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The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour, 1997

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The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour, 1997

This year the Study Tour began in Portsmouth and the students got a thorough introduction of the naval contribution to the war and Operation Overlord. The group then crossed the Channel following the route the Canadians took in 1944.

From their base at the Abbaye d'Ardenne, the students explored the Normandy battlefields and attended commemorative ceremonies marking the 53rd anniversary of the D-Day landings, and the achievements of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion on the night of 5/6 June 1944. Everyone had a chance to talk to Brigadier James Hill, who commanded the 3rd Parachute Brigade, which included the Canadians. On June 7th the students joined representatives of the local communities in a solemn service of remembrance for the young Canadian soldiers taken prisoner and then executed by the 12th SS Hitler Youth Division.

The third annual Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour was a great success. The Study Tour Director, Dr. Marc Milner of the University of New Brunswick, is best known as a naval historian but he is also the son of a Third Canadian Infantry Division gunner and a long-time student of the campaign

in North-west Europe. Marc provided outstanding leadership ably assisted by Dr. Serge Durlinger and Dr. Janine Stingel, both recent graduates of McGill University. Serge has now served as the tour's second-in-command on all three Study Tours handling administration, liaison with French officials and assisting in the battlefield studies.

After Normandy the Study Tour moved north to Dieppe, the First World War battlefields and the memorials at Vimy and Beaumont-Hamel, and to then to the Channel Ports and Bruges where operation south of the Scheldt Estuary were examined. After a quick crossing to the UK and a day exploring London they returned to Canada.

In 1998 Terry Copp will return to direct the tour. The Foundation has decided to focus the 1998 tour on Normandy and the Liberation of Holland. A new group of young Canadians will fly directly to the continent and will be based at Bruges and Nijmegen after the Normandy portion of the trip.

The following impressions of the 1997 tour offer some idea of the impact of the program on young Canadians.

Andrew B. Godefroy

Royal Military College of Canada

When we reached the military cemetery at Reviers all previous impressions I had about loss of life were quashed. Standing in the quiet grove, staring at row after row of dead men my own age, their lives cut short by this tragedy, I was made painfully aware that my freedom was not free. In front of me were a thousand mother's sons. I tried to read every epitaph, until the lump in my throat brought a tear to my eye. I was very sad that it had to come to this. That so many Canadians had to die. I can only make

sure that I make every effort to teach others what I saw here today. No Canadian can forget this.

As the sun set we returned to the Abbey, most of us with paled faces and pensive looks. We have been changed forever today, changed by what we have seen. I know what I have seen and felt will stay with me forever. In the evening Professor Milner took us into the garden for our first look at the Abbey memorial. No one had to tell us to stand mute. The garden speaks volumes of silence. Canadians were murdered here. I try to grasp the implications of what has happened here. It seems impossible at times. Is this the

price we had to pay? If so let it be known to all Canadians what happened here. Let us never forget this....

We are off to visit the Canada Museum in Adegem, Belgium. I am still in awe of the efforts of one man. If only such private devotion to memory existed in Canada. We spent a couple of hours admiring the displays and visiting with the curator. He has put in an incredible amount of personal effort into the museum. Displays, dioramas, and stained glass windows. It was incredible. I was struck by his passion for the project (almost \$5 million into it) and his promise to honour the memory of the Canadian soldiers who liberated his country.

I believe that the onus is now on the 12 of us. We were given the opportunity this summer to experience something that way too few Canadians will ever see. We now have to take this knowledge and put it to good use. Not just in essays for classes at University, but out to the public at large. I feel I have a responsibility to pass on what I have learned to others, and to encourage my friends to learn more for themselves. I feel I owe at least that much to those who fought and died for my future.

Robb Furlong
University of Waterloo

Our first stop was at St. Aubin-sur-Mer, a very impressive beach with a large seawall. We met an old local who was here as a child when the invasion occurred. He recounted his story for us and told how the Allies stormed the beach and bombed the town. The locals were terrified but exuberant, knowing that liberation was coming. In fact, he was so interested in sharing his story that he rushed home on his bicycle and got a collection of old photos and magazines that he had kept since the war. One of them was the "Picture Post," June 24, 1944. It was very moving and illustrative of the importance of the actions of the soldiers in the lives of the people of France.

When we stopped for lunch in Rots, a local woman, who was returning from her weekend home in Paris, invited us into her garden. We lunched in her yard and she supplied us with some Calavados and offered us some tea and dessert. We were all very moved and honoured

that a stranger, upon recognizing us as Canadians, invited us onto her property and ensured that we were content and well looked after....

