began at Beaumont-Hamel. There is something about that park which I find so soothing, and yet, it is a false sense of calm, knowing the horrific nature of the fighting that occurred there so long ago....On the first day of the Somme, there would have been approximately 2500 dead in the current parameters of the park's space. It's so difficult to imagine loss on that scale, and yet, in such a small space. I stood for awhile at the high ground in front of the German lines, and just reflected on the view....I think that's what defines the First World War sites for me the most, this sense of unease lurking just below a thin veneer of peace and rest. It's everywhere. In the contrast between

the massive numbers and the simplicity of the small graveyards with their rows of plain white stones; in the knowledge of the nightmarish conditions of the men fighting contrasted with the bucolic farmland that exists there today. It's a paradox that is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile.

Maryanne Lewell
University of New Brunswick

Tuesday, May 29

I had the honour of talking to the director of the Vimy site. M. Moree proved to be a knowledgeable conversationalist. He said something that provided closure to my thoughts about the D-Q battle and to the day's activities in general. He said "all history teachers should have the opportunity of visiting the battlefields in Europe where the Canadians fought." I couldn't agree more.

Rod Holloway

We drove up an old bumpy dirt road, between two farmers' fields to find the Quebec cemetery. This small cemetery is the resting place of 189 French Canadians, mostly Van Doos from Quebec City, my hometown. The headstones are set close together and the dates on them are almost all August 27, 1918. It is probably the smallest cemetery I have seen so far, but to recognize many of the last names and read the

epitaphs in French really hit me hard. I had to gather my strength to walk the rows and pay my respects to each one. I lay down a maple leaf for Champlain, 21 years old, a year younger than me....Just trying to record this in my journal is difficult, there are no words for what it felt like to be there, knowing these were all French-Canadians. ...I signed the register "Je Me Souviens."

Marie Eve Vaillancourt

Thursday, May 31

We headed to Pourville, codenamed Green Beach, to hear Céline's presentation on the South Saskatchewan. She was brave enough to share with us her conversation with Leroy, a South Sask vet who was there when Merritt was winning his VC.

Marie Eve Vaillancourt

We sat on the grass near the river Scie, the same river that Leroy had to swim across. Seeing it, and seeing the bridge that features so prominently in the story of the South Saskatchewan Regiment's landing here was

unreal. As soon as I started to talk I felt a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. I could feel everyone listening though, and I was glad that Leroy had agreed to share his story with me. I told it from the beginning, from his point of view. I told the group about how he'd never shared the details of the war with anyone, not even his family. And I told them how it was the most difficult interview I'd ever done....After my presentation, I felt relief that it was over, and a nakedness of sorts. I felt like I had bared my soul, and it wasn't even my story. I wonder if that's how Leroy felt after speaking to me.

Céline Garbay
University of Regina

Dr. Milner reminded us of something *very, very* important. Sometimes we see people having fun (ie. on the beaches of Dieppe) and we think that they are having so much fun that they are not respecting those who died. We *must* remember that these men died to give us a world where we could be carefree. This is the life they wished for us and we cannot begrudge these people their happiness.

Claire Wren
Université Sainte-Anne

Saturday, June 2

We visited some huge German batteries at Longues. These guns now sat silent and broken. Their power to inflict damage and destruction had been ended. Children played upon the bunkers where once, men who wore the twisted cross, had intended to send others to their doom. The spectacle encouraged me in a strange manner. It occurred to me that this was a most fitting memorial to the free men who had destroyed Hitler's evil designs. The weakest of all, children, frolicked upon the abandoned weapons of the "supermen" who planned to enslave the world. This was one of the best and most inspiring sights that I have ever seen.

Rod Holloway

We travelled to Juno Beach...quite by accident we met an older gentleman who was a young boy during the occupation and he told us the Nazis had forced him to work for them, carrying water to all the gun positions and bunkers. He was thrilled to meet us, and thanked us for being Canadian. I filled up with pride.

Edward Gidzinski

A little map orientation at "Hellfire Corner," Villons-les-Buissons: Milner points while Andrew Theobald, Paul Collins and Ed Gidzinski look on.

