

1995

The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour, 1995

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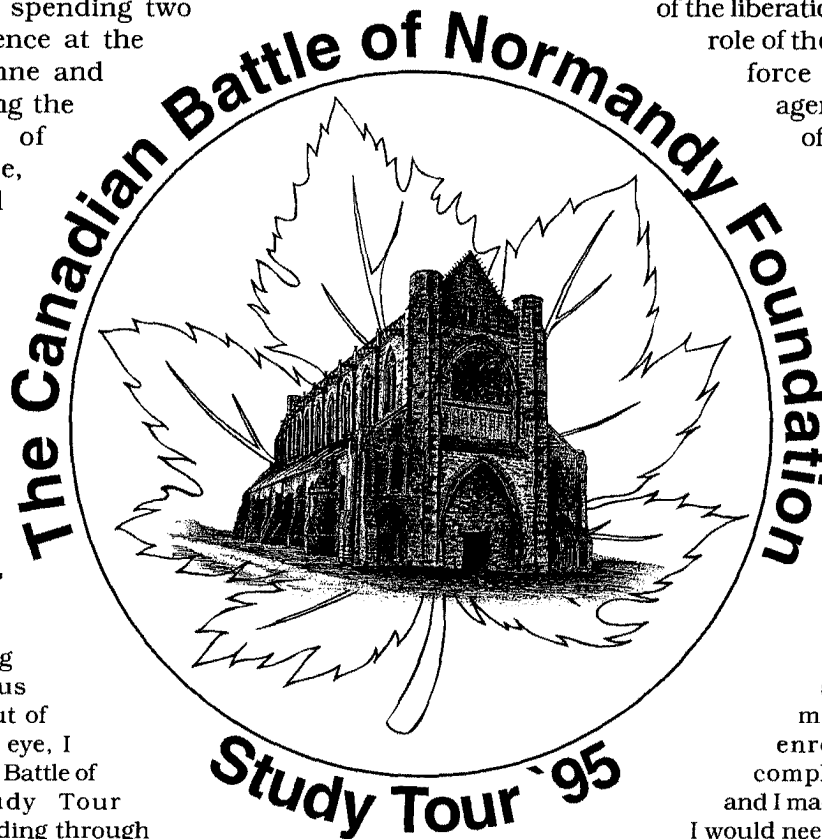
Recommended Citation

"The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour, 1995." Canadian Military History 4, 2 (1995)

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The first Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour began on June 3rd, 1995 with twelve students from all across Canada spending two weeks in residence at the Abbaye d'Ardenne and one week visiting the battlefields of Northern France, Belgium and Holland. Some of the students were formally enrolled in a university course on "The Canadians and the

Liberation of Europe" but everyone participated in the lectures, battlefield tours and on-site discussions of virtually every aspect of the liberation campaign. The role of the navy and the air force was part of the agenda and the sites of the RCAF tactical airfields in Normandy were noted for future work on plaques and informative displays. What follows are the impressions of the participants.



I was rushing down my campus hallway when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Canadian Battle of Normandy Study Tour poster. After reading through the criteria, I quickly realized I had found my dream. A chance to see Vimy Ridge and study the battles of Normandy on location was my idea of history. Something from my inner core was then awakened. I just knew in my heart that I would be part of this event - I had a date with destiny.

From the middle of March onwards it was full speed ahead. While I prepared and wrote my exams,

I developed a strategy for the money I needed, I enrolled in the complementary course and I made a list of the items I would need for the trip. After two months of hard work, my plans had turned into a reality. I met my financial requirements, I acquired the items I needed, and I was well on my way with the course studies. I had to work two jobs and become an expert in time management, though my girlfriend may tell you otherwise, but I had succeeded.

Trevor Rehel

The Group: Front row, l to r. David Kelly, Lee Windsor, David Turnbull, Mike Bechthold, Doug Cadot, Trevor Rehel; Standing, Linda and Terry Copp, Serge Durflinger, Lisa Mullins, Jean-François Béland, John Rickard, Morgan Wright, Jeff Claman and Naomi Chosen.



