

# The 1996 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour



*The second annual Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour left for France on 2 June 1996. The 12 students selected, six men and six women, came from the University of New Brunswick, Carleton, Trent, Wilfrid Laurier, McMaster, Western, King's College and the University of Manitoba. The group, under the direction of Linda and Terry Copp and Serge Durflinger, stayed at the*

*Abbaye d'Ardenne for 12 days studying the Normandy battlefields then travelled to Dieppe, the Channel Ports, Bruges, the Scheldt, Arnhem and the Rhineland before visiting First World War battlefields at Vimy and the Somme.*

*The following impressions of the trip are from student journals.*

**W**e began our tour at a crossroad aptly called Le Mesnil. The crossroad is situated midway along a ridge running north-south, thereby dominating the approaches to the bridges over the Orne and the Caen canal. As Professor Copp pointed out, it was the holding of this ridge line and not the bridges that was the key to preventing a successful German counterattack on the Allied flank. Due to the exigencies of the time, the Airborne troops were not relieved shortly after their landing as planned. These lightly-armed troops would take heavy casualties as they obstinately held this vital ground until August.

On the southwest side of the crossroad is a monument to the Canadian Airborne Corps, located only a hundred metres from the brickworks where the Canadians had placed their battalion headquarters. Today it doubles as a picnic site.

Some of the students remarked that the picnic table was inappropriate and that the site should be accorded more respect. I disagree. If people are willing to stop for lunch here, they are more likely to read the plaque and, it is hoped, learn something about Canada's part in their history. However, this would be far more effective if the site included a historical

description, supplemented with a map of the area. The key, as Professor Copp continues to stress, is not just remembrance, but informed memory. If we are to remember and honour our past, it behooves us to have more than an abstract (or superficial) understanding of our nation's history. Certainly many Canadian soldiers died here, but why? What were they trying to achieve at this now peaceful crossroad?

Christopher Doary  
Carleton University

**T**oday I experienced one of the greatest moments in my life. I was in Normandy on the 52nd anniversary of D-Day representing Canada with the other members of the study tour at services at St. Aubin-sur-Mer and Bernieres-sur-Mer. The high point of the ceremony at St. Aubin was when a group of young French schoolchildren arrived holding Canadian flags. It was very touching to hear the voices of children singing O Canada in both English and French on such a significant day. I felt extremely proud to be Canadian.

Diane Tomas  
King's College,  
University of Western Ontario



*D-Day commemoration ceremonies at St. Aubin-sur-Mer, 6 June 1996.*

*(Photo by C. Evans)*

participation at these events. Royal Marines abounded but no discernable Canadian contingent of vets was to be found, quite deplorable considering Juno beach is the Canadian beach. It speaks volumes about the Canadian psyche and how we forget our wars as soon as we've fought them thereby ensuring we will remake the same mistakes over again in the next one. It also points out a rather naive political understanding by our politicians of Europe today. If Canada wants to play and trade in Europe and NATO, Canada has to have a physical presence.

Canadians are certainly thought of very highly in places they liberated and it seems almost criminal not to acknowledge the French appreciation with an official and substantial presence.

Christopher Evans  
Carleton University

One does not usually see youth participation in remembrance ceremonies - their presence there that day was truly a poignant reminder that a new generation who has not been touched by war is being taught what happened 52 years ago. My hope is that ceremonies such as the one at St. Aubin continue, so the lessons of the past will not be forgotten. The very least we owe our veterans is remembrance.

Angela van Lanen  
McMaster University

Today was an absolutely extraordinary day, one that I will never forget for as long as I live. June 6th will never be the same for me again. After the band finished playing our anthem, a group of small French children sang O Canada in French with the accompaniment of their teacher. It was really beautiful to see, particularly when each child was holding a "Canada Remembers" flag. That gesture was so meaningful for so many reasons.

Diane Tomas  
King's College

Today was an amazing day. We started it off by going to our first Canadian war cemetery at Reviers. I knew it was going to be moving, but as soon as I saw it a feeling came over me which I don't think I can describe in words. My first reaction was simply to cry as I looked upon the row after row of headstones, and I simply could not stop. I was particularly emotional when I found Edgar Dawson Butler's grave, and all I could think of was his face and all of the others who lost their lives at such a young age and left so many loved ones behind. It is particularly difficult to comprehend the huge sense of loss when you realize that each one of those headstones not only stands for a Canadian who died, but that each also symbolizes every mother, father, brother, sister, wife or child who no longer had their loved ones in their lives.

