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Michael Bechthold
Wilfrid Laurier University

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Lessons learned on the Normandy battlefields: The experience of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation student study tours

Mike Bechthold

After more than 60 years the Battle of Normandy still captures worldwide attention. The recent commemoration of the D-Day anniversary compelled thousands of people to make a pilgrimage to the Overlord beaches to honour the sacrifices made in the name of freedom. Sadly, this type of attention is fleeting, primarily centred upon major anniversaries and other notable events, such as the passing of major figures or the release of a new book. What can be done to raise the consciousness of the public? Obviously, education is the answer, but in what form? This article is about a program run by the Canadian Battlefields Foundation that has been educating Canadian university students for the past ten years. It is a program that has taken students to explore the Canadian battlefields of the First and Second World Wars and provides them with an experiential learning opportunity that cannot be gleaned from books. These tours aim to give students a deeper understanding of events on the battlefield and their relationship to topics such as combat effectiveness, the impact of war on society, and even the question of nation-building. This article will also explore the concepts and methodologies behind this very successful program.

The conduct of this tour is different in emphasis and execution from other battlefield tours whether they be military or civilian. It is intended to provide Canadian university students with a hands-on learning experience. Each tour takes a group of about a dozen Canadian university students to Europe to visit Canadian battlefields of the First and Second World Wars. The emphasis is generally on the battlefields of Normandy, Dieppe and Vimy Ridge, but other areas visited by specific tours include the Ypres Salient, England, the Scheldt Estuary, Sicily and Italy to name a few. Each tour is led by an experienced military historian, and the tours are more than simple whistlestop excursions where the students are whisked around to see

the sights. Prior to leaving Canada, the students are asked to complete background readings and be prepared to lead discussions on various topics. Once on the battlefields, the students are engaged in sophisticated discussions covering a wide range of topics ranging from weapons and tactics used on the battlefield, the operational conduct of larger formations and the strategic conduct of the war. As well, the social aspects of the wars are explored. Questions such as who fought our wars, and what was the cost to society are discussed along with notions of service, sacrifice, memorialization and commemoration. These issues are brought to life through visits to the battlefields and cemeteries as well as through discussions with veterans and locals who lived through the wars. Through discussion and argument, observation and reflection, the students come to gain an understanding of events not accessible in the written record. To say that the tours have had a profound effect on students is an understatement. The lessons learned from this tour can be applied to enrich battlefield touring in general for both military and civilian audiences, and are applicable whether exploring the battlefields of Normandy, Gettysburg or the Somme. In addition, many of these same techniques and principles can be used to enrich classroom learning.

The stated purpose of the CBF tours has been to allow “young men and women from Canada [to] visit and learn, on the actual battlefields, what the youth of Canada contributed to their freedom.”¹⁸ In general, this captures the spirit of the tours, but not the actual accomplishments. The Canadian Battlefields Foundation was originally formed in 1993 as the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation to help preserve the memory of Canadian soldiers and their part in freeing France from the tyranny of Nazism. The impetus for this came when a spectacular new museum was opened in Caen called Le Mémorial. This museum marked the liberation of Normandy by the Allies, but incredibly, made no mention of the role played by Canada. This, combined with a significant American presence in both the museum and the surrounding area, led a group of Canadian veterans to form the CBF to see that Canada was given proper recognition for its accomplishments. The CBF was also set up to remind Canadians of their country’s role in the conflict, perpetuating the memory and deeds of those who participated, while both encouraging

and supporting Canadian university students in programmes for the study of war and peace. One of the main programs of the CBF is the sponsorship and administration of the annual battlefield study tours.

The composition of the groups has been one of the strengths of the study tours. A national competition is held each year to select participants. It is open to Canadian men and women who are currently attending university, in either undergraduate or graduate programs, or those who have recently graduated. This has resulted in the selection of candidates from across Canada, of both genders, and ranging in age from 18 to 45. Another valuable dynamic

and perspectives that benefit the group as a whole.

The primary aim of the study tours is to educate the participants on the Canadian role in the wars. This learning takes place on many levels. Preparatory readings are assigned and the students are required to prepare two brief presentations before they leave home. The first presentation deals with a particular event, battle or other similar topic. The intended purpose of this was to decentralize the teaching load, but it has also had an unexpected emotional effect. The students often choose topics about which they develop a proprietary interest; for instance a battle in which their grandfather participated,



Photo by Mike Bechthold



Photo by Marc Milner

Left: The 1995 CBNF group receive a briefing on a bunker in the Courseulles-sur-Mer sector of Juno Beach. l to r: Lee Windsor, Dough Cadot, Lisa Mullins, David Kelly, Jeff Clayman (sitting), Naomi Chosen, Serge Durflinger, John Rickard, Terry Copp and Trevor Rehel. **Right:** Laura Crawford, a student on the 1999 CBNF tour, stands atop Point 147 and briefs her group on the successful penetration of the Gothic Line by the Perth Regiment.