We began our tour at the Canadian D-Day beaches. On the cool, crisp, beautiful morning of June 6, 1995 I caught my first ever glimpse of the English Channel as we wound our way through the little town of St. Aubin to the coast. With Church bells ringing in the distance I stood on the very beach where Canadian forces stormed ashore on that now famous date of June 6, 1944. No greater sense of history could have struck me had I been standing on the beaches of Troy. Here on Juno beach, I thought to myself, Canada truly came into her own as a nation. To stand out at the water's edge and look over the expanse of open beach was a sobering experience. Later in the morning we attended a small ceremony for Canadian veterans, as well as for the 48th Royal Marine Commandos. While the beaches gave me a sense of the ordeal faced by the Canadian soldiers, our visit to the cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer profoundly brought home the sacrifice. Representing casualties sustained throughout the Normandy campaign, the cemetery holds 2,000 of our countrymen.

John Rickard

On the morning of June the 6th we unexpectedly took part in a ceremony to commemorate the 51st anniversary of the D-Day invasion. It was with great pride that our group sang O Canada to an unsuspecting crowd. I wondered about the other



The D-Day ceremony at St. Aubin-sur-Mer, 6 June 1995.

celebrations like the one at St. Aubin where our nation's voice was silent. Our flag flies everywhere along the coast yet our government has done relatively little to preserve the memory of our great sacrifice. Nevertheless, our presence on that day gave me the hope of a new generation which is beginning to wonder about our past and who feel it should be remembered.

Trevor Rehel

The feelings that I felt today, I must admit they were very different than in the past. To see the actual objectives, the terrain and even some of the remaining obstacles on Juno beach gave me a fuller appreciation of the tremendous burden placed on our soldiers on that day. Not taking into account the channel crossing, to land on a beach in occupied Europe, with very little knowledge of the opposition must have been terrifying. However, the performance of the Canadians that day made it possible for generations like mine to be able to come across and observe and appreciate the deeds which they had performed. At Beny-sur-Mer, the Canadian cemetery, it was very emotional to see all the crosses of our soldiers who died over 50 years ago. This is a feeling which I will recall for a long time.

*David Kelly, Stormont, Dundas
and Glengarry Highlanders*

Our first stop in a busy day was the Canadian cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer. I was not prepared for the sheer size of the grounds and the rows and rows of graves. They were so young, some married, some with kids and some young sons far away from home. What struck us most of all were the inscriptions and the messages of remembrance. Every Canadian should walk those rows and witness the horrible costs of war.

Lisa Mullins

The Canadian War Cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer.

Normandy is full of ghosts. The first week we spent following 3rd Canadian Division's line of advance in from the beaches so at the end of everyday for the first week we would drive back to the Abbaye Ardenne along the road from Buron, 9 Brigade's axis. You can see the towers of the chapel in the Abbaye where Kurt Meyer of 25 SS Panzer Grenadiers observed our boys approach. 51 years later as we drove down that road, Meyer still watched us.

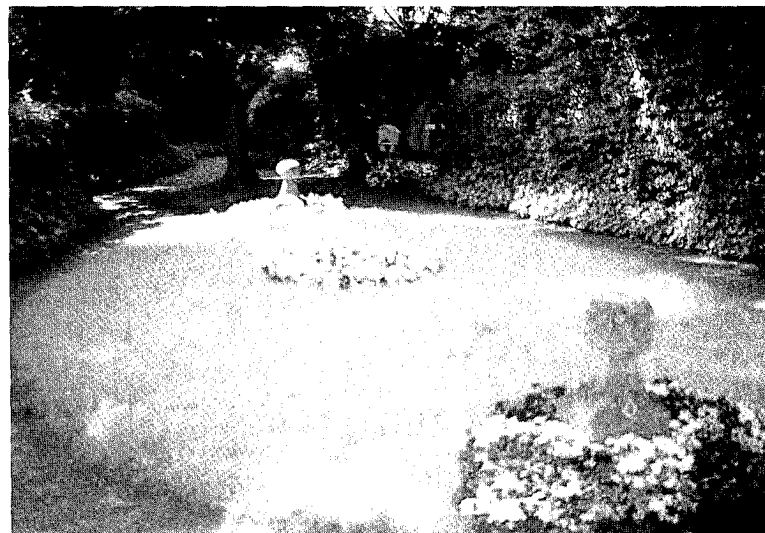
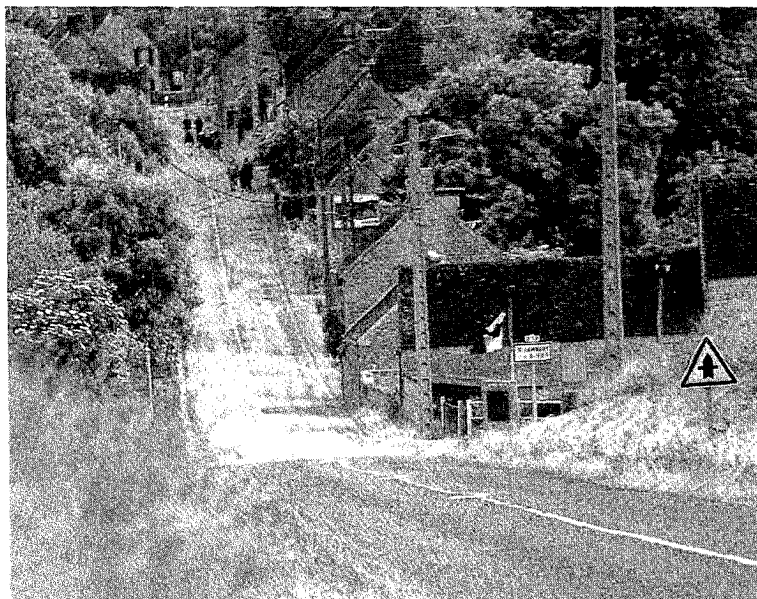
Lee Windsor, 8th Canadian Hussars

