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Verrieres Ridge

A Place of Memory

W. James Booth and Madeleine L. Booth

Fifty-eight years ago one of the costliest battles of Canada's involvement in the Second World War was fought in a cluster of villages and farm fields in Normandy, a few kilometers south of Caen. This was the battle for the Verrieres Ridge, a key part of Operation Spring launched on 25 July 1944.

C.P. Stacey, the official historian of the Canadian army, wrote of that site:

If the traveller be Canadian, he would do well to stay the wheels at this point and cast his mind back to the events of 1944; for this apparently insignificant eminence is the Verrieres Ridge. Well may the wheat and sugar-beet grow green and lush upon its gentle slopes, for in that now half-forgotten summer the best blood of Canada was freely poured upon them.

The youths who died there have a publicly commemorated place of burial at Bretteville-sur-Laize (Cintheaux). Among them, Augustine Johnny, an aboriginal, age 25; Phil Griffin, a McGill student, age 26; Gordon Hutton, a labourer from the Montreal suburb of Verdun, age 19; Fred Janes, a clerk at the Royal Bank on Laurier Street in Montreal, age 33: all killed in the course of the struggle for Verrieres Ridge. The Bretteville cemetery is a very Canadian place: because of the flag that flies at its gates, and because of the maple leaf engraved on every tombstone. But the place of their sacrifice is very Canadian too, yet for the past half century and more that battleground has remained unmarked and much as it was in the summer of 1944. Only someone versed in the history of the Canadian army in Normandy, or tied to that locale by personal or family memories, would have paid any attention to the fields and tree-crested ridge known as Verrieres. Indeed, when my father, brother and I visited the area in 1995 it was

entirely devoid of markers save for a commemorative plaque in St. Andre-sur-Orne.

The unacceptable silence surrounding this locale of sacrifice was corrected this past year with the creation of a memorial site on Point 67, just south of Ifs, overlooking the landscape upon which the battle for Verrieres Ridge was fought. A memorial to the members of the Toronto Scottish who fought there, an explanatory plaque outlining the events and significance of Operation Spring, and the Canadian and French flags were put in place by the Toronto Scottish, Professor Terry Copp and the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation assisted by the Comite Souvenir Juno and other local people and civic authorities in the area. This past summer, 58 years to the day after the battle, a related silence was corrected at the same site. Particularly hard hit that day was the Black Watch (RHR) of Canada, which lost 123 killed, 101 wounded and 83 taken prisoner in the morning hours of 25 July 1944. On 25 July 2002, a delegation led by three Black Watch veterans of the battle (my father and Madeleine Booth's grandfather, William Booth, Bruce Ducat, James Wilkinson) unveiled a plaque to the Black Watch on Point 67. The Black Watch Association, the current Regiment under its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce Bolton, Professor Terry Copp and the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation assisted by the Comite Souvenir Juno and local people and civic authorities were instrumental in seeing this project through to completion.

The ceremony itself was very moving. In addition to the Black Watch veterans of the battle for the Verrieres Ridge and their families, local townspeople, civic dignitaries from the nearby villages, current members of the Black Watch



William and Madeleine Booth prior to the unveiling of the Black Watch plaque at Point 67.

and two Canadian young people working for the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation were on hand for the dedication. The youngest person present was nine years old (Madeleine Booth) and the oldest were the veterans of the battle - representing a broad swath of Canadian history. The Black Watch's Pipe Major (retired) MacKenzie, played a traditional lament, "Flowers in the Forest," and Madeleine Booth handed out wild poppies she had collected from the field surrounding Point 67. This was followed by reminiscences from James Wilkinson, a speech by M. Noury of Comité Souvenir Juno and the dedication was read by William Booth. After the dedication, there was a wreath-laying at a Black Watch memorial in St. Andre-sur-Orne and a generous and warm reception offered by the

Mayor of Ifs. Particularly moving were the expressions of gratitude made to the veterans by young French people at the ceremony and by passersby in their hotel in Caen. The next day, a Black Watch delegation led by Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce Bolton and Captain Andrew Kerr, visited the Canadian Military Cemetery at Bretteville-sur-Laize (Cintheaux) and left flags on the graves of the Black Watch soldiers buried there.

The site of the plaque offers an excellent vantage point for understanding the events of July 1944 in this corner of Normandy, and in particular for seeing how the bloody events of 25 July unfolded. Now Canadians visiting the region have the opportunity to comprehend more

The Dedication ceremony. From left to right: LCol Bruce Bolton, veterans William Booth, James Wilkinson and Bruce Ducat, Pipe Major MacKenzie (retired), M. Noury and Captain Andrew Kerr.





Celine Garbay, a Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Guide, and two Black Watch veterans, James Wilkinson and Bruce Ducat, share a moment after the dedication ceremony.

fully this moment in their history. Yet at least as important as the site's educational value is the fact that these fields have now become a memorial location, a place of memory. The meaning of that memorial rests in its public acknowledgment of the tie between those fields and the history of Canada, and in the expression of gratitude for the sacrifice of those who gave their lives there. Madeleine Booth wrote in her

diary that witnessing the dedication ceremony this July allowed her to understand that the life we enjoy was bought for us by the sacrifice of those young people so many years ago. Learning for the future, understanding the past and acknowledging our debt are all part of the reason for the creation of this memorial site.

The site can be easily reached from Caen, by heading south on N158 (direction Falaise) and exiting towards St. Andre-sur-Orne. The site, marked by Canadian and French flags, is clearly visible just to the north of St. Andre-sur-Orne.

W. James Booth is Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Vanderbilt University. His father, William Booth, dedicated the plaque at Verrieres Ridge on 25 July 2002. Madeleine Booth, born in Montreal, is now a student at the University School of Nashville