Diane Tomas  
King's College

Finally stood on Juno Beach and was once again overwhelmed by the emotion of the experience. Having spent most of my life studying Canadian military history it was incredible to see through my own eyes what I have only witnessed second hand through pictures and documentaries. The absolute enormity of the invading soldiers' task to come ashore under fire and get off the beach was in a moment transformed from some Hollywood heroic dash to some terrible yet necessary run for survival. To consciously move towards danger, not away from it, my God.

Christopher Evans  
Carleton University

In Authie I had an encounter with fate once again. We were walking down the road when we stopped to take pictures of a house with a Canadian flag displayed. The man of the house saw us and came to chat. Diane gave him a Canadian pin and we discussed our study tour, the war and how Authie was affected by it. He told us about a memorial down the road dedicated to the North Novas and to civilians killed by the Nazis. We said our goodbyes, went to the memorial, took some pictures and headed home. Or so we thought...

We chanced upon an old woman working in her garden. Mme Helene Carville talked about the Nazis in Authie. She told us about Henri Brunet (we recognized his name from a street sign). He was a member of the Resistance executed by the Nazis for giving plans of the Atlantic Wall to the Allies. Then she began to describe her own experiences with the Nazis.

Attended two ceremonies today marking the invasion. Perhaps the single most notable event of the day was the almost total lack of Canadian

I soon realized that this seemingly innocent woman with the beautiful smile had witnessed the most horrific and disgusting acts that could be committed by man. Nearing the end of the occupation in Normandy, her parents were walking down the road holding hands when a Nazi shot them both, wounding her mother's arm and killing her father. Her mother was rescued by a Canadian soldier, a white band with a red cross sewn to his sleeve. The Nazis refused to let the family remove the body from the street, so for days, they watched as tanks ran over their loved one's corpse. Mme. Carville told us this story without shedding a tear. I just wanted to jump over the fence and hug her. We talked for a while longer and she invited us to return. I definitely would.

Christine Desjardins  
Carleton University

**M**ost brutal part of the day, the memorial service at the Abbaye. It was heartbreaking. Most indescribable moment of my life - after the ceremony, I was really upset. A French gentleman in his 60s hugged me and thanked me for being Canadian and thanked me, on behalf of my country, for helping his. I have never felt like this before!

Marie-Anne Ramson  
Wilfrid Laurier University

**T**he Abbaye d'Ardenne holds a special significance for Canadians, for it was here, not long after D-Day, that Canadian Prisoners of War were executed by members of the 12th SS *Hitler Jugend*. In one of the Abbaye's many courtyards there is a modest memorial garden with a commemorative plaque that lists the names of those who were shot and killed only a few metres away. It is a sad place, dominated by a large tree, a silent sentinel that stood helpless to intervene as each Canadian soldier met his fate against the courtyard's cold stone walls. The sun that filters through the tree's majestic boughs tries, but fails to comfort me as I ponder time's inexorable advance. The vines that threaten to overgrow this spot will not obscure the memory of these Canadians; it is only their fellow countrymen who are capable of such neglect.

Christopher Doary  
Carleton University

**O**f particular interest today was our visit to another Canadian war cemetery, this time at Bretteville-sur-Laize. Although most of the Canadian cemeteries are quite similar in their layout and presentation, each one stirs

*The Bretteville-sur-Laize  
Canadian War Cemetery.*  
(Photo by C. Evans)



up new emotions. The reason for this is of course the personal inscriptions that are found on most of the graves. They speak for themselves:

*A voice we love is stilled. A place is vacant  
in our home that can never bejilled.*

A. Morrison, South Sask. Regt.,  
20 July 1944, Age 20.

*We who lie here were young, we too  
loved life and home, remember us.*

C.E. Wood, Sherbrooke Fus. Regt.,  
12 August 1944, Age 22.