During the evening Hamilton Southam, the vice-president of the Foundation, spoke to us about the objectives of the Foundation. Following that, we had a very emotional memorial service for the Canadians executed at the Abbaye. This began with Mr. Southam giving a very good speech and setting the context. Then a M. Vico, who had lived at the Abbaye as a boy, told us a very emotional, compelling and complete story of the events surrounding the executions. This ceremony, which was attended by all of the students at the Abbaye, was very well done. It was difficult to imagine the events of the day of the executions in this garden which is so beautiful. To reflect on such events is very necessary, regardless of how unpleasant they might seem to us now.

David Kelly, SDGs

Many argue that horrible acts are committed by all sides in war. While this may be partially true, I know that Canadians fought on the side of all that is good and decent in the world. In 1939 we embarked on a mission to cleanse Europe of the Nazi disease that infected it. These words would have seemed a little idealist and simplistic to me, at least until 7 June, 1995. On that day we gathered in the garden of the Abbaye. As I entered the garden I could feel something I still cannot explain... more ghosts I guess. In that dark and quiet corner of the compound

The road leading into St. Lambert-sur-Dive. The Canadian flag marks the location of the memorial to Major David Currie, VC.



The garden where 20 Canadian soldiers were murdered and buried by the 12th SS.



that was once a German command post, we paid homage to 18 of my dear countrymen who were viciously and brutally murdered by Kurt Meyer's SS henchmen. I refuse to call them soldiers. French witnesses said the Canadians faced their executioners defiantly and with the dignity of heroes. As their names were read off, I fought to hold in tears and to keep my legs steady underneath me. One of the last names to be read off was Lieutenant Thomas Albert Lee Windsor, an Armoured soldier of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The tears escaped.

Lee Windsor, 8th CH

This tour was filled with one exciting experience after another and we all commented on the different emotions roused in us as we went from scenes of great sacrifice to peaceful serenity and beauty. Once Verrières Ridge was behind us we moved into the area of Falaise to discuss the closing of the pocket there. Of side interest was the picturesque castle in Falaise where Duke William of Normandy was born. While I am fascinated by Medieval architecture, the idea of thousands of Germans extricating themselves from a tightening Allied noose intrigued me more. Standing in the middle of the road at St. Lambert-sur-Dives where the Canadians captured many Germans and where Major David Currie won the Victoria Cross, was an interesting moment. It was interesting because

a picture of the exact spot where I stood is in the Normandy Guide and not much has changed on this stretch of road in 51 years. The same little buildings with easily recognizable scars of war allowed me to visualize the Germans streaming through here with us hot on their heels.

John Rickard

Our first morning in Dieppe started with a lecture about the battle which had occurred some 53 years earlier. Most mornings on the trip had started out much the same way but somehow this morning was different. After two weeks I had become accustomed to the terminology and the different components of a battle. In other words, I began to grasp what the battle might have looked like. Instead of being overwhelmed by information, I began to understand, to interpret and most importantly, to question. A weight had finally been lifted and for the first time on the tour I relaxed and enjoyed myself. I was in my element.