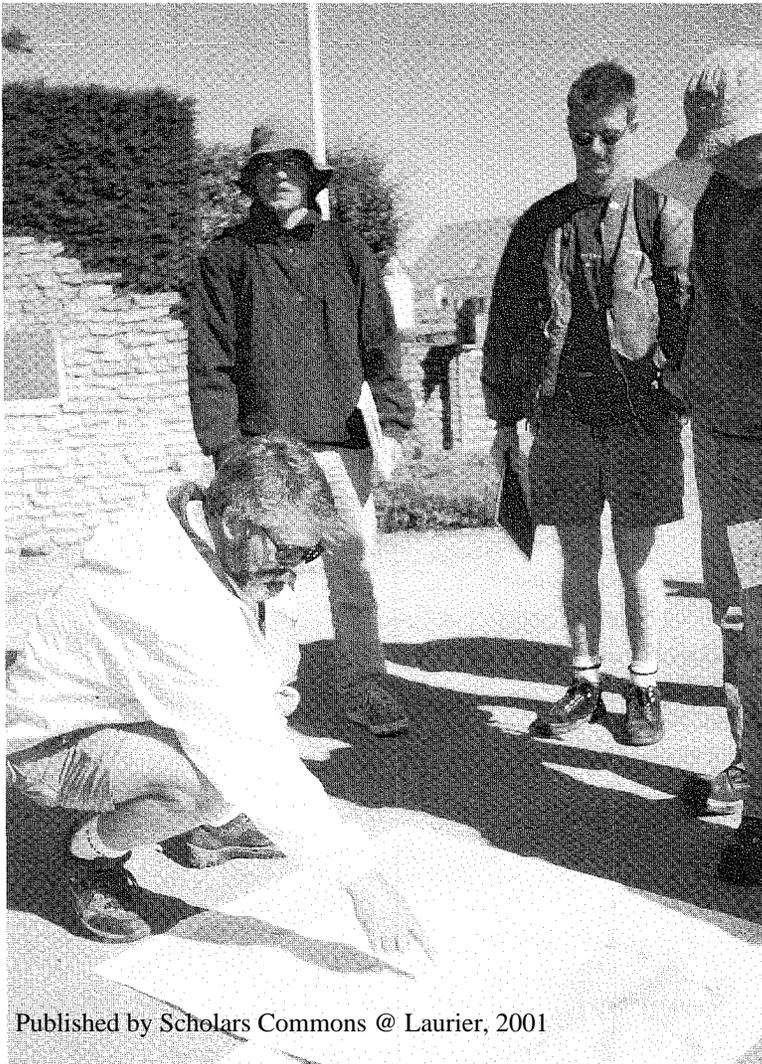




Photo by
Marc Milner

Above left: M. Jacques Vico addresses the Tour during our visit to the Abbaye d'Ardennes. **Above right:** Céline Garbay (in raincoat), a former member of the Royal Regina Rifles, laying a wreath at the Regina Rifle Regiment monument in Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse during the local ceremony, 6 June 2001.



Photo by
Marc Milner

At the Canadian cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer, I looked up Doucette/ Doucet in the registry and found four...None of these men are related to me (to my knowledge), though they share my name....For the first time since coming here and seeing so many thousand names, these four men bring home the tragedy to me in a way that the others did not. I have something in common with each of them, and although individually these things may be trivial, the combined impact is more than the sum of the parts: Pte. Aldie Doucet's stone reads "A. Doucet, Pte. Age 24." My initial, my age. Pte. Charles Doucette, like me, is a Nova Scotian, and Pte. Lawrence Doucette, also a Nova Scotian, and, like me, his father's name is Joseph Doucette.

Arlene Doucette
University of Waterloo

Monday, June 4

We were standing in this little garden behind the Abbey. M. Vico spoke very slowly in measured tones and Col. Dave translated. By the time he finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. Some of the girls were really upset. The guys put up a brave front, but we were all very quiet after, and most went off by themselves. It was pretty emotional. Here we were, standing in the very garden where, one by one, the Germans brought these young soldiers in and either beat them to death or shot them in the back of the head....Eighteen in total. The bastards. I know the war has been over for 56 years, but I still think the Germans have a lot to atone for.

