

The Battle of Vimy Ridge 100th Anniversary Gala and Dinner

Much has been written, especially in this, the 100th Commemorative year of preserving and promoting Canada's First World War legacy as symbolized with the victory at Vimy Ridge in April, 1917, in addition to recognizing its milestone whereby Canada came of age and as a result was then recognized on the world stage.

Our RCL Vimy Br. 145 membership recognized the fact some three years ago or more, that much would be said and written asking the question, were we, as Canadians, doing enough to honour and respect what those sacrifices in France and here at home delivered 100 years ago? As our recent Branch President noted in his take over reminders to the membership as a whole, and paraphrasing Winston Churchill's words, 'We must never, never, never take our freedoms for granted'.

And so, led by an outstanding gala dinner project leader, Bob Waring (supported by his wife Dayle), likely over the course of 2-3 years, the ideas were hatched, thoroughly discussed (no doubt over several cold pepsi's ???) and plans for this ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME CELEBRATION began to come together. Over time, and under the chairmanship of LCol (ret'd) Joe Murray, representatives from Fanshawe College, GDLS Vehicle Liaison, RCR Museum, 1st Hussars Museum, Elgin Military Museum, 1st Hussars Cavalry Troupe, representatives from the Victoria Cross Club, WWI Medal and Vehicle displays and the Hamilton WWI Signal re-enactors were all recruited and produced authentic representations of many of the WWI experiences from the past at the London Convention Centre in London, ON.

The aim of our branch members, right from the get-go, was to plan a once-in-a-lifetime gala event for a minimum of 1,000 sit-down dinner guests, to be entertained for the evening, the proceeds of which would support our London Poppy Fund. We, the membership of some 120 members, would have to put on our 'working boots and thinking hats' and get out and recruit these required supporters, at a charge of \$100 a pop!

The students of Fanshawe College created a fabulous video that produced historical footage and photos with music to tell a Canadian story of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. One should note that the camera projection mapping techniques that these students used to bring historic photos to life in a dynamic way was achieved by converting two dimensional photos into three dimensions. Truly, the integration of motion graphics and music fused the videos together to create a compelling tribute to the bravery of our Canadian Soldiers. You must remember, the entire thrust of the evening was to remind our guests that some 100,000 Canadian Soldiers fought in this four day battle, which marked the first time all four of our Divisions were engaged side by side. Canada had 7,004 wounded and 3,598 killed in this battle!

Students from the same college, different faculty, created over 100 plaster Vimy Ridge monument centrepieces, vinyl poppy placemats, vinyl signs and various displays.

There was an engaging photo booth; WWI vehicles on display; re-enactors doing their thing; and a mixed media installation of World War era Bell tents. The piece-de-resistance of the evening was the eight foot tall ice sculpture of the Vimy Memorial and the Grieving Mother (Bereft sculpture) in commemoration of the birth of our Nation (sculptured by the Ice Culture Company in nearby Hensall who have been creating renowned ice sculpting for events all over the world). The musical entertainment throughout the evening was handled by the London Fire Fighters Pipe Band; the Amabile Young Men's Ensemble, and the HMCS Star Dance Ensemble. An absolutely fabulous and profitable silent auction was held prior to and following the conclusion of the event, all proceeds again supporting the London Poppy Fund.

Of course, there were many VIPs in attendance, which if we may elaborate consisted of the Chief of Defence Staff, General Jonathan Vance, OMM, MSC, MID, CD who was our guest speaker; LCol Roger Vandomme, Deputy Defence Attache with the French Embassy in Canada; London MPs Peter Fragiskatos, Irene Mathyssen, Kate Young and Karen Vecchio; RCL Dominion Vice President Bruce Julian; and our own Vimy Br 145 President, Randy P. Warden.

Opening ceremonies as narrated by emcee Jim Swan were exhilarating with head table guests being piped in, followed by the Colours and Flag Party; the usual toasts; recognition of the Fallen Comrades' Table; grace from our local Branch Chaplain, Rev. Frank Mantz, and followed by a sumptuous meal.

Naturally, an amazing evening like this wouldn't have been quite right without the numerous March Past and Toasts (thanks to the music of our own Branch Conductor of the Vimy Band, Mr. George Laudlow who took over the Vimy Band in 2003). Addresses to those in attendance were provided by the Governor General's video, CDS address, Remarks from France's representative, as well as our own City Mayor, Matt Brown. It is fitting to note that our Governor General, David Johnston had this to say to our guests in attendance, through the media of his video:

"Victory was achieved at Vimy through incredible struggle,
determination and bravery. Today, 100 years later, we honour
their eternal sacrifice; we mourn their loss; and
We Remember Them."

When the solemn Remembrance Ceremony closed the evening's program, and in order to allow our audience to experience first-hand the emotion and power of two of the most iconic military pieces of music, the Last Post and Rouse, a long time trumpeter with our Vimy Orchestra, David Cunningham, played the bugle used by his grandfather, Pte George William Shaw. Pte Shaw enlisted 15 August, 1915 and was the bugler of the 3rd Btn, 1st Brigade of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He blew this same bugle as the Btn prepared for the attack on Vimy Ridge at the caverns at Maison Blanche. Their attack was mounted at 0530 hrs, 09 April, 1917, and they reached their target at Farbus Wood at 1427 hrs the same day. The Last Post, along with the Rouse, sounding again on this same historic instrument a mere 100 years later, certainly ensured a rare and

authentic moment of Remembrance for all those attending this successful and certainly historic event on behalf of the Royal Canadian Legion. Just to make that aspect of the evening's performance perfect, that same bugle was handed over to WO Bruno Godere, the Canadian Forces Central Band Bugler, who would be attending the celebration and festivities one week later in Vimy, France. A closing commentary was given by our own Vimy Br. 145 President, Randy Warden.

Dancing followed to the strains of the HMCS Star Band until the wee hours!

Vimy members responsible for the Gala Committee's efforts:

Zenon Andrusyszyn	Don Bondy	Allan Finney
Ian Haley	Brian Harris	Steve Hartwick
Jerry Juraszko	Elizabeth King	George Laidlaw
Joe Murray	Sam Newman	Bill Pettipas
Rick Phillips	Keith Roden	Beth Saylor
Gail Sneddon	Bruce Stock	Jim Swan
Gerry Treble	Randy Warden	Bob Waring
Dayle Waring		

A big thank you to our Project Leader, Bob Waring, and all of his extraordinary team of volunteers!

It was our intention to leave all of our attendees at this Gala event with the knowledge that a near miracle of ingenuity, co-operation and courage among Canadian Corps volunteers had taken place on that day of 9th April, 1917. It was on that day that some 80,000 Canadians, fighting for the first time as one Army representing all of Canada, streamed up that ridge and in no time at all had accomplished what no Allied Army had been able to do in nearly three years of killing in Europe. They seized the Ridge from a formidable and entrenched German Army. Some say those young soldiers also breathed life into a fledgling nation - Canada!