

The 1999 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour

The 1999 CBNF Battlefield Study Tour - 12 students, Vince Field as administrative officer and translator, Marc Milner as Tour Leader and General Charles Belzile as the thirteenth student - began its sojourn with a week in Italy. The group arrived at the Hotel Ideale in Ortona on 24 May, in the heart of the old city on the site of some of the most desperate fighting. Battlefield study actually began at Casa Berardi, where it was 'delayed' by the hospitality of the Berardi family before moving on to start the battle properly at the Moro crossing. From Ortona's compact and increasingly urbanized battlefield the Tour moved off to the open, rolling hills of the Gothic Line, between Pesaro and Rimini. Here several days were spent working, amid oppressive heat, through a corps level battle over ground little changed since 1944. Fortunately, the Tour planners booked the group into a seafront hotel with its own pool! The Italian portion ended with a retreat in time and space to the Cassino area, and a look at the Canadian breaching of the Hitler Line. Although here, too, urbanization - and the re-establishment of foliage - has changed old battlefields, the imposing nature of the enormous hills frowning down on flat valleys made the essential problem of opening the route to Rome immediately evident.

On 1 June the Tour abandoned the dry heat of Italy for the cool damp of northern France. After stops at Vimy, Beaumont-Hamel, the Somme battlefield, and Dieppe, the Tour arrived in Normandy on 3 June. The next week was fully taken-up with visiting battlefields, local museums and as things turned out — meeting with veterans travelling as part of a Department of Veterans'

Affairs tour. The presence of the vets added a wonderful element to this year's Tour. Students were able to talk to D-Day vets on the beaches on 6 June, and to travel with them on their buses for a series of memorial services (including the Abbey garden) on 7 June. The student and vets tours also met on occasion by pure accident, particularly at St. Lambert-sur-Dives and at the Polish Memorial at Mont Ormel where students were also able to talk to veterans who made the history they were studying.

By all measures, the 1999 Battlefield Study Tour was a resounding success. The administrative and travel arrangements went perfectly. Having an administrative officer who was fluent in Italian (as well as French) proved invaluable, especially since the Tour often went where few tourists go. The group was a joy to be with. Their interest level remained high throughout. It probably helped that before leaving Canada each student was assigned three "briefs" to prepare on specific battles. So everyone had to keep abreast of things, even as they climbed wearily into the vans for the umpteenth time and straggled down the Caen-Falaise highway in the third week of a very busy and enormously rewarding tour.

Just what those 12 students carried away from the tour only time will tell. Given what they saw — not just the battlefields, but cemetery after cemetery full of Canadians their own age — and witnessed of the remembrance Europeans have for Canada's sacrifice, it is certain that this group of young Canadians, too, will be forever changed by the experience. The following accounts provide some insight on their perceptions.

The group on the Sherman tank at the Polish memorial at Mont Ormel, near Falaise, Normandy: (l. to r.) Vince Field, Charles Belzile, Dave Maori, Chris Mummery, Diane Beauregard, Marc Milner, Dave Peabody, Hélène Charest, Sean Stack, Stéphane Guevremont, Robert Boyer, Laura Crawford, Heidi MacDonald, Todd Fitzgerald, Denis Duborg.

(Photo courtesy Dave Macri)



Italy

This morning we started off at 8:30 and went to Casa Berardi which is where one Canadian earned the Victoria Cross. The man who greeted us there was five years old during the encounter between the Canadians and the Germans and he remembers two things vividly: one, that the Canadians took care of him and liked to play with him; and two, that they drank copious amounts of wine! He told us that Canadians are not friends - to him they are brothers.

His wife asked Vince how many girls we were, and upon finding out she went and cut four roses from her garden for us. But her generosity exceeded the flowers; she and her husband then brought us all back to their house where they served us home made wine and olives.

Laura Crawford, University of Western Ontario

Photo courtesy Dave Macri



Casa Berardi

Significance of a tree at the Casa Berardi. A German sniper took out a Canadian soldier right beside the tree. He bled to death at the base of the tree all the while calling out for his Mom. The tree is still there, but legend has it that after the blood from the fallen soldier had spilt on the tree it never bore fruit again.