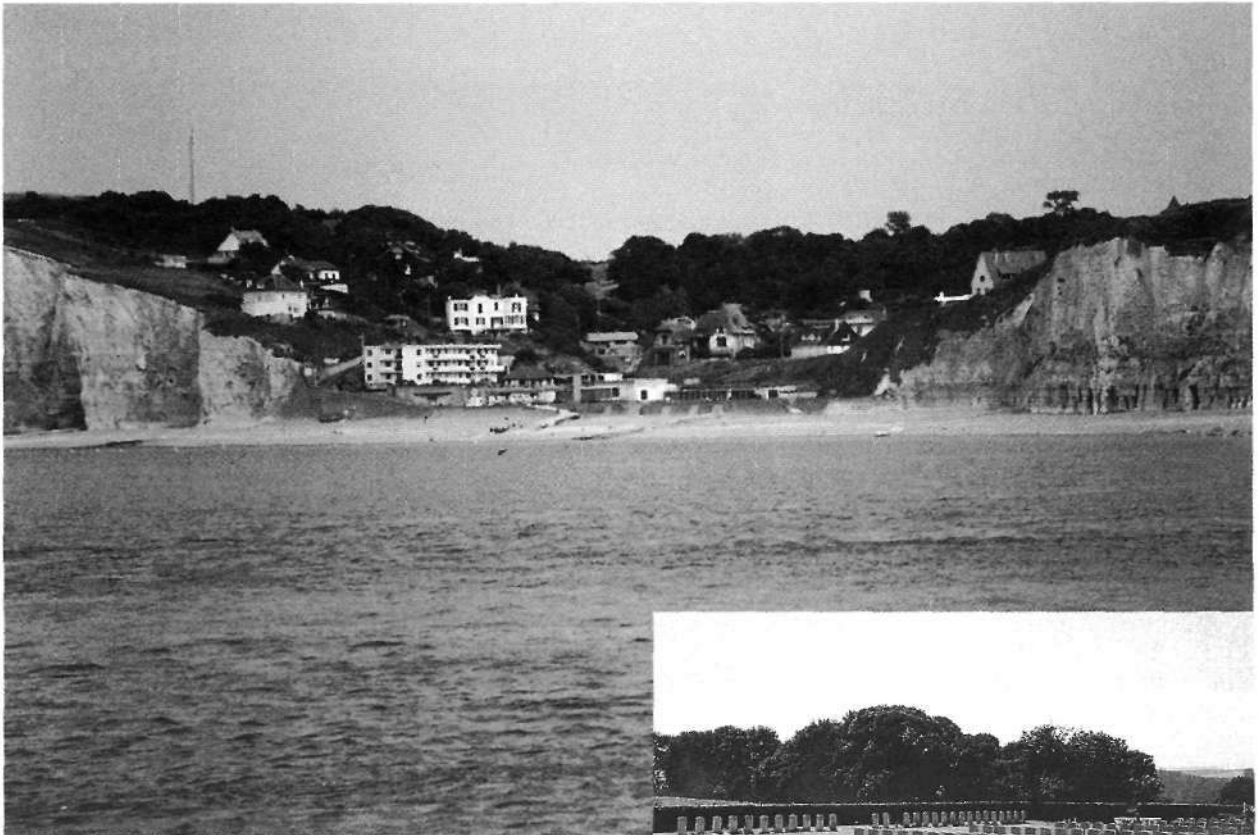
*To have, to hold and then to part  
is the greatest sorrow of the heart.*

W.L. Hinson, South Alberta Regt.,  
12 August 1944, Age 22.

Angela van Lanen  
McMaster University

**T**o a passer-by, Point 67, now a spot height of 64 metres on modern maps, is unremarkable. In July 1944, however, it afforded a sweeping view of the battlefield over which Operation Spring was fought. Few things have changed since then and one can easily discern the Beauvoir and Troteval farms much as they were 52 years ago.

Verrieres Ridge, the most famous landmark, lies just beyond these buildings, where "in that half-forgotten summer the best blood of Canada poured freely." The ridge line upon which so many Black Watch soldiers died dominated the countryside to the south of us. However, to the southeast one can just make out the village of Tilly-la-Campagne that the North Novas fought their way into. Southwest of us lies St. Martin-de-Fontenay and May-sur-Orne, 5 Brigade's objectives. And, further east of St. Martin is the compact village of St. Andre-sur-Orne that we had investigated earlier in the afternoon. At our back sprawls the city of Caen.



**Above:** The landing beach at Puits as seen from the sea. It is evident how the cliffs dominate this narrow beach. The sea wall today is about 10 feet tall. In 1942 it was over twice as high. (Photo by M. Bechthold)

**Right:** The Canadian war cemetery at Dieppe with its back-to-back headstones. (Photo by C. Evans)



Professor Copp hopes one day to see an observation post built on Point 67. The project merits serious consideration for a number of reasons. To begin with, there is a dearth of markers in the surrounding area that highlight Canadian Army operations in 1944. A tower containing maps and descriptions of these operations would enable visitors to easily orient themselves to the ground, while directing them to further points of interest. Additionally, an observation post would offer not only a better view of the ground over which Operation Spring was fought and Operation Totalize began, but would be highly visible and therefore more likely to be visited by passing motorists. The Maple Leaf, flying high above the fields, would be hard to miss. Finally, there is, I believe, a real need to create historical focal points that give people a contextual framework with which to develop more than a superficial understanding of Canadians at war. Deliver the facts and let people form their own opinions.

