

CANADIANS, from Vimy Ridge to the Canal du Nord



HE has counted the graves in three military cemeteries in his local commune. Guy de Saint-Aubert is the mayor of Sains-lès-Marquion and has thrown himself into a commemorative project that he wasn't in the least bit expecting. He was certainly familiar with the main thread of the turbulent events experienced in his village during the Great War, but there is so much more to the story...

"I was aware that villagers had been evacuated, and that the Germans had blown up the church in 1917. My brother had even received a photo of the event sent by a German with whom he corresponded and who had even fought in Sains!" The mayor had even heard talk of the "capture" of the village, of its "reconstruction", involving the digging of twenty wells, "plus, of course, the British cemeteries". Except that of the 273 graves at Quarry Wood, 260 are Canadian; of the 257 at the Ontario Cemetery, 142 are Canadian; and of the 227 at the Sains-lès-Marquion British Cemetery, 177 are also Canadian. It was the arrival in Sains of Michel Gravel in 2003 which "set the cat among the pigeons" for the mayor of the village. Since 2001, Gravel, a roof salesman from Cornwall, Ontario, has spent all his time researching Canada's military past. An inveterate history buff, he has thumbed his nose at academics. In particular, he has published *"Tough as Nails"* ("Arras à Cambrai par le chemin le plus long"), which provides a new insight into the capture of Canal du Nord. Supporting documentation comes in the form of regimental journals and the recollections of "Hillie" Foley, a roofer from Ottawa. "Gravel told us what happened on 27 September 1918 in Sains-lès-Marquion", states Guy de Saint-Aubert, "and I wanted to satisfy the curiosity of our local inhabitants."

No more fighting

Hence the inauguration of a commemorative plaque on the square on 31 August 2008. Ninety years before, on 27 September 1918 to be exact, on the left flank of the Allied offensive against the Hindenburg Line, the 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment) of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division attacked the Germans who were holding the Canal du Nord. Supported by an artillery barrage and by four tanks from the British Tank Corps, the 14th Battalion established a

bridgehead on the fields to the south of Sains-lès-Marquion. After a brief lull, they went on the offensive again, entering the village from the rear and taking the enemy completely by surprise, with the Canadian "steamroller" taking five hundred prisoners. "A tactical masterpiece within the Battle of the Canal du Nord, the most complex operation of the Great War, and a plan that was incredibly ambitious", asserts Michel Gravel. "The battle was won here in Sains, so a monument was needed to commemorate it", he adds, remembering the memorial at the Bois de Bourlon. Although the famous 14th Battalion lost sixty men on 27 September, a total of 9,000 Canadians were killed along the road from Arras to Cambrai between 26 August and 9 October 1918. All these soldiers had made "the supreme sacrifice", Michel Gravel pronounces darkly. "He knows them like the back of his hand", explains the mayor of Sains. "In front of each grave he will tell you that so-and-so died in Marquion, another at the hospital, and even the names of their parents." So it was, therefore, at the end of August, that Michel was able to show Jim Vallance "the exact spot where his great-uncle, James Wellington Young, was killed on 27 September 1918". Jim Vallance, who was making his second visit to Sains-lès-Marquion, is famous in Canada as a songwriter for Bryan Adams, the Scorpions, Joe Cocker, Rod Stewart, Tina Turner and others. Jim Vallance and Bryan Adams wrote "Remembrance Day" (11 November) in 1986: "The guns will be silent on Remembrance Day. We'll all say a prayer on Remembrance Day". In Sains-lès-Marquion, everyone is committed to weapons being silenced forever. Liberated in 1918 by the Canadians, the village is now twinned with the German town of Neuenheerse. "There'll be no more fighting", sings Bryan Adams.

We hope that is the case.



From 1914-18 to today: a Canadian battalion passes through Barlin (above); soldiers from the 14th Battalion are buried at the cemetery in Sains-lès-Marquion where Michel Gravel and Jim Vallance pay their respects (below).