Chris Mummery, University of Calgary

It is the end of a long, hot day in the sun... We hiked up to Point 111, which is on the north side of the Foglia River. It was a hot and steep climb, so I cannot imagine the energy it sucked out of the Perth Regiment as they hiked even further before reaching this point, and in preparation for an attack. Heidi read a passage about the Cape Breton Highlanders and then I talked about the Perths breaking the Gothic Line.

Laura Crawford

Walking the battlefields of Italy was important to me for another reason. Having served in the 1st Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment (during the latter part of the 1980s), I was eager to see just exactly where the RCRs had fought. Through regimental lore I had often heard about the Italian campaign, but to know I was part of a unit that once took part in these operations, filled me with pride and an immense respect for the Royals who had fought during that time.

Dave Macri, York University

Including Italy in this year's tour provided a terrific experience. Although all of the tour was new to me, it seemed extra special in Italy because so much of it is not well known by Canadians. Although the lack of signs and monuments commemorating the Canadian contribution to the war are disappointing from a "preservation of memory" point of view, the opportunity to explore virtually unmarked ground was very interesting. The day which most stands out in my mind was walking the Gothic line. The quiet lanes and roads of rural Italy offered us the chance to get out of the vans and walk the terrain over which the Canadians attacked. This slow pace allowed us to get a feeling for the ground that was not possible from a map or even the vehicles. The effort required to make it up many steep sections in the hot sun (even without equipment and not under fire) gave me a better appreciation of the common infantry soldier.

A final thought on Italy is that seeing the battlefields gives a real sense of how frustrating it must have been for the Canadians and Allies as they attacked the retreating Germans. The series of ridges and ravines, especially around Ortona, provided one natural obstacle after another. Attacking the same enemy, sitting on a virtually identical ridge to the one they had just been driven off of, must have been a discouraging experience to say the least.

Sean Stack, University of Waterloo

France

Vimy - Certes, le monument est extrêmement imposant et d'une architecture incroyable. Mais que c'est étrange d'être complètement entourée de champs de mines et de voir concrètement les marques des bombardements sur le sol. Un raccourci à travers les champs n'avait jamais été jusqu'à présent dangereux. Il n'y a que quelques années gisaient sous cette salle

de toilette des tonnes d'explosifs! Fascination, certitude et rappel, bref, que la vie est fragile et que, contrairement à eux, j'ai le privilège de vivre en tout confort et bien loin du danger.

Diane Beaugard, University of Ottawa

We went straight to the Vimy Memorial from the airport. I thought it was tremendous - the monument is gigantic, and the sculpted figures express emotion in equal proportion. The memorial overlooks the plains and is approached from the top side, the side from which the Canadians assaulted... The tunnels were eerie - I didn't think so at the time, but I do now. And I keep thinking of the painting at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. It shows the monument surrounded by the ghosts and skeletons of soldiers, walking away. Could anyone visit here blithely? There we were today, walking with the spirits.

Laura Crawford

Prior to this trip, my knowledge of Canadian military history had been primarily acquired through books and articles. Being able to meet with some of the veterans, however, and to listen to them relate their wartime experiences, gave much of what I had previously read a greater impact and clarity than it had before. It is one thing to read about a battle in the comfort of your living room chair, but hearing about it from the participants as they pointed out the important features on the ground they fought on helped me to understand the difficulties that they faced.

But there was more to it, however, than just hearing them talk about the war. I felt there was a sense amongst them of belonging to something greater than most people today could possibly even imagine....Getting a glimpse of what these guys were like, made me kind of wish that I had been around back in that era. Being on the bus with them on the day we went from Caen back to the Abbaye Ardenne (7 June), was a pretty good substitute though. The traffic jam we found ourselves in that day was one I'm glad we ended up in. To pass the time, one of the vets (from the Toronto Scottish Regiment) took hold of the microphone on the bus and he started cracking off a bunch of dirty jokes. Considerable amounts of laughter filled the bus and then another fellow grabbed the mike and played old wartime songs with his harmonica. They all broke out singing "Lili Marlene" and it almost seemed as if we had gone back in time to 1944 in the back of a deuce

and a half. That was absolutely fantastic and I'm glad I was lucky enough to have been there.