Another aspect of the trip which dawned on me that morning was the nature of our lectures. Standing on battlefields, bunkers and beaches in not the usual class environment that I have become accustomed to. Suddenly, I looked around to see the strange looks on peoples faces as they passed us by. The beauty of the surroundings, the warmth of the breeze and the sounds of the ocean all seemed to blend into the words I was listening to. This was the ideal classroom. I began to realize how truly lucky I was to be a part of this tour. This was a privileged event.

Trevor Rehel

We left for Beaumont-Hamel and the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. The park is a network of

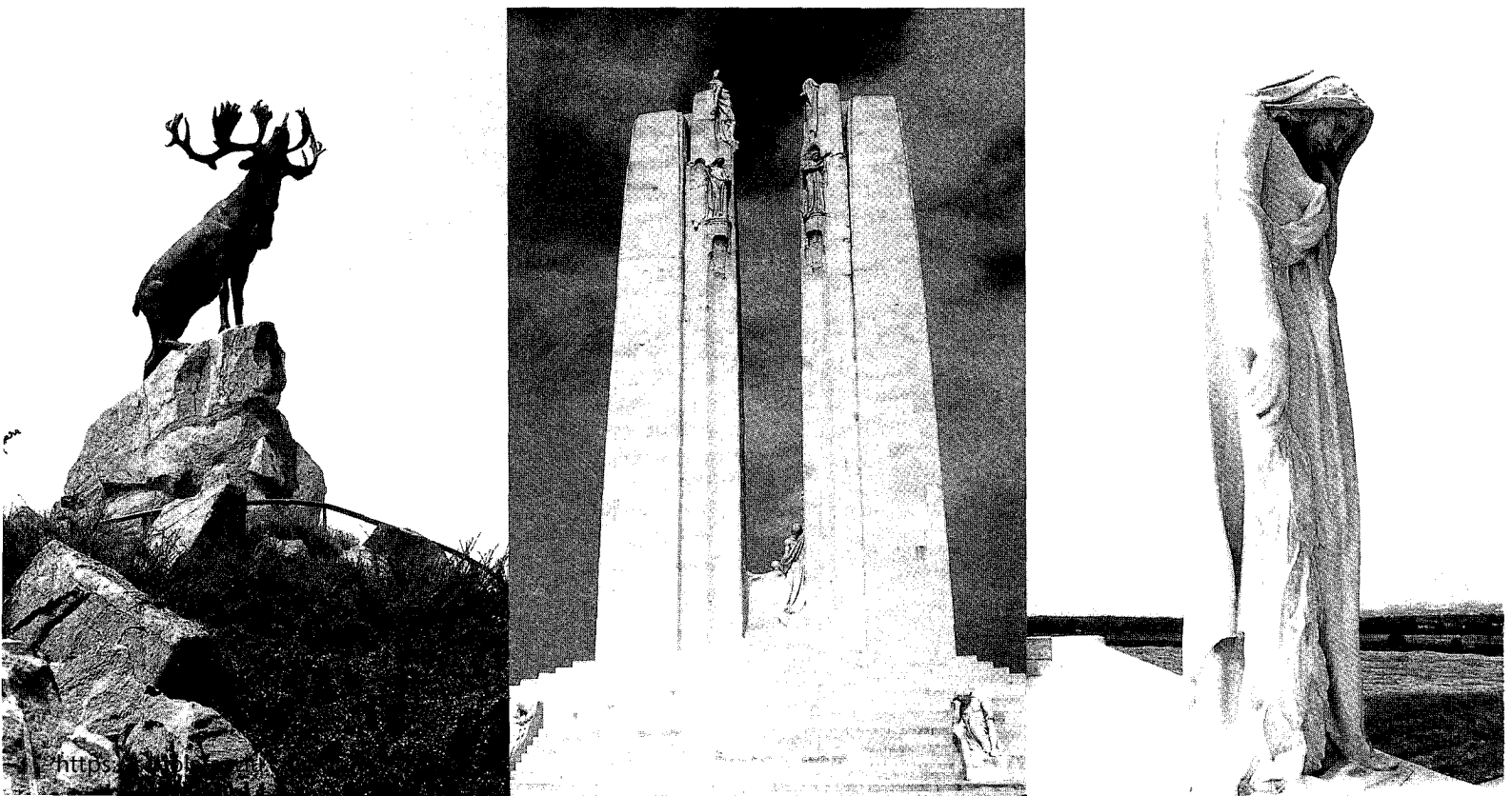
Below, Left to right: The Caribou Monument to the Royal Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel; The Vimy Memorial; The heroic figure of Canada brooding over her war dead.

