

'It just shocks me, how many people died'

Students to visit Great War battlefields

Jeff Outhit Waterloo Region Record

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WATERLOO REGION — Canada's bloodiest conflict is not dusty history to 100 high school students. To understand more about the First World War, they plan to visit the battlefields where so many fell.

The trip called '100 for the 100th' is planned for April 2017, a century after Canadian soldiers cleared the German enemy from Vimy Ridge in France. The famous victory cost 3,600 Canadian lives, among more than 60,000 Canadians who perished in the war.

"I want to know why they decided to go and fight this war that's across the ocean," said Brayden Raymond, 16. "I'd be terrified to have to go through anything close to what these guys had to go through."

Raymond, attending St. Benedict in Cambridge, struggles to understand what trench warfare was like for soldiers not much older than him. His British-born ancestor Nathaniel Craig enlisted in Ottawa in 1914 and was shot in the eye in 1916. It damaged his vision forever.

"It just shocks me, how many people died," said Elizabeth Van Dam, 14. "Young boys were pulled out from their families, and had to go. They didn't deserve to die."

Van Dam, attending St. David in Waterloo, wants to learn more about airplanes in the war. During the war, her Dutch ancestor Cornelius van Beers helped guard the neutral border between the Netherlands and Germany.

"It made Canada proud to be who they are," said Naomi Paul, 15, attending St. Mary's in Kitchener. Her relative George Dusome enlisted in 1916 at Penetanguishene, Ont. He was killed in action in 1917 in Belgium, at 20.

By visiting battlefields "you can kind of experience what they were thinking," Paul said.

Before going overseas, students from five Catholic high schools will study the Great War and research individual soldiers whose graves they will visit.

They plan to visit London's Imperial War Museum, before travelling to French and Belgian battlefields. This includes visiting Vimy Ridge for the 100th anniversary of the battle, launched April 9, 1917.

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"It is considered the point at which Canada started to feel like a nation," said Carol Watkins, a retired teacher who's organizing the trip.

Troops assembled in tunnels ahead of the Vimy battle. "They went in there as English, Irish, German, French, Russian, Ukrainian, whatever," Watkins said. "They came out as Canadians."

Fundraising to defray costs is underway. Tomorrow, on the anniversary of the start of the Vimy battle, students intend to walk 3,600 metres each around the track at Resurrection Secondary School, after securing fundraising pledges.

jouthit@therecord.com

jouthit@therecord.com

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