Dave Macri

Staying at the Abbey gave me a great deal to think about. It is a great place to stay with its medieval history and country setting, and I knew it was especially important because of the 20 Canadian soldiers murdered there by the 12th SS. However, I at first had a difficult time fully understanding why such attention was paid to



Hélène Charest briefing the group on the battle for Coriano, Italy.

Photo courtesy of Marc Milner

the deaths of these 20 men. This became even harder for me to understand after we spent days walking the ground where thousands of men had lost their lives. However, after visiting the garden and participating in the ceremony to honour the 20 Canadians murdered, I realized that not only were we remembering the deaths of those young men, but also the great evil which they were fighting. The Hitler Youth, the models of Nazi idealism, had entered that once holy place and marred it with 20 horrendous acts. The Canadians there were not the victims of war, but rather of men who placed no value whatsoever on human life. Killing those prisoners served no purpose. If fighting the Second World War ever needs justification, one needs only to point to the murders in that garden to point out that what Canada did was necessary and right.

Sean Stack

The last ceremony we attended was one in which we also participated. It was the ceremony in the garden of the Abbey....General Belzile read out the names of the dead, and their ages as we each in turn placed a leaf on the



Looking for gun emplacements near Pontecorvo, Italy, with the flat topped ridge shown prominently in Charles Comfort's "The Hitler Line" looming in the background. Photo courtesy of Marc Milner.

memorial in honour of the dead. He wanted us to realize that Canadians our age had come to France before us, and now rest all around the places we visited.

Laura Crawford

I really appreciated the interplay of studying the battlefields, visiting cemeteries and meeting veterans. The three activities culminated in a particularly striking moment which I will never forget. After a ceremony held at the Abbey d'Ardenne in memory of 20 Canadians murdered by the 12th SS, a veteran from Amherst, NS approached me to say I had laid a maple leaf in memory of a very good friend of his.

*Heidi MacDonald,
University of New Brunswick*

In Retrospect

What I preferred about the trip was to prepare three briefings, know those battles well and then present them on the spot. There is nothing like studying something and then seeing it. I like to think that it is as big a contrast and almost as powerful as reading about love and then falling in love.

Diane Beauregard

In my mind's eye, pictures persist of the narrow bullet-scarred streets of Ortona and the daunting view of Monte Cassino and its domain from the floor of the Liri Valley. Equally provocative is the perspective I observed from the shingle-rocked Channel coastline of the dominating headlands in and around Dieppe, as well as the open fields on the approaches to Carpiquet. I continue to attempt to imagine what Canadian troops on these battlefields were feeling and thinking when they looked over the same terrain on the eve of combat.

The study tour served to remind me that the study and understanding of military history is far from a simple or strictly academic pursuit. The experience underscores the importance for all to pay heed to the human and material costs,

as well as the complexities and nuances of armed conflict. I think all the participants of the study tour have been invaluable and incalculably enriched. Our academic, professional and personal lives have been indelibly affected. Undoubtedly, I shall be a better military history student, researcher, writer and teacher thanks to the pivotal experience the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour provided.

Denis Dubord, University of Victoria

Now that I have had a couple of months to think about the experience of touring the battlefields, I feel that this was one of the best experiences of my life. I feel like I have made a pilgrimage that has had numerous benefits for me. First of all, for me the tour was an invaluable educational experience that will probably sour any further reading I do in military history. My conception of the wars has also changed. As mentioned, they seem much more recent than they did before, and in a way, more real. I feel that in Canada the postwar generations have not experienced the same impact from the wars as was experienced in Europe, and seeing physical scars from the wars has made them more impacting. Of these physical scars, I found the cemeteries to be the most profound. They gave me a small indication as to how much the two conflicts actually cost the world and its people. Finally, the tour has also made me increasingly proud to call myself Canadian. After seeing some of the battlefields in Europe, I am happy to associate myself with the men and women who volunteered to go overseas to help defend and liberate a land they had never been to. I feel that the wars are an integral part of our history, and that to ignore that history is disrespectful to the people that gave their all so that we can enjoy the freedom we enjoy today. I have returned to Canada eager and proud to do my best to make sure this part of our history is not forgotten by our younger generations, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have had this experience.

*David A. Peabody,
University of New Brunswick*