619,000 soldiers mobilised

Gloriously sunny skies welcomed Queen Elisabeth II to Vimy on 9 April 2007, where she was presiding over the official inauguration of the restored monument. "Victory at Vimy Ridge enabled Canada to occupy an important place in the world, inspiring a young country to become a magnificent nation", she said. In Canada, everyone knows about Vimy, however in the grand scheme of things this small part of the Pas-de-Calais is just a single episode in Canada's participation in the Great War. From October 1914 onwards, Canadian volunteers were already arriving in England and were involved in early fighting near Ypres at the beginning of 1915. The Canadian Expeditionary Force had already distinguished itself in the battles of Ypres and in the face of the horrors of poison gas, as well as in Neuve-Chapelle in March 1915, and Festubert and Givenchy in May and June 1915. From July to November 1916, there they are again in the tragic Battle of the Somme. And then at Vimy Ridge from 9 to 14 April 1917; Arleux; the 3rd Battle of the Scarpe; Souchez; Avion; Hill 70 and the offensive against Lens in August 1917 (the only large-scale urban battle in the Great War); Amiens in August 1918; the breaching of the Hindenburg Line during the autumn of 1918; and the advance from Arras to Cambrai. In total, the Canadian Expeditionary Force committed 619,000 men to the First World War (a figure based initially on volunteers and then on conscription after Vimy, to which Quebec was opposed). There were many immigrants in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and it is estimated that half of all its soldiers were born in the United Kingdom. Add to these Ukrainians, Russians, Scandinavians, Dutch, Belgians and a plethora of Americans, not forgetting four thousand native Indians, Inuits and Métis. The human cost was a very heavy one: 66,655 dead, of whom 19,660 were unidentified. In places such as Achicourt, Vimy, Étaples, Écoivres, Thélus, Villers-au-Bois and elsewhere, 28,785 Canadian officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers are laid to rest in the six hundred or so cemeteries and burial sites in the Pas-de-Calais.

The 22^e Battalion «indefatigable heroism»



1 5 SEPTEMBER 1915, 8.30pm, and the steamer Princess of Argyll is berthing in Boulogne-sur-Mer. On the quayside the few spectators "listen attentively". For over a year now Boulogne has been used to the sight of British troops disembarking at the port, but this evening the new arrivals are speaking French. The news travels fast: the French-Canadians are heading for the front! "The 22nd caused quite a stir", wrote Joseph Chaballe in his "Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français", a battalion officially born on 21 October 1914 following the actions of fifty or so individuals "frustrated" by the fact that the first contingent of volunteers which had departed for Europe did not include a single exclusively French-speaking fighting unit within its ranks.

On 16 September, the 22nd reached Saint-Omer, where the general headquarters allocated it an interpreter who was heard to exclaim: "mais nom d'un chien, vous parlez tous le français, et l'anglais bien mieux que moi" ("good grief – you all speak French, and English better than I do!"). 1,178 men were readying themselves for the trenches, including 1,078 French-speaking Canadians, 47 French-Americans from New England, 14 French, 10 British, 4 Swiss, 3 Italians, 2 Spanish, 1 Mexican, 1 Argentinian and some Russians! During the course of 38 months of war, and taking reinforcements into account, 5,919 officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers served in the 22nd. From September 1915 to August 1916, the 22nd went on the attack, suffered the effects of mud and gas, and demonstrated their bravery and energy around the "Ypres Salient" in Flanders. These "Frenchmen dressed in English style" (i.e. khaki) then headed for the Somme, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Tremblay. On the evening of 15 September 1916, the 22nd

took and held Courcelette "to the final man..." in the terrible battle of the same name: "If hell is as abominable as what I saw in Courcelette, I wouldn't want my worst enemy to go there", wrote Colonel Tremblay in his campaign journal. The hell of Courcelette brought with it despair and revolt within the battalion, in which three soldiers were shot for desertion. On 1 October came the attack on the Regina trench. Men fell in their hundreds, and the four companies, their ranks decimated, needed urgent reorganisation; on the 15th they established quarters in Bully-Grenay and at Fosse 10 with the "ch'ti" (the local inhabitants of the Pas-de-Calais), where they were entrenched in the heart of the Angres sector. Their new objective in 1917 was the attack on Vimy Ridge on 9 April – the greatest Canadian victory of the Great War and a joint English- and French-speaking success. Having barely gathered their emotions, the 22nd arrived at Côte 70 (the French translation of Hill 70, named after the 70 marker, a figure which appears on local topographical

