



Canadian soldiers looking over the crest of Vimy Ridge on Vimy Village after the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Photo by Galt Museum & Archives



Photo by: Galt Museum & Archives
A World War One tunic belonging to distinguished Lethbridge soldier, Jack Shields. The tunic was housed in the Galt Museum for more than 50 years before its owner was discovered. Collection of the Galt Museum & Archives

Ahead By A Century

Remembering Lethbridge's contribution to the Battle of Vimy Ridge

by Christina Scott

As the sun sets on a bloody day of combat in France's Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, Sgt. John Murray undertakes a familiar ritual. Pulling a small notebook from his pocket, he pens a letter, beginning with the words, Dear Mother. On this Easter Monday in April 1917, it's hard for Murray to fathom that three years have passed since he left Lethbridge and the comfort of his entire world.

"I expect before long now we will look towards the end of the war," he muses on the yellowing paper. "This year they will surely finish [or] let us hope so anyway."

War, like many things in life, is unpredictable. Murray couldn't have envisioned the 18 months of colossal carnage that lay ahead, nor could he have foreseen the profound place the Battle of Vimy Ridge would hold in the pages of Canadian history.

The battle took place April 9 to 12, 1917 during the First World War. After French and British forces failed to prevent enemy counterattacks in previous months, the seven-kilometre ridge in Northern France remained captured by the German army. Soon, British high command ordered the Canadian Corps to seize the ridge. The corps comprised of four divisions of soldiers from across Canada and Britain. This would be the first time all the divisions fought together.

Led by Lt.-Gen. Julian Byng, the group worked diligently to plan its attack, undergoing weeks of training using models of the battlefield and aerial photographs to map the landscape. Engineers also dug deep tunnels in the trenches to help soldiers maintain a creeping barrage to bring them forward safely during combat.

Despite this preparation, the key to success would lie in the ability to surprise the Germans with firepower. Infantry were given specialist roles such as machine-gunners, riflemen and grenade throwers. A week before the battle, Canadian and British artillery annihilated enemy positions with a near limitless supply of shells; they contained special fuses which allowed them to explode on contact. This also removed challenging combat barriers such as barbed wire.

At 5:30 a.m. on the Easter Monday of April 9, the allies including the Canadian Corps stormed the ridge, overrunning the Germans along the front. Despite heavy fire, the Canadians continued moving forward, charging machine gun nests and forcing Germans to surrender from their dugouts. After three more painstaking days of battle, victory came at a heavy price: nearly 4,000 Canadians were killed and 7,000 wounded. "It was a defining moment for Canada because all the Canadians fought together as a group," says military historian and veteran Glenn Miller. "We had guys from coast to coast, from every town and community fighting as one."

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18 pd Casing: An 18-pound artillery shell. Artillery was one of Lethbridge's primary contributions to the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Collection of Glenn Miller



A French bayonet for the end of a rifle. The bayonet was discovered on Vimy Ridge. Collection of the Lethbridge Army Navy & Air Force Veterans Club.



A German shell casing bearing the inscription, Vimy Ridge 1917. Collection of the Lethbridge Military Museum

Referring to the victory at Vimy Ridge, Brig.-Gen. A.E. Ross famously declared, "In those few minutes, I witnessed the birth of a nation."

This April marks a century since the battle. Miller, with the assistance of staff at the Galt Museum and Archives, has created a special exhibit to honour the anniversary.

"The Galt approached me a couple of years ago, and asked if I wanted to be a guest curator," says Miller, who also volunteers with the museum. "I knew this 100th anniversary was coming up, so I've been preparing this for 10 years."

The exhibit, on display from Feb. 11 to May 27, will cover the geographical location of Vimy Ridge, the details of the battle, tactics and techniques that were used, the opening of the Vimy Ridge Monument in 1936, and more.

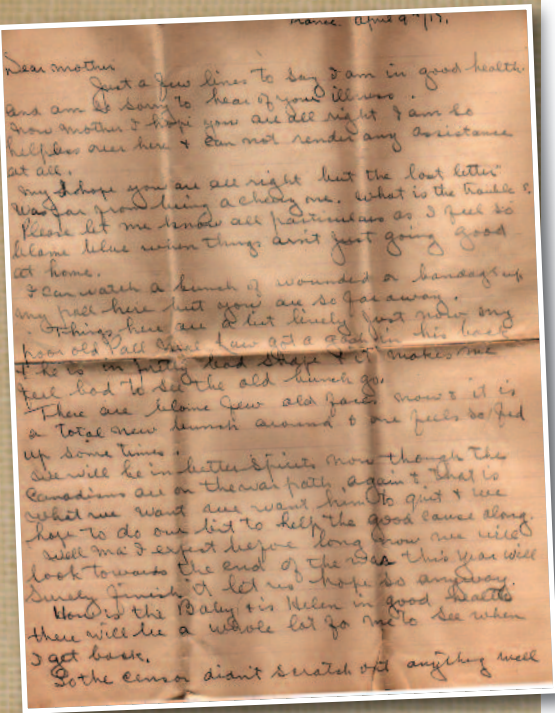
The exhibit will feature an interactive component that will allow visitors to learn of Lethbridge's contribution to the battle.

