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A Canada Day of Remembrance

JUNE 27, 2024 BY MARK STEVENS

3 COMMENTS





A sculpted caribou, symbol of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, soars above the actual battlefield in Beaumont-Hamel, France.

– photos by Sharon Matthews-Stevens

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Newfoundland and Labrador traditionally celebrate Canada Day along with the rest of Canada on July 1, but that date is just as significant here for an entirely different reason.

At 9:15 a.m. on July 1, 1916, eight hundred members of the Royal

Newfoundland Regiment went over the top to attack the German trenches near the French village of Beaumont-Hamel on the first day of the World War I Battle of the Somme.

Sixty-eight of those eight hundred reported for roll call at the end of the day. More than three hundred were killed, presumed dead or missing in action. Nearly four hundred more were wounded.

All in a matter of hours.



Among the artifacts displayed in the museum at The Rooms in St. John's are images of those who served, reminding one of the human cost of war.

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Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, July 1 – Canada Day – is also a day of remembrance.

A sense of pride does characterize Canada Day celebrations. The day begins with a sunrise ceremony high atop Signal Hill and ends – not surprisingly – with the requisite fireworks, filling the skies over Quidi Vidi Lake with colour, the thunder of gunpowder reverberating across the valley.

Despite the solemnity of the upcoming ceremony, St. John's itself can be downright cheerful.

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But local festivities do inevitably take on a darker tone.

“Flags here are lowered to half-mast on the morning of July 1,” explains Newfoundlander Dean Lodge. “But we still celebrate Canada Day. Traditionally flags are raised again at noon.”

One hundred years ago this week, on the eighth anniversary of the Beaumont-Hamel battle, the National War Memorial in St. John’s was dedicated to great pomp and circumstance fifteen years before Ottawa’s national cenotaph. A solemn procession was led by seven bands in the largest gathering in Newfoundland history. Field Marshall Douglas Haig, who had been the commander of the British Expeditionary force at the time of the battle, conducted the dedication itself.

Signifying the maritime contributions of Newfoundlanders, the middle level of the monument boasts a bronze sculpture.

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Given that fact that next week marks the one-hundredth-anniversary of that dedication, this year's events promise to be particularly poignant.

In late May an honour guard traveled to Beaumont-Hamel to oversee the exhumation of the body of an unknown Newfoundland soldier. Then they escorted his remains back to Newfoundland.

Just this week, ten days before the commencement of these ceremonies, my wife and I visit the memorial early on a Sunday morning to pay our own tribute.

Sharon's family were Newfoundlanders so she knew the story of this tragedy better than most. I'd worked in a St. John's hospital in the 70's, taking care of veterans from Newfoundland and Labrador. During one Canada Day, CBC reporters visited one of my patients, a fellow

Street banners advertise the upcoming ceremonies.

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who had never said so much
as a word to me about his

service, though we talked about it in detail in the following days. He had survived the battle.

Fascinated by his story, I began to research the battle, to study its impact on Newfoundland and Labrador society. I promised myself that one day I would pay tribute at the very spot where so many died.

Four years ago my wife and I stood at the edge of No-Man's Land at Beaumont-Hamel and remembered, standing in the shadow of a sculpted caribou, symbol of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment.

Symbolic caribou looks out over the battlefield, one of only two Canadian national historic sites located outside
Canada.

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We marched through zigzag trenches facing no-man's land, we noticed rusted stakes still sprouting from the ground, vertical supports for strands of barbed wire. We descended the slope and negotiated the treacherous shell craters still dominating no-man's land. We stopped to reflect at a replica of the Danger Tree, a planned rally point for those who made it past the German guns, a number that turned out to be alarmingly small.

It was the final stop in our own pilgrimage of remembrance, one that took us to Ypres, to Vimy, to Passchendaele, at long last to Beaumont-Hamel.

The author walks through the trenches at Beaumont-Hamel, learning specifics of the fateful battle.

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Forty years later I had fulfilled that long-ago promise to come here and pay tribute.

On that morning I said a little prayer for the soul of my erstwhile patient.

Finding ourselves in downtown St. John's mere days before this year's rededication, it seems logical to make just one more stop on our own pilgrimage of remembrance.

Early on a late June Sunday morning we visit the memorial itself.

Construction barriers limit access to the site because they are frantically

refurbishing it for anniversary events, but an understanding security guard lets us sneak past the barriers.

The memorial is located in a strategic spot, dominating a hillside that falls away to the waters of the harbour in central St. John's.

We turn away from the memorial itself and face the water. The monument is so placed that it is one of the first things arriving vessels see after passing through the Narrows into the harbour.

“Victory” stands atop the War Memorial in a place of honour. The plywood structure will be removed to open the granite tomb for the Unknown Soldier.

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A verdigrised bronze statue of a woman representing the Spirit of Newfoundland dominates the structure. Standing atop a dais of granite, she holds a torch in her hand, symbolizing freedom.

