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BATTLE ANNIVERSARY

A muted lesson from Passchendaele

Wasteful slaughter in Belgium was larger than Vimy, but draws far less attention

DOUG SAUNDERS ZONNEBEKE, BELGIUM It was the bloodiest moment in Canadian history. Nine decades ago, 100,000 young Canadian men were ordered to throw themselves at an insignificant looking hillock, and after three weeks, they had captured a two-kilometre stretch of mud and corpses, at a cost of about 16,000 casualties.

It marked the final victory in the battle of Passchendaele, a Belgian village that has become a byword for senseless slaughter, after a quarter of a million English-speaking soldiers lost their lives or their limbs in a largely pointless four-month battle.

After British, Australian and New Zealand forces had been decimated, it was the Canadians who finally won it. But when the 90th anniversary of the battle is commemorated in Belgium today, the Canadian presence will be surprisingly small and muted.

The reasons, it seems, have everything to do with another war taking place in another century. The NATO headquarters is only an hour's drive from the farm-field soil that still holds 2,000 unrecovered Canadian corpses, and there is no desire for Ottawa to draw much attention to this prominent piece of history today.

Back in April, Ottawa spent millions on an enormous live television gala at the site of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the French hill that Canadians successfully conquered in a much smaller 1917 operation.

At Vimy, thousands of schoolchildren and veterans were flown over, the site's monument was spruced up at great cost and Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a prominent speech that implicitly linked the sacrifice at Vimy to current Canadian efforts in Afghanistan.

In comparison, the Canadian government will be represented at Passchendaele today by the ministers of Indian and Northern Affairs and Veterans Affairs. There will be no television. Ottawa's expenditures are largely limited to a small and intelligently designed interpretive display, erected on the battlefield by the National War Museum at a total cost of less than \$60,000.

"It was all we could do," said one Canadian official involved with the commemoration, which will be attended by the Queen and is the subject of media attention in Britain. "They told us they'd spent all the money at Vimy, and that was it for us." Historians say that it is a familiar pattern.

"When countries make monuments to battles, they don't put them in the places where the best fighting was done or the most people died - they usually pick the ones that can offer inspiring lessons for the wars being fought today," said Franky Bostyn, curator of the Belgian-run Passchendaele museum, which contains reproductions of the battle's putrid dugouts and trenches.

The Passchendaele victory is considered by many to be Canada's bravest and most skillful military success, and also the country's most tragic. It won Canadians the largest number of Victoria Crosses for bravery and established a reputation for the Canadian corps as the toughest and most successful storm troopers in the war.

Vimy Ridge has long been used as a propaganda point by Canadian governments, just as the largest and more bloody Canadian role in Passchendaele, Arleux, Fresnoy, and Hill 70 have been played down.

Vimy is the site of a park and a Canadian-funded monument that serves as a shrine to Canadian sacrifice.

Historians point out that there is a clear reason for this: Vimy offers the lesson that military sacrifice is worth it in the end.

Passchendaele offers another, potentially relevant lesson: that military endeavours are enormously wasteful if they serve no greater end.

"I think that the lesson of Passchendaele is that when you enter a war, there have to be clear objectives - and in the heat of fighting, when you are losing many lives, it is very dangerous to lose sight of those objectives." Mr. Bostyn said. "It's a lesson that's being forgotten in Iraq and Afghanistan." Less than a year after the Passchendaele victory, in which about 5,000 Canadians died, the hill was surrendered without a fight to the Germans, the British leaders having realized it had no strategic value.

"I think it's important that Canada has a presence here. We had a presence on the battle field 90 years ago. It's the low point; it doesn't get any worse than this - this is the bog of mud and bodies. It's hard to imagine 16,000 casualties to capture a tiny target," said Tim Cook, the National War Museum historian who designed the interpretive display.

"Within the context of the war, this is what the Canadians were called upon to do; this is what they did. It tempered Canada - we went through something terrible and we came out the other side.

It nearly ruined us and it caused crises that lasted for decades.

But in its own way, as much as Vimy, it shaped us as a nation."

BATTLE OF THE AGES

While the Battle of Vimy Ridge is remembered as one of Canada's greatest military triumphs, the Battle of Passchendaele is considered one of Canada's most costly and brutal victories.

Vimy Ridge Passchendaele Dates April 9- 12, 1917 July 31 - Nov. 10, 1917 Duration 4 days 103 days (Canadians led for the last 16 days) Canadian troops involved 97,184 100,000 Canadian casualties 10,602 15,654 German casualties 20,000 270,000 Victoria crosses earned 4.