We left Normandy for the last time today and had a hard day of driving for Dieppe. When we arrived, a number of us headed up on the cliffs and looked through the bunkers. We wandered through town and a number of us stumbled upon the small Canadian monument at the Cathedral. Only two feet high, it said "Ici Le 19 Aout 1942 Sont Tomeés Deux Soldats Canadiens." Our discovery of this understated and reserved yet remarkably powerful monument left us shaken. To find this tiny monument on a back street in Dieppe led us to wonder who these soldiers were and what role did they play in the raid.

David Patterson
Concordia University

D-Day - a day of ceremonies and remembrance. Our first event was the Queen's Own Rifles ceremony at Bernieres-sur-Mer. They unveiled a new plaque on their monument, and brought a 40-piece band and a 20-man guard from Toronto. The crowd was large and friendly as the veterans marched into Place du Canada, led by Charlie Martin, DCM, MM. Speeches and unveilings followed but the most memorable and moving part of the ceremony was hearing "O Canada" played by a military band on a foreign battlefield. We are not a very patriotic people, we Canadians, but I think that any heart would have swelled to be in that place of sacrifice and struggle, standing with some of the men who did those incredible things.

Our last day in France was devoted to the largest national monument of the First World War - Vimy Ridge. The day was cold and rainy with a steady wind that kept most tourists away and reminded me of the cold sleety snow that greeted the infantry that April 9th morning in 1917. We had the park virtually to ourselves, save for two busloads of kids, one British, one French. To start our visit we took a guided tour of the underground tunnels carved out of the chalky rock. The guide points out, as we clambered along the narrow passageways, that these tunnels were significantly widened since the war to allow tourists' entry. Upon leaving the tunnels we walked up to the monument itself.



*The "gang" in London, England
June 1997:*

*Back row, l. to r.: David
Patterson, James Caddell,
Vince Field, Annette
Dombrowski, Martin
Sauson, Nancy Beatty,
Robb Furlong, David Yuill,
Perry Pryor, Andrew
Godefroy.*

*Front row: Janine Stingel, Marc
Milner, Serge Durlinger.*

*Missing: Pieter O'Leary, Nancy
and Paul Cervenko.*

we walked up to the monument itself. The massive twin towers are visible from a great distance, dominating the Douai plain. Another guide explained the significance of the various sculptures on the monument. Once again it was the seemingly endless list of names of the missing that impressed me the most.

The end of the tour begs the question "What next?" What will I do with this experience of a lifetime? One of the aims of the tour organisers is to see the experience of the tour carried over into the lives of the participants. While I know that I will return to these places, particularly Normandy, I must also seek ways to keep this experience alive. One way will be to keep in touch with my tour mates - a most pleasant task. Another will be to use every opportunity to talk and write about the tour. I am sure thousands of Canadians visit France and Belgium without ever thinking about their countrymen who fought here in two wars. The tour has also reaffirmed my decision to pursue my history studies as much as I can. If by writing articles, letters, and monographs I can help keep alive the memory of these Canadians then I shall have kept faith with their sacrifice. *Je me souviens, je me souviendrai, je me toujours souviendrai.*

David Yuill

University of British Columbia

I wish I knew where to begin. I have wracked my brains trying to think of the appropriate

analogy, or metaphor that would help explain my experience to others. The truth is I'm not even sure I know. I guess the most useful departure point would be to start with what I have managed to reconcile from within. To say that this Tour moved my peers and me beyond the depths of verbal expression would, well frankly, understate the profound impact it had upon me.

All too often I found myself marvelling at the heroic feats of men, most younger than I when I donned a uniform, and felt a surge of emotions like none I have ever experienced. I have tried to understand what motivated them to leave loved ones behind, and head away to fight for something few probably understood....I learned that being Canadian is a source of rightful pride. In Normandy, it is a currency that can be traded for goodwill. The feelings, many deep and poignant, are so real they are almost tactile. The goodwill engendered some 50-plus years ago is alive and well in France....

This was an experience that has marked me profoundly. I will never look at history the same way. The Tour brought a group of eager young Canadians together from disparate regions of this country and fused them into friends....I have gained a renewed pride in my country and awakened a desire within me to continue to learn....Thank you for allowing me to experience one of the seminal events in my life. It is something I won't soon forget.