

THAT OTHERS MAY *live*

TOURING BATTLEFIELDS AND WAR MEMORIALS IN EUROPE GIVES THIS RETIRED HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TEACHER A SENSE OF GRATITUDE, AND THE HEAVY COST OF PEACE. **BY DENNIS MAKOWETSKY**



by *Dennis Makowetsky*

For 31 years I taught high school history in the classrooms of Kent County, and for over three years after retirement, at Canadian College Italy. As you would expect, the courses I taught and the students' ages varied, but whether the subject was Canadian, American or European history, the Great Wars of the 20th Century inevitably played an important part.

Coming of age in the turbulent 1960s, starting my teaching career in the early-70s, and never having to sacrifice precious years of my youth to serve in wartime, I was always conscious of how lucky I was. And the spectre of the Vietnam War tearing at the fabric of society in the United States made this feeling even more immediate.

So when the subject turned to war, I was always concerned to do the very best I could to help the students understand and appreciate the sacrifices of those young men, so many years ago. We used simulation exercises, read diaries and letters, invited veterans into the

classroom to tell their stories, watched grainy, black and white newsreels, and spent countless hours organizing meaningful Remembrance Day programs for the school. I like to think a creditable job was done.

Except for a brief visit to Vimy Ridge in the 1980s, while on a teaching exchange in England, I had never visited the far-away battlefields we had only read and heard about.

That began to change during my time teaching in Italy. The school was located in the town of Lanciano, a short distance from Ortona, where Canadians fought gallantly over Christmas 1943. The school had always organized a moving Remembrance Day ceremony in the nearby Moro River Canadian War Cemetery, where 1,375 Canadians were laid to rest. An additional 50 graves are unidentified.

The program was beautiful, and it brought students to



Dennis Makowetsky (far right) has led several trips to sites that are significant to Canada's military history. Photo by Barb MacDonald

Left: Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France. Photo by Dennis Makowetsky

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Dennis stands by a monument in Fusignano, Italy, marking the farthest point of progress of Canadian troops in the Italian Campaign during the Second World War.
Photo by Barb MacDonald

tears when they visited the graves, but what was missing was an understanding of what had actually happened. So for the last three years of my stay, on Nov. 10, we took the entire student body on a day-long tour of all the sites relevant to the Battle of Ortona. Now when visiting the cemetery the next day, it was clear the students were even more appreciative of the sacrifices those young men had made. There was a level of emotion that I thought had never been attained in my Canadian classroom.

Upon my return to Canada, of all the great experiences that came with living and working in Italy, it was the experience of touring the Ortona battle sites and visiting the Moro River cemetery that moved me the most.

Shortly after I returned to Canada, it was my extreme good fortune to work for a travel company in Exeter. I started out managing general, cultural and musical tours for adults and students to various locations in Europe, and soon began helping to design and sell tours.

In 2006, with the 90th anniversary of Vimy Ridge on

the horizon, and many other similar commemorations looming, the travel company owner suggested we try our hand at battlefield tours. I jumped at the chance. Of the more than 50 tours I have led in the past 14 years, 25 of them have been battlefield tours in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. Most have been student tours, but they have also included regimental tours and tours involving interested adults.

I have been to Vimy Ridge many times – in the bright sunshine and in the driving rain; in the early morning hours on Remembrance Day, before the crowds arrived; and with an adult group, late in the day, when the skirl of a lone piper emanated from behind the monument in the waning light. I was among the thousands of pilgrims during the 90th anniversary celebrations. There is no bad time to visit Vimy Ridge, but in my view, if you are fortunate enough to be alone with the beautiful monument, reading as many of the 11,285 names inscribed on it as you can, and standing beside the elegant statue of Mother Canada, overlooking the Douai Plain, you will experience Vimy Ridge as few are able to do.

There were many visits to Beaumont Hamel, where the heroic Royal Newfoundland Regiment fought on July 1, 1916, the first day of the tragic Battle of the Somme.

Newfoundland lost a generation of young men during the First World War, and Beaumont Hamel was perhaps the worst disaster of all. About 800 soldiers from Newfoundland went into battle that morning, and only 68 could answer the roll call the next day. Among the casualties were 14 sets of brothers, who lost their lives in half an hour on a patch of land that today lies untouched from the battle more than 100 years ago. Standing on that battlefield, one can only imagine the horror those young men felt that day.

Juno Beach is another staple of battle tours in France. The Juno Beach Centre, in Courseulles-sur-Mer, is marvellous to visit. Standing on the beaches where Canadian soldiers landed on D-Day, and touring the bunkers, is an unforgettable experience.

But etched in my memory is the image of a young Grade 10 girl, a student with a group I led, as she accompanied a veteran of the Queen's Own Rifles infantry regiment in laying a wreath on their monument on the beach in Bernières-sur-Mer. Two years later, the same student, now a high school senior travelling with another school group, returned to the same spot and laid a single rose in honour of the same veteran who had passed away in the interim.

Then there are the many memorable stops on an Italian battle tour. One of them is the mountaintop above the Sicilian town of Assoro, where the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (also known as the Hasty Ps) scaled an impossible cliff in the dead of night to surprise the unsuspecting enemy at dawn. Among the attackers that morning was a young Farley Mowat, who became one of Canada's best-known writers. Five months later, Mowat became shell shocked outside of Ortona, overcome by the battle anxiety he called "the Worm."

I learned many lessons in my travels to the battlefields of Europe. Many are the obvious ones relating to the details of the countless battles. But I also learned that, as important as Vimy Ridge and Juno Beach are, they perhaps distract attention from the many other incredible

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As I travel the countryside with groups, I often wonder out loud, “How many 73-year-old men in the world, like me, can say they have never had to fire a gun?”

struggles Canadians endured on the battlefields. Only by taking the time to travel to sites, many of them far off the beaten track, can we truly begin to understand the sacrifices made by our young soldiers. And while we rightfully honour those who paid the supreme sacrifice, we need to also remember those who survived the conflagrations, only to return home to the cities and rural areas of the country, like ghosts, never able to shake what Mowat described as “the Worm.”

out loud, “How many 73-year-old men in the world, like me, can say they have never had to fire a gun?”

I shall never forget that it is because of the sacrifices made by the men found in the pristine Commonwealth war cemeteries, and by those who gave up the formative years of their lives, that my life has been so fortunate. ■

Dennis Makowetsky (better known as “Mak”) is a retired high school history teacher and a travel guide at Ellison Travel and Tours in Exeter, Ont. Learn more at www.ellisontravel.com.

As I travel the countryside with groups, I often wonder



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