Just below her, four bronze figures pay tribute to the Newfoundlanders who served: a member of the Forestry Corps, a sailor, a representative of the Mercantile Marine, a soldier from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment.

Five plaques are affixed to the base of this monument, recognizing those who served – from the War of 1812 to Afghanistan.

The Rooms play host to the museum where visitors can discover a wealth of Newfoundland and Labrador history.

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Here, early on this Sunday morning, it is peaceful and quiet. Wind whispers in the leaves of the trees offering shade to this site, an occasional car passes. I hear the periodic complaint of an impatient seagull.

It is a moving and elegant memorial, even with the signs of current construction, but I'm struck by the presence of an oblong plywood box situated front and centre.

And peaceful though this morning may be, just yesterday my wife and

I immersed ourselves in the events of that long ago day that inspired this very tribute, a day that forever scarred the Newfoundland psyche.

Cabot Tower on Signal Hill is another iconic St. John's landmark.

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The Basilica in St. John's dominates the skyline overlooking the War Memorial and stands beside The Rooms, home to museum, gallery and archives.

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Even now I look up the hills that fall toward the harbour, past the rainbow-painted Second Empire row houses that decorate the downtown, past the Basilica, toward a duet of imposing yellow buildings with red roofs that dominates St. John's skyline.

Known as The Rooms, these buildings house the provincial archives, an art gallery and a museum.

There in the museum, we spent the better part of yesterday morning exploring an exhibit called "Beaumont-Hamel and the Trail of the Caribou." The latter is a reference to the fact that the Royal

Newfoundland Regiment's service extended well beyond that lonely, tragic battlefield.

Museum exhibit "Beaumont-Hamel and the Trail of the Caribou"

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The exhibit seemed deliberately designed to confuse and discombobulate the visitor, as if one was hunkered down in those very trenches, as if to recreate the feelings that those soldiers must have shared.

Here we learned about the human costs, we saw the human faces of those who went to war. Here we saw a trench club designed for hand-to-hand combat, here we saw the prosthetic devices once worn by a veteran who survived the ordeal – though the cost to him was enormous. Here we rounded a corner and stood, with the recorded rat-a-tat-tat of machine

gun fire for background, at a replica of that Danger Tree. It evoked our own memories of standing on the very spot where that fateful landmark once stood in No-Man's Land.

At this very spot – where the Danger Tree stood – troops were supposed to rally. Very few got this far.

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A solemn, lonely tribute from a Newfoundlander decorates one corner of the battlefield.

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Back at the Memorial itself this morning I reflect on yesterday's visit to the museum, on our own pilgrimage to the actual battlefield. That's when it strikes me with a sudden jolt of sadness that the plywood box marring the symmetry of this site is no mere construction leftover.

Even as we study this monument, across town in Confederation Building (home to the provincial legislature) they are making preparations for one more sombre ritual, one more pit stop on the Caribou Trail.

In the days leading up to Canada Day the remains of that repatriated patriot will lie in state there.

On the morning of July 1, Newfoundlanders will gather at this hallowed place.

“For the first time, members of the individual Legion branches will hold their own services on June thirtieth so they can come to St. John’s for the repatriation,” says Lodge.

The body will be transported here, that plywood box removed to reveal an empty grave. After the bugle call, after the laying of wreathes, after the exhortations, the memorial will be closed off and the Unknown Soldier will be laid to rest in a granite tomb. This will then be the only Canadian War Memorial outside Ottawa to host a final resting place such as this.

Later that afternoon, the site will be re-opened for Newfoundlanders and visitors to pay their own respects.

The author studies the Newfoundland names populating the cemetery here on
the Somme.

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This morning, mere days before July 1, 2024, the centenary of that first ceremony of remembrance, my wife and I reflect for a moment in silence. We remember.

In scant days Newfoundlanders will also remember.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning.

For a virtual tour of the commemorative exhibit at The Rooms
<https://www.therooms.ca/exhibits/now/beauumont-hamel-and-the-trail-of-the-caribou>

– Whether you want to visit to pay your own tribute, to learn more about the history and culture here or just to sample the delights of one of Canada’s most beautiful provinces, a great place to begin your planning is

www.newfoundlandandlabrador.com



A Century of Remembrance

It was a century ago that "The war to end all wars" came to an end ...



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O Canada

On the occasion of Canada's 150th birthday, Mark Stevens & Sharon Matthews-Stevens share their impressions of Canada ...



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COMMENTS

Mark. Stevens says

June 28, 2024 at 9:29 am

Thanks for your faith in our work — once again! Looks fabulous!

Reply

Guy Theriault says

June 28, 2024 at 1:04 pm

Another well written piece Mark and nice pics Sharon.

Reply

Ruth Cameron says

June 28, 2024 at 1:24 pm

What a touching, beautiful story – in spite of all the deaths!!

Reply

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