

# On their way to Vimy, students learn what 'nobody on earth can imagine'

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*The Memorial Cross, also known as the Silver Cross, was given to the mother of Pte. George Dusome after he was killed in action in 1917. - Peter Lee, Record staff*

WATERLOO REGION — [George Dusome](#), 18, died alone in the dark, marching across a muddy, cratered battlefield in Belgium. [Alexander MacDonald](#), 25, died at a field hospital in France, rushed there after he was shot in the stomach.

They were strangers, infantry privates who sacrificed themselves for Canada in the First World War. A century later, they have something more in common.

Both are related to local high school students who are going to Europe to remember and honour them.

Naomi Paul, 17, will gaze upon George's name, carved on the [Menin Gate Memorial](#) in Belgium. She'll help lay a wreath there on Thursday. George was her great, great uncle. Kieran Coffey, 16, will think about Alexander, who earned a Military Medal for bravery and is buried in France. Alexander was his great, great uncle.

Naomi and Kieran are among 180 local students going on pilgrimages this month to Western Front battlefields and cemeteries. The highlight is [April 9](#), when students join Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Royal Family at the national Vimy Memorial in France, to commemorate 100 years since the battle that historians say helped forge a nation.

George was a French-speaking labourer from Penetang, Ont. Naomi will tell her classmates about how her great, great uncle lied about his age to enlist at 16, about how he got over the mumps just before sailing to England from Halifax, and about how he barely got into the fight before he was killed on Nov. 7, 1917.

She might tell them how the government mistakenly paid him \$15 after he was killed, but made sure to claw the money back.

"I think that he went to war so he could get some money every month to send to his mother," said George's niece, Leona Paul, 81. She said George came from a big, poor family that loved music.

"They loved to dance, they loved to sing, they loved to play the mouth organ and guitar," Leona said, remembering George's many brothers and sisters.

George was killed at [Passchendaele](#) in Belgium. The battlefield was a stew of mud and rotting corpses. Soldiers made their way across it by laying ladderlike wooden planks across the mud.

These planks, called duckboards by soldiers, swayed "drunkenly as they floated in the mire or were propped up on a few islands of solid ground — or on the thousands of decomposing corpses that rested in the quagmire," historian Tom Cook writes in "Shock Troops".

"To fall off of these perches meant to sink into the morass. With heavy kits, it was not uncommon for soldiers to slip off the wooden boards and drown."

George had reached the front just six weeks earlier. At night while marching with comrades, he slipped off a plank and disappeared. Perhaps he drowned in the mud or was targeted by a sniper. He was reported missing and later declared killed in action. His remains were never recovered.

"He was leaving the front lines when he was killed," said Naomi, who attends St. Mary's High School in Kitchener. She wonders if George was at the front long enough to make friends. She's consoled that he saw combat before he was killed.

"It seemed like he wanted to go there. So it would have been kind of sad if he didn't actually get to do what he signed up for," Naomi said.

Naomi contacted researchers in Belgium to learn more. They sent her a map of the Passchendaele battlefield, marking the spot where he's believed to have died, and told her: "We believe Pte. Dusome fell out of the line during the chaos of the relief, at times targeted by German artillery, on the crowded duckboard No. 5 ... We do not know if Pte. Dusome was wounded but he fell victim to the mud."

Alexander MacDonald was a steelmaker from Cape Breton, N.S. He came from a large family with a Gaelic-speaking mother. He enlisted with his pals when the war started in 1914 and was always sure to send money to his widowed mother.

"He always thought of home first," said his nephew Colin Alexander MacDonald, 79, whose middle name is partly a tribute to his fallen uncle.

Alexander saw many pals killed, their bodies obliterated. He wrote that it would be "nice to die in a quiet place where you are clear of shells and bullets flying around and where you can get a decent burial."

His death at a field hospital, away from the battlefield, earned him the small mercy of a known [grave](#).

While fighting in France at the Somme, Alexander was shot in the left thigh in September 1916. While recovering, he wrote to his mother Rebecca: "You asked me if I was on the firing line all the time, yes ever since I came to France till I got wounded but I will be back in a few days time again."

He told her that his job was to go into trenches to maintain wiring so that artillery guns could communicate with infantry soldiers.

"It's a dangerous job when there is a big bombardment on you got to go out in the open through rifle and shell fire and keep the lines up in those trenches," he wrote. "The nights are dark and you fall in shell holes and on top of dead men that have been laying there for days and the smell is terrible.

"There is nobody on earth that can imagine what us poor fellows got to go through over here unless they went through it themselves it's a terrible war."

Two years later, at 4:50 a.m. on Sept. 2, 1918, Alexander leapt from a forward trench with his infantry comrades, following a barrage of Canadian shells that crept toward the enemy. Their goal: to liberate the French village of [Cagnicourt](#).

The men had no time to prepare after spending days hiding in shell holes while the Germans bombarded them and poured poison gas across the terrain. Alexander hadn't eaten hot food in four days.

Combat was hard and bloody for more than two hours as the men advanced a kilometre. Later in the day more than 30 enemy airplanes raked the men with machine-gun fire. Still they persisted, crashing the German front line and forcing the enemy to retreat.

After Alexander was shot in the stomach, his comrades rushed him to a mobile field hospital, where he perished on Sept. 3, 1918.

Kieran is now learning details about the great, great uncle who fell in battle. He's visited the Cape Breton town where Alexander grew up. He knows his family connection will loom larger as he makes his way to Vimy and to other battlefields. "It will definitely add more meaning," said Kieran, who attends St. David Catholic Secondary School.

Naomi struggles to understand how Europe's governments let the Great War begin. "I feel like it just shouldn't have happened," she said. But she can see how the war helped shape Canada as an independent nation. And she can see how the Second World War that began in 1939 can be traced back to the end of the First World War.

It delights Leona Paul to know that her granddaughter Naomi and her uncle George are connecting across two continents and a century, and that George's sacrifice is not forgotten by country and kin.

"It's history. It's family. It's everything," she said. "And that is what is important as we go through life."

[jouthit@therecord.com](mailto:jouthit@therecord.com) . Twitter: @OuthitRecord

by [Jeff Outhit](#)

Jeff Outhit is a Record reporter, specializing in education, government, and data analysis.