

We Stand On Guard for Thee

Some time ago during my vacation period, I had the pleasure of travelling to Europe to tour the various regions of France. Our tour group was comprised of forty-five travellers from a variety of countries. My three friends and myself made up the Canadian contingent on the bus.

As the days and weeks passed we had the chance to get to know each other better and in some ways the new friendships that grew became as valuable and as memorable as the trip itself.

On the second last day of the tour we were making our way to Calais and the ferryboat that would take us back across the English Channel, on to London and finally the airport. Throughout the war memorial that the people of France erected to the Canadian soldiers who fought so bravely here the trip as we rode along in the coach our wonderful French guide provided a colourful and interesting commentary to give us a better understanding of what we were seeing out the window.

About two hours out of Paris we were driving through the peaceful, French countryside when our guide came on the microphone. His richly, accented voice was serious and sombre.

"We are presently passing through the World War I battlefields just south of Vimy Ridge. If you look to your right, just across the field there, you will see the war memorial that the people of France erected to the Canadian soldiers who fought so bravely here. Even today some of the residents from the surrounding towns place flowers on the memorial regularly. Some lived through the fighting and have never forgotten the soldiers who took up their cause. And so, my dear Canadian friends at the back of the bus, I would like to say thank you from the people here in Vimy for the unselfish acts of your Canadian soldiers."

Across the grassy field, the stone monument stood erect and proud against the French sky. A Canadian flag rippled softly in the calm breeze. The passengers, each deep in their own thoughts, stared silently out the windows. Lost in the moment, I could visualize the sights and sounds of war. Suddenly an unexpected wave of emotion swept over me. I felt immense sadness for those men who never returned home to Canadian soil, but at the same time my heart swelled against my chest with an enormous sense of pride. Tears swelled up in my eyes. I was embarrassed by my uncontrolled reaction. As I turned around I realized that each of my friends had experienced the same feelings, their eyes also wet with tears. We smiled knowingly at each other not speaking a word, our eyes rich with understanding.

I had travelled all this way to appreciate what it means to be Canadian.

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