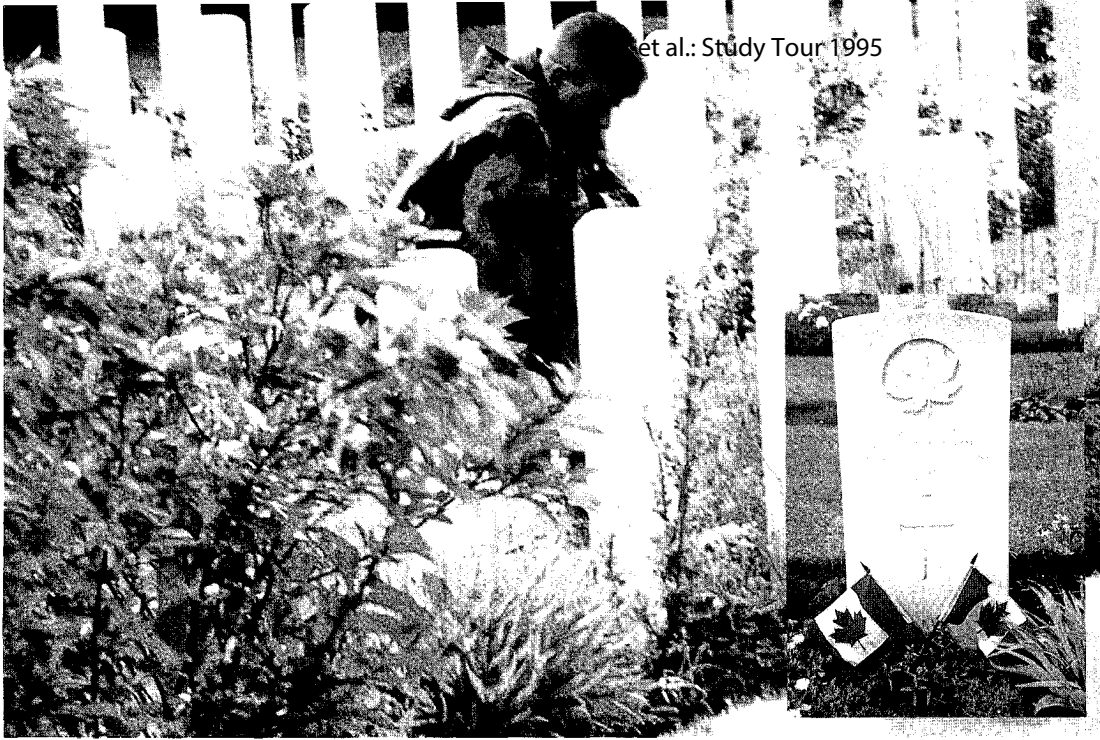
trenches and a maze of shell holes. The front line is clearly indicated by the posts that once held the razor wire that marked No Man's Land. I stopped for a while beside the Danger Tree and tried to imagine this beautiful countryside being in the midst of the ravages of war. With the opening line of the poem mounted on the bottom of the Caribou fresh on my mind, "Tread softly here, Go reverently and slow!" I remembered the photo from Sandra Gwynne's book of the Danger tree with the recce type crouched down to the ground trying to avoid the sniper's bullets. I thought of my Great Uncle Bob who fought with the Canadians during the First World War. Seeing the same land he saw was a bizarre feeling. Especially at Vimy.

Vimy took me by surprise. The pictures do not do the graceful and imposing monument justice. The mother who weeps over the ridge captures so much sadness and regret. We spent a long time on the steps of the memorial looking up to the top and towards the fenced off areas where unexploded munitions still lie. All the trees near Vimy are less than 75 years old. Each of the more than 11,000 represents a soldier who has no known grave.

Lisa Mullins

Checking out some of the World War One battlefields. We stopped at the Australian Memorial. A very impressive cemetery, imposing but simple. Being able to go up the tower and look across the battlefield was great. Found the grave of a soldier from the 38th Battalion. The memorial is just outside of Villiers-Bretonneux. The beauty of the cemeteries always amazes me.





