

Destination: REUNION

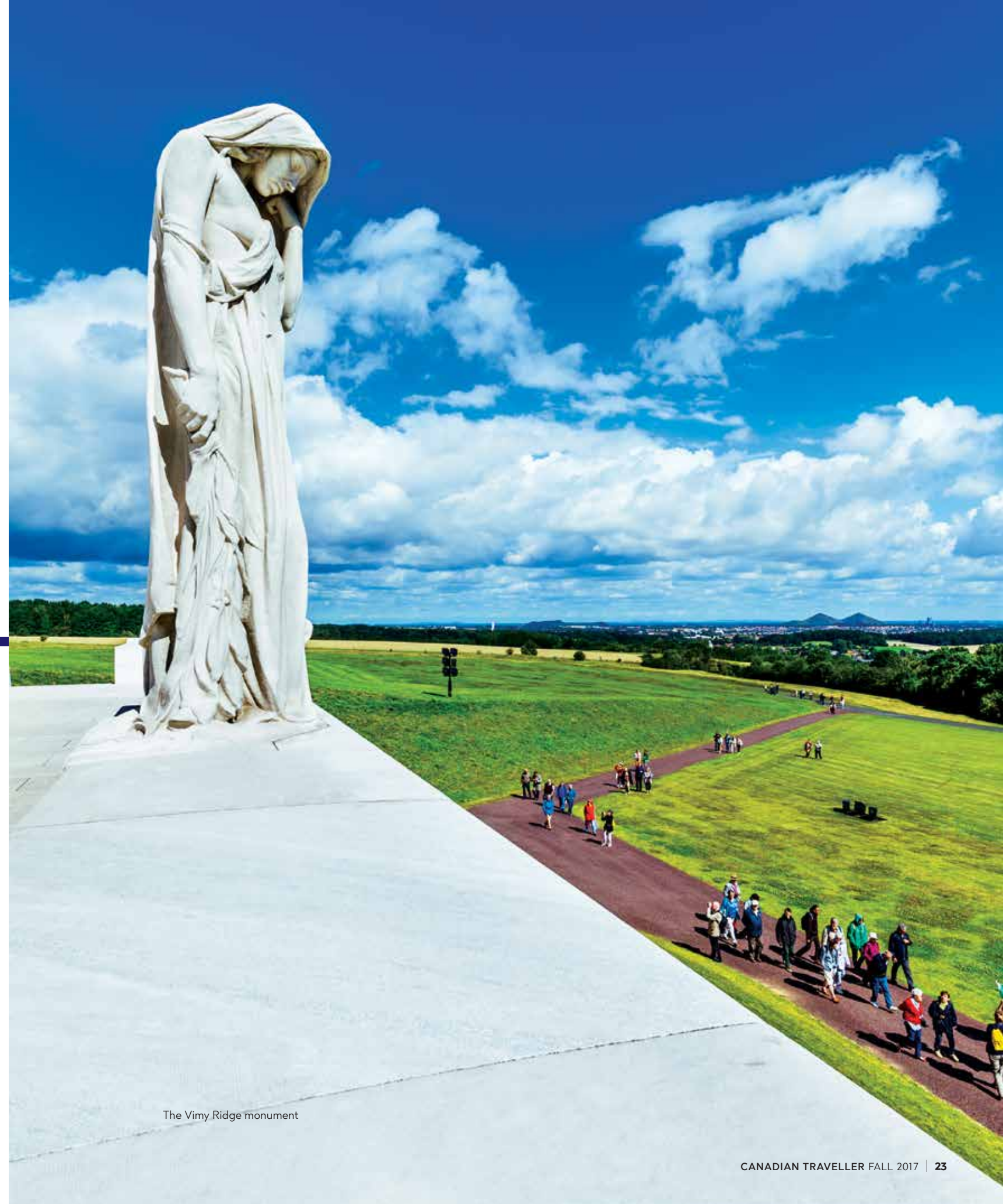
It's been 100 years since the Battle of Vimy Ridge, a historic event that some say symbolizes Canada's coming of age as a nation. **KELLY S. THOMPSON**, a veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces, shares the story of reuniting with her husband in Europe while he was on leave from a deployment, and their experience visiting WWI & II battlefields and monuments together, given the couple's connection to the cause.

THE VIMY RIDGE MONUMENT QUITE LITERALLY took our breath away as we veered off the highway in our rented Volvo. We were silent – my husband, Joe and I, both Canadian Armed Forces veterans – but we reached our hands across the console to interlace. Finally, we had arrived; we had tackled basic training together, navigated military life together and coped with extended separations from one another – so we didn't need words. A fellow veteran always understands.