maps) in a suburb of Lens, where the attack took place on 15 August 1917. In later years, a ski run in Les Laurentides would be named Côte 70: quite a transition from coal to snow! Following new raids in Belgium, the 22nd spent Christmas and New Year in the "civilised surroundings" of Ligny-lès-Aire: "What joy for all our poor tommies used to the horror of desolate ruins to spend a few weeks in a village that had not seen the war, to be able to breathe fresh country air without the burning sensation of powder and poisoned gas in their throats, and to be able to sleep for an entire night without being suddenly and continually woken by the sound of cannons", wrote A.-J. Lapointe in "Soldier of Quebec". The 22nd began 1918 in the Neuville-Vitasse and Mercatel sectors: "filthy sectors, mud up to your knees; no trenches, just shallow ditches with individual holes that men dug as fast as they could". The battalion made their way through the south of the Artois: Bailleulmont, Bailleulval, Lattre-Saint-Quentin, Bienvillers-au-Bois and Hermaville. Then came the Battle of Amiens in early August and Chérisy at the end of the same month: "...indefatigable heroism. All the officers of the 22nd were either killed or wounded". At Chérisy, Georges Vanier, the future Canadian ambassador to France from 1945 to 1953, and Governor General of Canada (the first French speaker to be appointed to the post) from 1959 to 1967, lost his right leg. The Battle of Cambrai, the Armistice and the



Included in the list of 1,074 dead from the 22nd Battalion is the name Celestin Hermary, originally from Saint-Floris in the Pas-de-Calais. Having emigrated to Canada with his family in 1907, Celestin signed up in September 1916. Following his arrival in France on 7 September 1917, he was killed near Mercatel on 2 April 1918 and buried at the Wailly Orchard Cemetery.

long "march on Germany" then followed. The battalion returned to England on 10 May 1919 aboard the Olympic, the sister ship of the Titanic, and received a hero's welcome a week later in

Québec City and then Montreal. 1,074 officers, non-commissioned officers and other ranks from the 22nd battalion died in combat or as a result of combat, with 2,887 others wounded.

Filip Konowal, the Ukrainian of Hill 70

On Monday 22 August 2005, along the Béthune to Lens road, a bronze plaque in three languages (English, French... and Ukrainian) was inaugurated near the Hill 70 battlefield where Filip Konowal's actions were rewarded with the Victoria Cross, the highest British military distinction. Filip Konowal had a "fascinating yet little-known history". He served for three years and 357 days in the ranks of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in which 10,000 Ukrainian-Canadians enlisted, while thousands of others were interned in camps as "citizens from an enemy country". Born on 15 September 1888 in Kudkiv, on the border between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, Filip enlisted in the Russian imperial army at the age of 21. In 1913, he emigrated on his own to Canada, working as a lumberjack out West before heading East to Ontario with the aim of quickly being reunited with his family. Having volunteered in 1915, he landed in France in August 1916, where he was involved in the battles of the Somme, Vimy Ridge, and Lens, where he was awarded the prestigious Victoria Cross (alone killing sixteen enemy soldiers in three days) and received a serious head wound. He returned to Canada after the war, learning that his wife had died of hunger in the Ukraine, and that his daughter had been interned in a camp. Having slowly recovered from his injuries, Filip



The medals of Filip Konowal, a hero of both Canada and the Ukraine.

Konowal worked as a caretaker in Canada's House of Commons before being assigned the post of custodian of the Prime Minister's office. He died in Ottawa on 3 June 1959 and was more or less forgotten until the acts of Canadian-Ukrainian reconciliation, which took place after the year 2000 and were overseen by Lubomyr Luciuk, a professor from Ontario. In 1956, describing his heroic actions on Hill 70, Filip Konowal declared to a journalist: "I was so fed up standing in the trench with water to my waist that I said the hell with it and started after the German army!"