

Remembering the century-long journey of one unknown Canadian soldier

Phil Egan - November 2020

He was finally laid to rest a mere twenty years ago, at the close of the twentieth century. But his long, arduous journey to that spot began well over 100 years earlier.

We don't know his name, rank, or hometown. We know him only as a Canadian hero, interred in a nationally-televised service.

This is a little of his story, and that of the place where he lies.

He was chosen for the honour of representing all of Canada's fallen from the 1,603 unknown soldiers wearing the maple leaf who fell at Vimy Ridge during the battle that raged there in April, 1917.

It has been called "the Battle that Gave Birth to a Nation" – arguably, Canada's true first step upon the global stage. It was the first time that all four corps of the Canadian Army had fought together, winning a glorious victory.

For 103 years, the tomb of this particular Unknown Soldier had been Grave 7, Row E, Plot 8 of the Cabaret-Rouge British Cemetery in Souchez, France – not far from the Vimy Ridge battlefield and memorial.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission made the selection of Canada's Unknown Soldier.

On the morning of May 16, 2000, the casket was exhumed from the soil of France – the ground that this heroic Canadian had died defending. One week later, accompanied by a chaplain and a 45-man guard of honour, the Unknown Soldier was flown to Ottawa on a military aircraft.

For three days, his remains lay in state in the Hall of Honour of the Centre Block on Parliament Hill.

On the afternoon of May 28, amidst grand pageantry, the new silver maple casket of the Unknown was transported by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police carriage to the National War Memorial in the capital city. Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, Prime Minister Jean Chretien and a crowd of 20,000 saw the soldier, known only to God, re-interred with full military honours in a sarcophagus at the front of Canada's National War Memorial.

His long journey from Canada to the battlefields of France and back to his homeland in glory was finally over.

Canada's National War Memorial, at the base of which lies the Tomb of the Unknown, is located in Confederation Square on Ottawa's Wellington Street.

The granite pedestal and arch and bronze figures of soldiers is known as "The Response" – meant to honour the sacrifice of the men and women who served King and Country during the Great War (1914-1918) and to memorialize the 61,000 who never returned.

It captures the zeal and sacrifice with which Canadians responded to the global threat to freedom.

That sacrifice included this writer's great-uncle, who fell as he fought alongside his twin brother - my grandfather – at the Battle of the Somme..

"The Response" was dedicated in the spring of 1939 by King George VI in the presence of 100,000 Canadians.

In 1982, the memorial was re-dedicated to honour those who served Canada in the Second World War and Korea, and again in 2014 to include the South African War (1899-1902) and the mission in Afghanistan (2000-2014).

November, 2020 is a time to honour their memories: all of them – those who fell as well as those who uprooted their lives and those of their families to serve Canada.

This November, we will honour their memories and their sacrifice.

Covid-19 may stop us from gathering at the Cenotaph, but nothing will stop us from remembering them.

We will remember them.