Lee Windsor at the grave of Lieutenant T.A.L. Windsor.

Saw a moving video at the Ulster Memorial in Thiepval. Consensus among the group was that Canada should have a similar set up.

Beaumont-Hamel. What a wild sight! Just unbelievable, the whole area is covered in shell holes and trench works. Walking the zig-zag pattern of the trenches is very unsettling. This was the Somme battlefield where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment fought. They took a heavy beating and they weren't even in the first wave. 78 years ago, or so, this area was just barren and muddy. What was really amazing, is that there were still pigtail pickets in the ground, strung out in the formation of barbed wire entanglements. It is so beautiful today, it is hard to imagine it as a battlefield in a war zone. You really need the pictures from the era to put it into perspective.

Vimy Ridge. Almost like a homecoming, going back to Canadian soil. I can honestly say that I never thought I would make it to Vimy Ridge. It is a very imposing monument. Beautiful in itself, in a solitary sort of way. Couldn't have asked for a better day, sunny and windy. With so many trees its hard to imagine the battlefields as it must have been. Seeing the shell-pocked ground, makes you realize how heavy the barrages must have been. Went down into the tunnels. Very cold and narrow. Very neat, an engineering marvel. During the battle the water in the tunnels was almost up to your knees. Some troops spent five days down here before the attack.

*Morgan Wright,
Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa*

Earlier we made a stop at the Canadian Cemetery at Calais and visited just for a bit, with some of the lads there. The cemeteries are the hardest part of the tour. You want to see everyone and remember each somehow. After each stop we all feel drained and unsure. It is so important for us to be there though. Even if we only had time to see twenty or thirty percent

of the boys there. Morgan's reactions were what surprised me the most. Every time we would see one of the Camerons he would clasp the back of their headstone and murmur, "It's nice to meet you buddy." I almost thought it was more difficult for him to be there than it was for me. Tears come easily as I remember the time we spent walking the rows and rows of headstones together. The boys beneath never growing older men, the older ones not being able to remember being young. But most of all, I would think about the families at home and wonder if they ever stood where I was standing. If I could return I would still not be prepared for the sense of loss I felt as I passed, each time, the stone etched with "THEIR NAMES LIVETH FOR EVERMORE."

Lisa Mullins

Went down to the Canadian War Cemetery outside of Brugge. They don't get any easier. Found five Camerons. Place a flag in front of G.E. Main's grave, aged 22. I have to keep reminding myself that none of the people here have died peacefully.

Went to the yet unfinished Canadian Memorial Museum at Adegem. When it opens it will be an excellent museum. The hospitality factor was overwhelming.

Morgan Wright, CH of O

Today was one of the best tour days to date. We met two men at the Adegem Canadian War Cemetery, one English, and one Belgian. The Belgian had erected a War Museum dedicated to Canadians. He financed it all by himself and his only motivation is personal interest and honour. Another man we met there was the builder who was very inspirational. He did it because it was a dream of his and he is thankful for what the Canadians did. I can't describe in words how this one man has put faith of the world in me like no one else ever has.

David Kelly, SDGs

Have you ever been thanked for simply being Canadian? I was riding a ferry from Walcheren Island when a Dutch couple approached and asked me if I was a Canadian. When I replied with a bewildered "yes," the gentleman proceeded to thank me. My first thought was why is this many thanking me? I didn't realize until a few minutes later, when in the course of conversation, he said I thank Canadians every chance I get for liberating our country. After a brief chat we parted company and I rejoined our group. Several minutes later the gravity of what the man had told me began to sink in. What he said had been so subtle, so sincere and above all so unexpected. I wished at that point that every Canadian could have stood in my shoes just to feel how I felt when I heard that simple thank you. I thought about that a little more and I realized that our school system has totally neglected to inform my generation of this great Canadian accomplishment. I have a feeling someday all this might change. Somebody in the group or perhaps myself may play a role in instituting this aspect of Canadian history into our school structure.

Trevor Rehel

As an aspiring military historian this trip has come to be a defining period of my life. The performance of the Canadian Army in Normandy has been criticized by many, often severely. I could not help but wonder if there was some truth to this. After seeing the ground for myself and examining each of our major battles, often at the company/squadron level, I realize that our soldiers did the job that was assigned to them with a level of courage and skill that cannot be questioned. While circumstances of war sometimes meant that our objectives were not taken, I discovered that Canadian commanders usually made the only decision that was available to them at the time given the information they possessed and the pressure from higher command. This trip has reinforced in my mind the need to avoid evaluating history using hindsight and instead to try to determine what factors lead to the final outcome.