Paul Collins
Memorial University of Newfoundland

We are at the Abbaye. I'm a little nervous going in. I don't know what to expect. I've heard what

happened here and I'm afraid what I'll feel. The feeling was chill and oppressive. I walked up the stairs with my heart in my throat - it was a physical reaction to the place. Call me paranoid but I've never felt such a feeling before. As Dave translated what M. Vico said, his familiar voice relating such unbelievable images, I began to cry and I am crying still. I felt physically ill and overwhelmed with a million feelings - disgust and pity, anger and shame. I knew they must have been so afraid, knowing what was coming. One after another - bullet to the back of their heads. Hearing the shot and the thud of their comrade's bodies and not being able to do a thing to prevent their own inevitable turn. The horror of Nazism *has* touched Canada - it killed those Canadian soldiers. The Holocaust was not only about Jews, it was about hate and brutality and the degradation of man.

Jen Goertzen
University of Calgary

Wednesday, June 6

D-Day. Today we went to our first ceremony at St. Aubin-sur-Mer and then on to one more at Bernières-sur-Mer. It was very emotional to see veterans remembering their fallen friends or families remembering their fallen loved ones. It is true: "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old. Age shall no weary them, not the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them. And when you go home, tell them of us and say For you tomorrow, we gave our today." It was the last part of this that really got into my heart. I am afraid that our youth are forgetting what so many have sacrificed. The Normandy Foundation is doing a wonderful job of

preventing this. I can only hope to do my part as well.

Claire Wren

[Céline Garbay was interviewed on CBC Radio while in France - here is a portion of the transcript]:

Sheila Coles: Well give us a sense of how significant D-Day is in France.

Céline: Well, I'm still trying to get that sense myself, actually, but when we were standing listening to prayers today there was a nine-year old boy standing next to me and he was quiet and respectful and um, when it was over I turned to him and I asked him if he understood what was going on and he said "of course I do," and I asked him how, if he learned it in school. And he said, "no, ever since, you know, a couple years ago my grandfather started telling me about the war" and I asked him well what do you feel standing here and watching this, and he said, "I feel free." And that just blew my mind - I've never heard a nine-year-old boy talk like that before....

Sheila: All right Céline, thank you very much. It sounds like it's been a life-changing experience for you.

Céline: It has, definitely.

I hung up the phone, put my head in my hands, and cried.

Céline Garbay

Thursday June 7

A long day interspersed with ceremonies and regular presentations. The almost brand-new Toronto Scottish Memorial at Point 67 is the best Second World War Canadian memorial I have yet seen. Not only is it visually striking, but the accompanying text - which includes a synopsis of the unit's history - is much more informative than most.

Andrew Theobald
University of New Brunswick

I went to a small town in Normandy which the Regina Rifles liberated...The weather was very wet, it was raining a lot. But that didn't matter because hundreds from the town attended. During the ceremony Céline was very emotional. When the Canadian national anthem was played,

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I, along with the others tried to sing the words, but couldn't because it was too emotional. When the members of the town noticed this, the mayor, plus others I think, began to sing the words that they had written before them. It was truly a touching moment, when French citizens sang the Canadian anthem because we couldn't.

Edward Gidzinski

Postscript

My education is continuing. I will go home with a more accurate knowledge of the World Wars as a result of this trip. My experiences have given me a knowledge of and an appreciation for the Norman people and their culture. My attitudes toward veterans, Remembrance Day and Canadian history have been altered. I have a more profound feeling of gratitude toward our veterans than ever before. I believe that I will now teach Canadian history with more passion than I possessed prior to this trip. I am convinced that I will remember with a deeper sense of gratitude after seeing what I have seen on this tour.

Rod Holloway

And for me, as a Canadian, these events must be remembered because if they aren't, their sacrifice, their bravery will have been wasted and this cannot occur. It is unthinkable. That's why I feel fortunate that I'm about to enter the teaching profession, because I will have the opportunity to share this with the youth of Canada....That's why this trip has been so important to me, I have experienced something that most Canadians will never be able to do, and I have both the means and the opportunity to share it with others.

Edward Gidzinski

My fellow students amaze me. These young people are intelligent and possess a sophistication that I lacked at their age. They are interested in Canada's military history and in preserving the evidence of our nation's achievements in war and in general. I am most impressed by these youths and feel confident that they will not forget or diminish the triumphs and tragedies of our past. I hope that these excellent young people, drawn from across Canada, will hold the torch of remembrance higher and brighter than my generation has done.

Rod Holloway