in the group has been the presence of military personnel. These men and women are generally serving part-time in the Reserves while attending civilian universities, though some have also come from the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC). The interaction between the civilian and military participants in the group has been very useful because each group brings a different perspective that helps to enrich the learning experience of the other. For example, the soldiers often have an understanding of military culture and regimental tradition that is not possessed by the civilians while the soldiers often benefit from the views and opinions expressed by civilians who have not been exposed to a military way of thinking. This mix of people has created a range of experience

or in which their regiment was involved. The passion developed by the student in researching the topic is often infectious when the topic is presented. This makes the presentations more meaningful for the group as a whole. The second presentation is much more emotional. Students are asked to research a soldier killed in battle and make a short graveside presentation about his life and death. It is up to the individual student who they pick to talk about. It is often somebody they are connected to, whether geographically, through a regimental affiliation or sometimes it is a family member. Doug Delaney related one such occasion: "The highlight of the day occurred at the Cassino War Cemetery. It was there that one of our group, Addy Poulette, found her grandfather,



Photo by Marc Milner (inset photo by Mike Bechthold)



Above: M. Vico, who lived in the Abbaye d'Ardenne during the war, tells the CBF group the story of the Canadian soldiers murdered there in June 1944. **Inset:** The Abbaye d'Ardenne.

Louis Brooks, an RCR soldier killed in action at the Hitler Line....She did such a beautiful job honouring him and telling his story....At the end of her tribute...[she broke down]. I'm pretty sure the rest of us joined her....It was a very powerful and moving moment. Though she'd never met him, you could tell her affection for him ran deep."¹⁹ Another requirement is that the students keep a journal. Each day they are to record their experiences, thoughts, emotions and anything else they have learned. At the end of the trip, this journal is to be submitted as a record of their journey. Some of the journals take the form of a simple day-by-day log of events, but most are much more elaborate encompassing detailed written entries along with photographs, drawings, poetry and other material the students think is important. In reading these journals, the one common thread is the depth of emotion experienced by all the students. Typical is the reaction of Diane Tomas upon her first visit to a Canadian war cemetery. "I knew it was going to be moving, but as soon as I saw it a feeling came over me which I don't think I can describe in words. My first reaction was simply to cry as I looked upon the row after row of headstones, and I simply could not stop."²⁰ A similar response was recorded by Lee Windsor of his reaction to

a ceremony to remember the Canadian soldiers executed by the 12th SS at the Abbaye d'Ardenne. "In 1939 we embarked on a mission to cleanse Europe of the Nazi disease that infected it. These words would have seemed a little idealistic and simplistic to me, at least until 7 June 1995. On that day we gathered in the garden at the Abbaye. In that dark and quiet corner of the compound that was once a German command post, we paid homage to 18 of my dear countrymen who were viciously and brutally murdered by Kurt Meyer's SS henchmen. As their names were read off, I fought to hold in tears and keep my legs steady underneath me. One of the last names to be read was Lieutenant Thomas Albert Lee Windsor, an armoured soldier of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The tears escaped."²¹ These excerpts capture the essence of this tour. This trip is as much a pilgrimage as an educational endeavour. In addition to learning a great deal about the wars, many of the participants are extremely moved by their experiences. When they return to Canada to continue their studies or share their knowledge, not only are they educated and interested in the subject but it is also a topic about which they are passionate. This is a quality that comes through clearly in their writings and presentations, and is often contagious amongst the audience.

The major advantage a study tour such as this has over a similar topic being taught in the classroom is the ability to stand on the same ground where a particular battle took place. This is fully taken advantage of during the course of the tour. When examining a specific battle, the day usually starts off with a brief background lecture. The group then sets off and begins to follow the events on the ground. For example, when looking at the D-Day landings at Juno Beach, the group starts in St. Aubin-sur-Mer and proceeds through each of the coastal towns liberated by the Canadians on the 6th of June. At each stop a detailed explanation of events in that sector is given while pointing out specific features that played a role during the battle. A past participant, Christopher Evans, has stated that, "The opportunity to study the actual battlefields was of incredible value in helping me better understand the events that took place. I have a new and much improved understanding now of the importance of terrain and how it dictates the way a battle is fought. The concept of reverse slope, hull down, the positioning of anti-tank weapons versus likely avenues to be taken by armoured vehicles, all of it became clear during the three-week program. I've read hundreds of books and studied maps, watched documentaries but nothing can replace the experiences of being there and seeing it for yourself."²² Interwoven with the tactical level discussions is an appreciation

of what is concurrently taking place at the operational and strategic levels. An important aspect of this process is the interaction between people. Questions and discussions are always encouraged as a way of intensifying the learning experience.