As a Canadian, the trip has been overwhelming. I have always been passionately in love with my country, yet standing among our fallen sons in the fields of France and Belgium I finally understood what a privilege it is to say that I, like these men, am Canadian.

Lee Windsor, 8th CH

Put quite simply, I don't think any other experience in my life has affected me quite as much as this trip has. The memory will last forever in my mind.

Trevor Rehel

Photos by Mike Bechthold

The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation was established by a group of Normandy veterans to ensure that future generations would have the opportunity to understand the Canadian contribution to the Battle of Normandy and the liberation of Europe. The Foundation raised the funds to create a magnificent Memorial Garden and co-published two battlefield guides, one to Normandy and one to Northwest Europe, so that every aspect of the Canadian effort in France and Northern Europe could be studied on the ground.

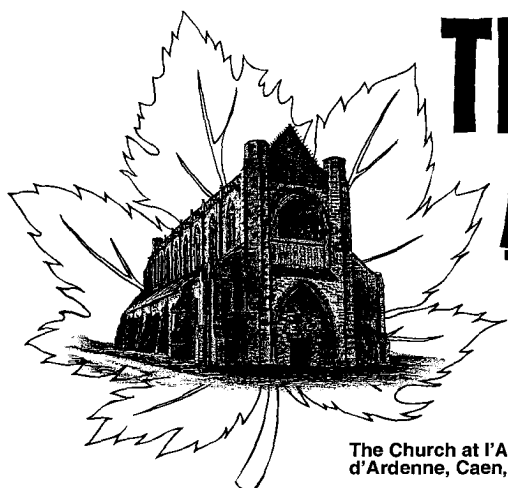
The new President of the Foundation, Dr. Alex Douglas, recently defined the challenges facing the Foundation. Paying tribute to General Roland Reid, a "Canloan" veteran of Normandy who served as President from 1992-1993, Douglas noted that under General Reid's leadership the Canadian presence in the City of Caen has become more evident than at any time since 1944. The Foundation has provided a plaque to mark the time and place where Canadian troops first met French civilian officials in the heart of the city on July 9th 1944 and completed the beautiful memorial garden.

The work of the Foundation now must focus on the educational aspects of its mandate especially the bursary program designed to encourage Canadian university students to study the Canadian role in the liberation of Europe on the battlefields where liberty was paid for at the price of young Canadian lives.

The second tour is planned for June 1996 and the Foundation is developing a fund raising campaign to ensure that this program can continue. If you would like to become a member or simply want further information contact:

Normandy Foundation
1650 Featherston Dr.
Ottawa, ON K1H 6P2
Tel. 613 731-7767
Fax 613 731-6577

The Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation
announces the second annual



The Church at l'Abbaye
d'Ardenne, Caen, Normandy

THE CANADIANS AND THE LIBERATION OF EUROPE

A 21-Day Study Program in Normandy and Northwest Europe (2-23 June 1996)

- ✳ An intensive program of lectures and discussions on the Second World War and Canada's role in the Allied victory.
- ✳ Field trips to the Canadian Battlefields of Normandy, Northern France, Belgium and Holland.
- ✳ 2 weeks residence at L'Abbaye d'Ardenne, Caen, Normandy plus 8 days in Dieppe, Vimy, the Channel Ports, the Scheldt Estuary, Belgium and Holland.
- ✳ The cost of the trip is \$4,000 Cdn. This includes air fare, meals, accommodation and travel in Europe.
- ✳ All successful applicants will receive a Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation bursary of not less than \$2,000 Cdn.
- ✳ University credit available through Wilfrid Laurier University, Continuing Education, on letter of permission from your university. Partial tuition bursaries available.
- ✳ Tour and course director, Terry Copp.
- ✳ Applicants must be registered at a Canadian University and have completed a minimum of one year of university studies with a good academic record.

Class limited to 12 students.

Application deadline is 31 January 1996.

Applicants should have two letters of reference, a copy of their university transcript, and a personal statement (typed) explaining their reasons for applying sent to:

Professor S.F. Wise, Department of History,
Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5V6