I MET JOE IN 2002, during our first year of basic training. During a grueling field exercise, I broke my leg and Joe carried me for three kilometres back to camp. That injury, after eight years of surgeries and treatments, never healed and left me with a permanent disability, medically releasing me from the Forces. But I scored a husband who had proven he was there, in sickness and in health.

In December 2015 (after five years of marriage), Joe announced that he would be deploying to Egypt in June for a year. We sat on our couch and cried together about the challenges ahead. We decided to plan two reunion trips in Europe, though having those to look forward to did not assuage our sadness.

We knew one vacation would include the Netherlands and Belgium; the Canadian military was a large part of the liberation in both WWI and WWII, and we couldn't think of any place we'd rather be during Joe's deployment than paying homage to those who once upon a time, had been called to do the same. ▶



The Vimy Ridge monument



Clockwise: Amsterdam by night; Tyn Cot cemetery; Kelly & Joe at the Vimy Ridge monument; Menin Gate; Anne Frank House.

WE STARTED IN AMSTERDAM and spent more than a week navigating cobblestone streets, riding down lazy canals and sipping wine at cafés while tulips bloomed in each corner of available green space. Every museum called to us, from the touching exhibits at the Holocaust Museum to the swaths of colourful oil paintings at the Van Gogh Museum. But it was the Anne Frank House that elicited tears from me the moment I walked in. We listened to details of the canal house through an audio guide, which described a day in the Frank family life – one of silence and fear, sure, but also of joy in the simple acts of love, like late nights playing games and reading books. In the final room, faced with the actual copy of Anne Frank’s diary on display, I reached out to the glass case as Joe gave my arm a squeeze.

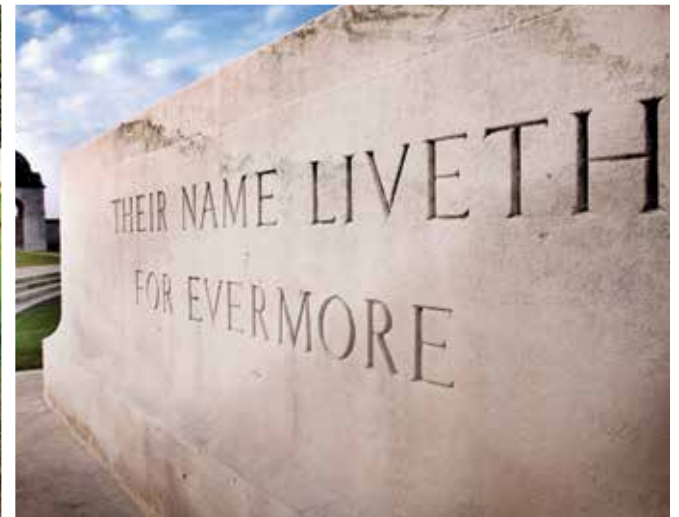
It was a coincidence that we happened to be in Amsterdam on May 4, the country’s Remembrance of the Dead Day. As we pushed through the streets with what felt like the rest of the city, we caught a glimpse of the King and Queen moving through the crowd to lay wreaths at the war memorial in Dam Square. A giant screen played a reel of heartbreaking photographs from the war era and at 8 p.m., during the two minutes of

silence, the entire city took a deep breath and waited; the emotion and respect felt tangible, as though you could have picked it up and wrapped your arms around it.

I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND Remembrance ceremonies to be moving, likely because of my military family history. The Thompson Family service goes back four generations on both sides, so when the Twin Towers were attacked, I abandoned my dream of being a writer and enrolled in the military. It seemed, at the time, not only the right thing to do, but a way to connect with the family members I so revered. When my Dad performed my swearing-in ceremony, I knew then that “remembrance” would never mean the same thing as it had as a child, as a teen, and as a civilian. From that moment on, my acts of remembrance would be committing to memory my own service, too.

JOE AND I MADE our first military-based visit to the Holten Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands, accessible by a scenic drive through flat country. The

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Clockwise: Joe at The Hague; the Vimy Ridge monument; Tyn Cot Cemetery in Passchendaele; Holten Canadian War Cemetery, Netherlands.

location is nestled in parkland where families were biking, walking and picking field flowers. Inside the information centre, Holten holds a series of plaques that detail the lives of some of the soldiers buried on the grounds, written by high school students for annual history projects. We learned about the families who loved these men, where each soldier was from, and of course, how they died. We wandered through different sections, reading here and there as our eyes welled with tears, but it was the cemetery itself that served as the real sight, with orderly white tombstones lined up like perfect soldiers. Joe and I walked through every single row, reading names and inscriptions from loved ones, and placing wild daisies on the graves of those unknown. The grounds smelled of roses after the recent Remembrance Day ceremonies, and every one of the 1,393 gravesites was donned in a small bouquet of white roses.