Christopher Doary  
Carleton University

**W**e went to the cliffs at Puits then over to Pourville after walking the Dieppe beach itself. Not sure how to describe this. The sick feeling I got in my

stomach as I looked up at those cliffs was quite unexpected and stayed with me for some time. Despite all the arguments that say no one knew Dieppe would be a disaster as I stood under those cliffs today I can't help but think that they should have known. Very unprofessional I know but I feel quite angry at such a terrible loss of life in what to me appears a very avoidable attack. Visiting the cemetery above Dieppe didn't help this feeling, especially when faced with headstones lined up back-to-back, very uncharacteristic of the other cemeteries we have seen.

Christopher Evans  
Carleton University

**O**ur last day before going to Dieppe. I can't believe how fast the time went! In the morning we headed for Bayeux, but before we reached Bayeux, we stopped in at St. Martin-des-Entrees so that I could see W.K. Ferguson's grave. That was so wonderful. I was so happy that I was able to visit his grave site. I wasn't sure I would have an opportunity to do so because it was a little bit out of the way. It really meant a great deal to me to be able to place a flag at his grave, especially since I know his sister Mary so well. I was also extremely excited when I spotted the street sign with his name on it, and I was able to get pictures. I

had heard so much from Mary about how important her brother was to the village and how honoured she felt two years ago when it was decided to rename the main street after her brother. I can now say that I have been there as well.

Diane Tomas  
King's College

On the 21st, we headed into the southeastern part of the Netherlands and spent the morning at the Dutch National War Museum. I could have used more time to explore the museum and its vehicle park, both well situated in a wooded area. The most compelling part of the museum is the Holocaust annex. It is a haunting place filled with unsettling bronze sculptures of concentration camp inmates. On the long drive to Arras that afternoon, I thought about the grisly piece of tattooed skin that is encased in glass like some laboratory specimen.

Some of our group rose late after having attended the previous night's summer solstice festival in Arras, but all were keen to make the pilgrimage to the Vimy Memorial. It is a site to be seen by all Canadians, and the view from the ridge confirms both its tactical and symbolic value. Although I managed to tour the tunnel systems and walk in the restored trenches elsewhere on this famous landmark, I prefer to sit on the steps of this monolith that marks the coming of age of a young nation.

Christopher Doary  
Carleton University

I still can't believe how quickly the time went. We saw so many things and discussed so many issues that sometimes it was hard to absorb everything at once. I know that months after this trip, and probably even years later, I will still be reflecting on things that I saw and did on this remarkable study tour. I knew this trip was going to be amazing before I left Canada, but it actually surpassed all of my expectations. It was certainly a very emotional trip but I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I wish that every Canadian could go on the same pilgrimage our group was so privileged to do. To walk in the footsteps of our soldiers really changes someone's perspective. I will never forget all the places that I saw and all the wonderful people that I met, and some day, I hope to return.

Diane Tomas  
King's College

Overall I was thrilled to be selected for the study program. The opportunity to study the actual battlefields was of incredible value in helping me better understand the events that took place. I have a new and much improved understanding now of the importance of terrain and how it dictates the way a battle is fought. The concept of reverse slope, hull down, the positioning of anti-tank weapons versus the likely avenues to be taken by armoured vehicles, all of it became clear during the three week program. I've read hundreds of books and studied maps, watched documentaries but nothing can replace the experiences of being there and seeing it for yourself.

Christopher Evans  
Carleton University

*Members of the 1996  
Canadian Battle of  
Normandy Study Tour.*

*Back row (l. to r.): Jil  
Beardmore, Grant  
Dawson, Christopher  
Evans, Serge  
Durflinger, Marie-Anne  
Ramson, Renee  
Lafferty and Jody  
Perrun. Front row (l. to  
n): Angela Van Lanen,  
Diane Tomas, Terry  
Copp, Christine  
Desjardin, Rob Talach,  
and James Camsell.  
Missing is Chris Doary.  
(Photo by Linda Copp)*

