

Brethren:

My talk this evening is partially inspired by the recent anniversary, April 9th of the battle of Vimy Ridge which commenced on the evening of April 8th, 1917, some eighty-eight years ago. At 5:30 a.m. the next morning, 2,800 allied guns began pounding the enemy's trenches and soon afterwards the Canadian infantry went over the top into "No Mans Land". One battalion, the 87th, incurred losses of over 50% in less than a few minutes. Notwithstanding the terrible losses at the beginning, this battle turned out to be one of the greatest victories of the Canadian Forces.

A few years ago, I started to research my family tree. My father, his brothers and sisters had all passed away so I had little to work with. One day I contacted, my cousin Alf by phone. We had not spoken to each other for many years as we had drifted apart. It turned out that he also had started work on our family tree and based on some information from his mother, had contacted the Canadian government for the military file of a man whom he thought might be our grandfather. Alf's father Alfred and my father Michael were brothers.

Weeks later, he received a bulky file in the mail which turned out to be our grandfather's military file. My cousin, who is quite short, said he knew he had the right fellow as soon as he started to read our grandfather's physical stats, in particular his height which was shown as 5 foot 3 and one half inches.

As for myself, I had sent away for my father's military records in the Second World War and everyday I would go to the library to do research. I browsed the 1891 Canadian Census on microfiche.

Just when I was about to give up, I came across an entry “Kingsley Dora” a twenty-one year lady, both of her parents born in Ireland and below her name, her son, a baby listed as David Kingsley. His age was shown as 6 over 12, meaning 6 months old, my grandfather. He was born on October 1st, 1890 in Hamilton, Ontario. It listed his mother as being born in Ireland and his father as being born in England but I haven’t solved that mystery yet. Later in his life, our grandfather’s name is shown as Alfred David Kingsley.

Jumping ahead a number of years to August 21st, 1915, my grandfather enlisted in the 86th Machine Gun Battalion of the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. On May 19, 1916 he embarked from Halifax and on May 30, 1916 disembarked in Liverpool, England. He joined his Battalion in France on January 7th, 1917. A few months later, on June 9th, 1917 he would be killed in action.

Do any of you know what trench warfare is? I always thought trench warfare consisted of our forces digging a trench along an imaginary line facing the enemy. The enemy would do the same, and then each would fire upon the other.

Actually, trench warfare consisted of our forces making use of the Scottish and English coalminers digging tunnels under the No Mans Land and placing mines (explosives) under the enemies’ defensive positions. It could take as long as a year to dig a tunnel and place a mine. On occasions, miners accidentally dug into the opposing side’s tunnel and an underground fight took place.

At the beginning of the recent film “Cold Mountain”, one scene depicts a battle in the U.S. Civil War where the same trench warfare strategy was used.

In January 1917, General Sir Herbert Plumer gave orders for 20 mines to be placed under the enemy lines at Messines. Over the next five months more than 8,000 metres of tunnel were dug and 600 tons of explosive were placed in position. Simultaneous explosions of the mines took place at 3:10 on June 7th, 1917, the day before my grandfather was killed at the same location. The blast killed an estimated 10,000 soldiers and was so loud it was heard in London, England. Many of our soldiers were reported killed by the repercussions of the huge explosions.

George Coppard, a writer and an eyewitness wrote the following: “At the moment of explosion, the ground trembled violently in a miniature earthquake. Then, like an enormous piecrust rising up, slowly at first, the bulging mass of earth crackled in thousands of fissures as it erupted. When the vast sticky mass could no longer contain the pressure beneath, the centre burst open, and the energy released carried all before it. Hundreds of tons of earth hurled skywards to a height of 300 feet or more many of the lumps of great size. A state of acute alarm prevailed as the deadly weight commenced to drop, scattered over a huge radial area from the centre of the blast.”

Another eyewitness, Henry Perry Robinson of the Times wrote: “Can you imagine what over 600 tons in 20 or so blasts along an arc of 10 miles looked like? I cannot describe it for you. Personally, I can only vouch for having seen nine of the great leaping streams of orange flames which shot upwards from that part of the front immediately before me, each one of the nine a huge volcano in itself.”

The fighting continued but by June 14th, the Messines Ridge had been completely occupied by British forces. The battle for Messines Ridge was the first on the Western Front since 1914 in which defensive casualties (25,000) exceeded attacking losses (17,000).

In 2001, while on a business trip to France, my cousin Alf had the opportunity to visit our grandfather's gravesite in the La Chaudiere Military Cemetery, Vimy, Pas de Calais, France. The cemetery is beautifully cared for in honour of the many soldiers who bravely fought and died under the most horrible conditions for our freedom and the freedom of our great nation.

Commencing in 1939, another great world war erupted. My father enlisted and was trained and served in the Field Ambulance work. He served on the front lines for nearly five years 1940 to 1944. In late 1944, he returned home a broken man full of despair. On compassionate grounds, he was not required to return overseas. It was very sad and depressing to read about his final months overseas and I noted in one of his reports that he stated he did not know his true father. A mystery which my cousin and I had recently solved. My father was still a young man, 53 years old when he died from a heart attack.

Brethren, this short talk is not meant to focus on just what my grandfather and father contributed towards the protection of our freedoms, but rather to embrace and cherish the memories of all the men and women that served our country in its times of need. I know some of you served our country and some can tell of the sacrifices made by members of their family for the good of our nation.

Brethren, thank you for your patience and your kind attention.