"One story will talk about a soldier who got wounded in the first attack when his rifle was hit by an artillery shell," says Miller.

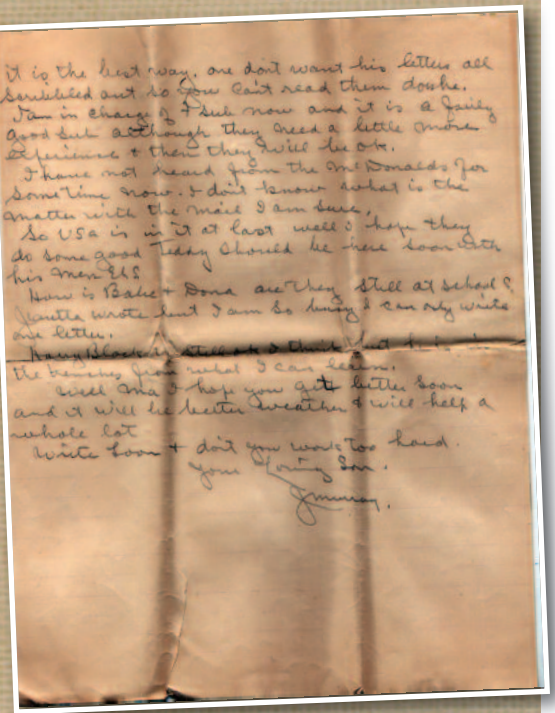
Lethbridge played a significant role in the success of Vimy Ridge through the provision of artillery units, each containing 140 men.

Murray, who enlisted with the Lethbridge's 20th Battery, was a gun commander at the battle. He affectionately named his gun Babe, in honour of his youngest sister. In the April 9 letter to his mother, he asks about her and wonders if she is still in school. He talks about life in the trenches, stating:

"Things here are just a bit lively . . . now. My poor old pal Neil Law got a gash in his back and he is in pretty bad shape . . . it makes me feel bad to see the old bunch go."



Photos by: Glenn Miller



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Glenn Miller

The letter is one of 90 Murray wrote to his mother between 1914 and 1918 during his time in England and France. While Murray's April 9 letter will be part of the exhibit.

Miller had the opportunity read the letter at Vimy Ridge on one of his many trips to the historic site.

"It was emotional," he says of the experience. "Being a gunner myself, I could just appreciate it. It was my own little moment in space and time of personal remembrance trying to envision what the artillery went through that day."

Today, Murray's letters are housed at the Galt.

"Canada's contribution and achievements in World War One are really important to our community," says Dana Inkster, marketing and communications officer for the Galt.

"The Galt Museum is committed to preserving Lethbridge's military history. Each artifact [that we have] is connected to a person with a story. We tell the human history."

The exhibit will also display several First World War artifacts from collections around the city. These include a German shell casing, an 18-pound artillery shell, a French bayonet, and a tunic belonging to distinguished Lethbridge soldier Jack Shields.

Former museum curator Wendy Aitkens discussed with Miller the best way to display the exhibit with the space available. Miller provided the text and photos while Aitkens ensured the information was understandable to the public. Current curator Aimee Benoit helped complete the exhibit.

"It's a privilege, but it's also a responsibility to the soldiers to help educate Canadians, because the average Canadian today doesn't know anything about the Battle of Vimy," says Miller of the opportunity.

"I tried to use local examples to amplify the Galt's collection to tell that story. It was challenging to try to tell a big, big story in four little panels."

In addition to the exhibit, University of Calgary instructor Stephane Guevremont will speak on Canada's contributions to the Battle of Vimy Ridge as part of a presentation at the Galt April 9.

"We try to invite speakers from the community who can complement the exhibits we have," says Inkster. "The Galt prides itself on being a place where expertise from our community can find a voice and be shared."

Miller hopes the community finds pride in the exhibit as well.

"I want people to remember that it was a Canadian battle fought with a Canadian way of thinking which achieved a Canadian result. It was a huge boost to the allies' war efforts."

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