

"We have to tell this story time and time again"



By Brock Weir

Some historians call the Battle of Vimy Ridge as a turning point in Canadian history, one which ultimately led to the birth of modern Canada.

A turning point, yes, but it was also a turning point which cost the lives of nearly 4,000 young Canadian men, and left thousands more wounded – physically and otherwise – for the rest of their lives.

“We gave mightily to the cause that followed, our greatest gift: our finest citizens, the lives of future leaders, healers, thinkers and builders from a young nation just 50 years old at the time,” said former Federal Defence Minister Peter MacKay, the keynote speaker at a commemorative gala at the Aurora Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion on the eve of Sunday's centenary.

Speaking to a sold-out crowd of veterans young and old, serving service personnel, the servicemen and women of tomorrow, and dignitaries from the Federal and municipal levels of government, he said these lessons are particularly poignant as that once young nation marks its 150th anniversary this year. “In 2017, Canadians begin this year of celebration,” he said. “We will show the world what we have achieved and will achieve more in coming years. We're an admired, unlikely nation. Our country evolved as opposed to revolted. Nevertheless, we were born out of conflict and we sacrificed much more within the history of our nationhood. In this year, Canadians should not only pause and reflect on our past but, just as importantly, we should look ahead, as a nation, on what we have to look forward to.”

Saturday's gala, which benefited the Queen's York Rangers Regimental Council, providing assistance to current and former service personnel and their families, was also attended by past Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario David Onley, Former Honourary Colonel of the Regiment, as well as his wife Ruth Ann who provided offered stirring readings and songs that evoked the time in which all four Canadian Battalions hunkered down in their trenches at Vimy Ridge waiting to do battle.

“Perhaps more than any single event, Vimy Ridge defined us, for on those four days 100 years ago in April 1917 amidst the gas and the shells and the carnage and the full on raging horror of war, Canada struck a historic blow for the freedom of mankind,” said Mr. MacKay. “Victory didn't end or even turn the tide of the Great War, but it established forever that Canada was a single force for good in the world, a reliable ally, capable companion, able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the very best.

“One can only imagine the terror and the turmoil waiting in the mud for the call to go over the top. What we never really understand is the terrible, heartbreaking suffering our veterans have endured and whatever the war, whatever the campaign, that they continue to endure when they come home. For the ground forces at that time in the mud and the muck and the mire of the trenches, if bullets or bayonets didn't kill you, there was disease that could and so many horrible deaths.”

By the time the smoke cleared days after the battle, he said, Canadians had “done the unthinkable” in taking the ridge, but those who survived were instantly “battle-hardened” veterans, going into other battles on the front or returning home to fight their own personal

battles.

'No resources for support awaited these young men that returned,' said Mr. MacKay. 'These were hard times. Most families heard of the loss sometimes by letters posted at train stations or post offices, no internet, no direct contact with the families from small communities that dotted our country. I often marvel at the size of the cenotaphs in small communities around the place I grew up in Nova Scotia: small towns with Scottish sounding names and when you look at the names chiseled in the granite, in some cases there were or five sons lost from a single family.'

In evoking the past, the self-described 'recovering politician' drew modern parallels both from his time managing the Defence and Foreign Affairs portfolios in Stephen Harper's Conservative government, as well as recent events in Syria.

War, he said, is the 'failure of peace, the failure of politicians and diplomats, and of brokers and policy makers.' A soldier takes up the defence of the causes of others, he noted, recalling a former soldier saying 'having to depend on someone else for your freedom is much harder.'

While Vimy was seen as a decisive rallying point for Canada and the others, war was becoming increasingly unpopular as the sheer number of lost lives mounted, not dissimilar to the mounting frustration most recently felt by Canadians each time a body of a soldier was repatriated along the Highway of Heroes.

'No amount of spin in the pre-internet era could ever assuage the heartbreak of so many families,' said MacKay. 'Canadians rightly enjoy this reputation till as being tough, professional, highly intelligent, adaptable, quick and agile soldiers in battle. A reputation, as I said, continued throughout conflicts that followed.'

'We owe it to our generations of soldiers past and present and their families to continually honour their service and we want future generations to understand and engrain [in] them, the young and not so young, through education, that monuments mean more than physical structure where they stand, but symbolize monumental struggles for what was right. War, freedom and peace are not just the business of government or military, it is a personal concern. It is a personal issue. It is a testament to remembrance that holds fast which brings us here tonight.'