

Cadets bring home the experiences of Vimy soldiers for community commemoration



By Brock Weir

Over the last few weeks, young Canadians have followed in the footsteps of the thousands of young men who marched off to Europe to fight in the First World War.

Bound for Vimy Ridge, the most celebrated battle in Canadian history, these teens walked through the trenches and participated in events to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the momentous victory.

They are memories that will stay with them for a lifetime, but a handful of them returned to Aurora on Wednesday night to make sure these memories continue to stay alive on the home front.

Queen's York Rangers Army Cadets filled the first two rows at the Aurora Cultural Centre last Wednesday night for A Reflection on Vimy: 100 Years Later, a community commemoration to mark the Centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge hosted jointly by the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Museum & Archives and the Aurora Historical Society.

The standing-room-only crowd was treated to a poignant display of artefacts from the First World War, all with distinct local connections, including contemporary newspaper articles highlighting the valour and sacrifice of local soldiers, and the letters they sent home to their families.

Many of these contemporary documents were brought to life by the cadets, several of whom took part in the lead up to last week's poignant commemorations in that tiny patch of France now celebrated Canadian soil.

"Being there at the actual memorial was quite an emotional and moving experience," said Warrant Officer Dalton Slind, who read letters related to Robert Stuart Hillary, who died at Vimy Ridge just days before the height of the battle, standing in front of a cross which once marked his grave. "Having seen photos and having heard, I got an idea what it was like, but actually being there I got the full picture and it is a lot more than what I expected because you're there. All I could think of was, wow, these soldiers fought for me and all these people who live in Canada. It was basically too much to handle.

"Having read the two letters that I read tonight, made me feel really honoured and really proud as well to have been able to say I read these letters and I did something to commemorate the people who fought for me."

Added Warrant Officer Yeonsu Choi: "Overall the word I would describe was 'humbling' because just witnessing all that really brings it to life. I just feel more of a connection with what happened instead of being just at school and reading it in a textbook. It brings it so much more to real life."

The packed crowd was welcomed by Jane Taylor of the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Historical Society curator Erika Mazanik, and Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum and Archives, and entertained pianist Doug Balfour and Susie Wesson who leant their voices to a program of songs contemporary to Canadian soldiers charting their journey from the carefree pre-war days, budding patriotism, army life, missing the girl back home, and the realities of war settling in.

"In a week where the almost unimaginable happened 100 years ago, and a story that was repeated so often in 1914 to 1918, we pause to remember the sacrifices of those who fought and lived and the ultimate sacrifices of those who fought and died in this particular

field of Battle located a few kilometres north of Arras in Northern France," said Ms. Taylor, mentioning her own grandfather, Arthur Edward Collins, who served at Vimy Ridge, and her own daughter, Sally Falk, following in his footsteps at last Sunday's service at the Vimy Memorial.

Word was also sent from France by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev, who was still in Europe as part of the Government delegation selected to take part in the 100th anniversary commemorations.

"Of the 100,000 Canadians that served at Vimy, there were more than 10,000 casualties, 3,598 of which were fatal," said Ms. Alleslev. "Out of all of those, we remember, I would like to highlight two soldiers in particular: Private Roy Hollingshead, who resided in Aurora, and Private Caldwell Eugene Brown who was born in Aurora, as they both came from our community and gave their lives to serve our country.

"Today we remember a sobering war, a victory on a strategic vantage point and the birth of a nation as Canadians fought together as a unified force for the first time. The torch is ours to hold high and we will remember them. As we recognize Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation this year, it is important we remember our veterans' courage, service and sacrifice that defined our nation as it allows us to celebrate 100 years of freedom and peace."