

Aurora High sending 70 students to Vimy Ridge anniversary



By Brock Weir

Is it just a sentiment at Aurora High School; next week, 70 students and seven chaperones will be headed across the Atlantic to follow in the footsteps of young Canadian men who laid down their lives for King and Country.

Departing Monday for London for a series of events culminating in France on Sunday, April 9, for the official commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, which will also be attended by the Prince of Wales, Governor General David Johnston, Princes William and Harry, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the Aurora High contingent is the second largest in all of York Region, just behind Sir William Mulock in Newmarket.

It must say something about the Aurora High community and it must say something about my strong history department because there is a keen interest in history in this school and this community, says David Steep, Head of History and Social Sciences at AHS. We are proud of this trip and the response from the community.

This trip has taken about a year and a half to coordinate, he says, first offered to Aurora High School students in the fall of 2016. Selling out immediately when the threshold was set at 40 students, organizers faced a huge waiting list and tremendous parental pressure to cast a wider net.

Although they are concerned that several of the registered students haven't yet received their formal registration for the April 9 ceremony from the Department of Veterans Affairs, it is full speed ahead in getting the teens prepared to walk the walk.

In addition to the First World War being a cornerstone of the Grade 10 History Curriculum, each of the participating students has picked one specific soldier who is buried near Vimy Ridge to study.

Teachers have imparted the skills they need to navigate online databases and other resources to learn more about their individual, their life, and their records.

We call it Walking in their Footsteps and the kids are really excited about it, says Mr. Steep. Once they have learned all the information about their soldier, they are going to visit their final resting place. We will be bringing a wreath from the Aurora Legion with us for a wreath-laying ceremony there. We feel this is an important gesture to commemorate the lives of a small group of Canadians who gave their lives for Canada in World War One.

Because we each have an individual soldier that no one else has picked, I feel standing by his gravestone and giving thanks is going to be something that words just can't describe, agrees student Jeffrey Crowe.

For the students, it is not just a trip abroad, nor is it a matter of just learning about the past, it is about being part of something historic that remains just as relevant and contemporary today.

It was breaking down barriers in Canada, says Thomas Mason of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Just because it is 100 years, it doesn't take away from the 101st anniversary or the 102nd, and I think even though this is 100 years ago, and we may not know directly the people who fought and died, it is still just as important to remember their names and honour what they fought for.

Adds Frances Pocock: This anniversary is a good exercise in uniting the nation. When you go to America there are a lot of American flags everywhere and they are very patriotic, but in Canada we are far more toned down. I expect it to be very humbling when we go to Vimy and see all the other Canadians in their red jackets, honouring the people we respect while also celebrating our

country ? and that is something we don't see very often. I am expecting it to be a show of Canadian patriotism and unity.?

Students arrive in London the morning of April 4 and their first day on the ground will include a walking tour of the city. On April 5, they will take part in a Vimy 2017 event at Green Park hosted by the Canadian High Commission, along with a visit to the Tower of London. April 6 takes them across the Channel to Normandy where they will travel the next day to Juno Beach where Canadians fought and died on D-Day.

They arrive in Vimy on Saturday, April 8, while also taking in the Newfoundland War Memorial at Beaumont-Hamel and visiting the graves of their studied soldiers at Vis-En-Artois British Cemetery.