We had the same feelings emerge when we moved to Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery near Nijmegen. More than 2,300 troops from WWII are laid to rest atop the sunny hill, with red and white tulips springing up between the stones, which were planted to honour

Canada’s 150th. There were Canadian flags everywhere and the same inscription mounted on every site: *Their Name Liveth For Evermore*. I whispered “thanks” over and over again as I walked, and felt comfort knowing the soldiers were well cared for and had found peace in a place far from home.

Joe and I were most anxious to see Vimy Ridge, which commemorates the bloodiest day in Canadian war history. It was touching to see the Canadian flag hung in the windows of each and every home as we wound up the road towards the monument, the white limestone glimmering against a background of the tiny French village. The message was clear: we remember.

At the information centre, we waited in line for a tour of the tunnels and discovered everyone in our group was Canadian. Our guide arrived and gestured to the nearby pockmarked hills – carrying the stories of artillery shelling and underground trenches – and the fields labelled with “no trespassing” signs because of the unexploded ordinance still lurking beneath the grass.

“We tried to find it all,” says our tour guide of the unexploded shells. “But there were just so



L to R: Vimy Ridge monument; Flanders Fields.

many." I was struck by how often the guide referred to this collective "we." *We* fought a war. *We* died. *We* lived in horrible conditions and swallowed fear. And as I looked around at my fellow Canadians, I knew I wasn't the only one who felt the weight of his words.

We descended downstairs into the preserved tunnels that served as command posts during the war, and as we entered the enclosed area, I was instantly uncomfortable in the damp, mouldy space. Ironically, during the time of war, this was considered a luxury compared to the open trenches above our heads, free from rain and gunfire, perhaps even offering a bit of warmth – hard to imagine considering the drip drop of moisture that pulled from the ceiling. When we pushed our way through the tunnels into the light, we shook hands and wished each other well, trying to hide our tears after all we had just seen and felt.

The memorial itself left us speechless, sitting on the ridge, glowing in the May light with the names of more than 11,000 soldiers inscribed on the walls. Joe and I found a string of Thompsons, some with the same initials as my family who have served in the Forces. We walked in respectful circles, snapped photos and I left behind a poem of remembrance and a cardboard tag that read "Je me souviens," which was given to me by a Kindergarten student when I spoke at his school on Remembrance Day. He had asked to try on my uniform tunic before he pressed the laminated paper into my hand, then hugged my leg and scampered off. I'd been hanging on to that tag for more than five years, waiting for the perfect place to leave it.

Next, we visited Ypres, where Joe and I walked under the Menin Gate and its litany of soldiers buried without a grave. We saw the former medical service location-turned-cemetery where John McCrae wrote "Flanders Fields" and I couldn't stop the tears when I thought of the 14-year-old boy laid to rest only metres away; how he would have wished for his mother as he bled on this very spot. The feeling carried-over to Tyne Cot cemetery, the largest Commonwealth burial site in the world. Surrounded by countless bodies so close to the battlefield of Passchendaele, Joe and I sat in the sunlight and leaned into one another until the sun set, overcome with awe and gratitude. It wasn't lost on us that soon, we would be home together in Ontario, and a year apart suddenly didn't feel like such a sacrifice when stacked next to the price these soldiers paid. So many others weren't as lucky as we are.

IN YPRES, WAITING FOR JOE to return with yet another basket of Belgian fries for lunch, I got to talking with a couple enjoying ice cream while the fountain behind us misted on our cheeks.

"Canadian?" the man asked, gesturing at the maple leaf pin on my purse. Yes, I nodded, and he explained that he and his wife were from northern Netherlands, on vacation. I told him briefly of our situation: deployed husband, overseas meet-up, two veterans paying our respects in the countless locations where it was due. He told me he remembered the war but he said no more, and I left him to his silence.

Joe approached with a wave and a smile. In a few days, we would have to part again and my bottom lip quivered at the thought. "I should let you eat," said the man. "But first, I must thank you." He took my hands in his and our teary eyes met. I wondered what his story was; what he survived and what those around him lived through, too. I wanted to tell him I understood, but I said nothing; I didn't have to. Our silence transcended all language barriers. The man sniffled then patted my shoulder before returning to his food. Joe sat, kissed my cheek and we ate, the hum of chatter and laughing children filling the air. 🍷



Bart Heinweg, visitflanders



We make plans in advance. We attempt to orchestrate details. That's not how this world works. Beauty lies in the unexpected. Awe strikes randomly. We won't know when. All we know is where.

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