A novel aspect of these tours is the opportunity for the students to participate in TEWTs (tactical exercises without troops) where they are given a tactical problem based on a historic battle. TEWTs are regularly utilized by the military to train officers in the conduct of a battle, but the intention here is to force the students to think about a battle from the inside out in order to better understand the decision-making process, as well as the pressures and limitations encountered in an actual battle. The students are broken up into syndicates or command groups of 3-4 people to work on a solution to the problem.

The exercise begins with a briefing where the tactical situation is explained as it existed on the eve of battle. The briefing includes the same information a commander would have had access to prior to the battle: orders for the upcoming operation, the existing tactical and strategic situation, composition and the disposition of his own as well as friendly troops, allocation of divisional, corps and army support, and lastly, expected enemy strengths and intentions.

This garden in the Abbaye d'Ardenne is a tranquil place today, but in June 1944 it was an execution site. The memorial at the left commemorates the Canadian soldiers murdered here.



Photo by Mike Bechthold



Bechthold: Lessons Learne

Photo by Marc Milner

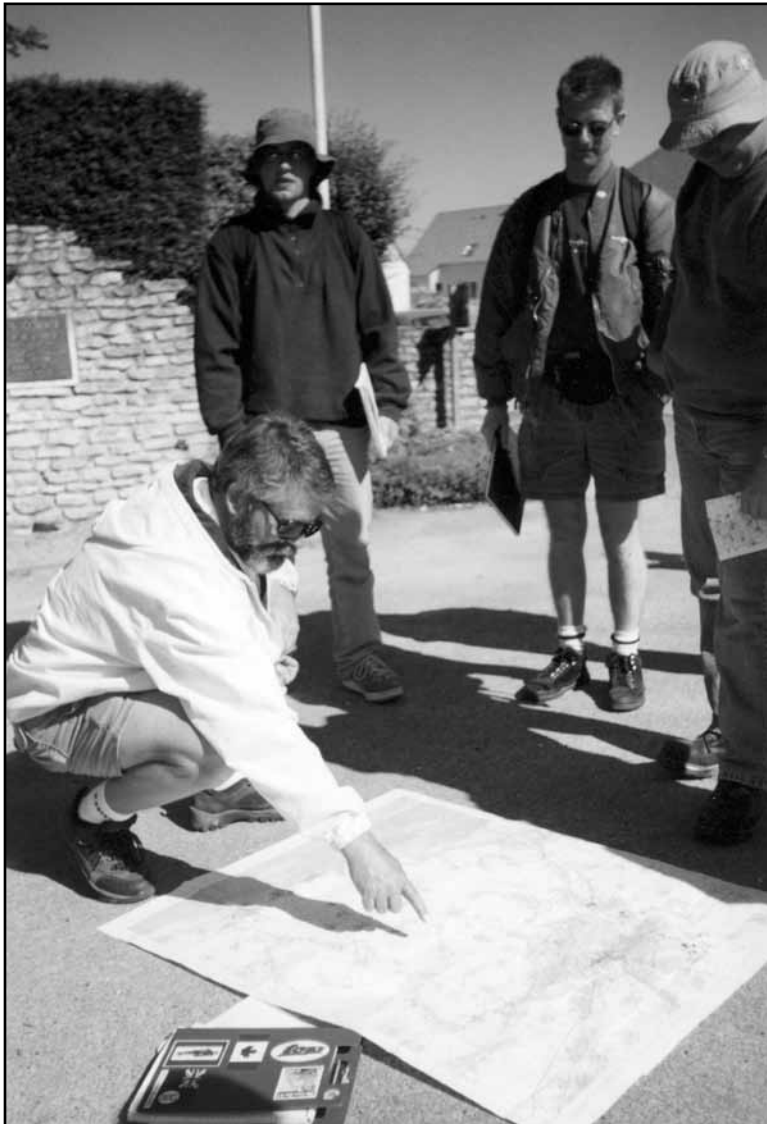


Photo by Bobbi Milner



Photo by Linda Copp

Top left: Lieutenant-General Charles Belzile, a former president of the CBNF, talks to students on the 2000 tour during a TEWT in Normandy. **Left:** Group leader Marc Milner points out locations on a map. **Above:** Denis Whitaker, a veteran of Dieppe and Normandy, provided valuable personal experience to students on the CBNF tour.

this, the syndicates are given time to formulate their plans. During this process, complications are thrown at the students in the form of 'breaking news' that will impact, and probably upset, their planning process. This includes changing orders and updating information regarding the movements of neighbouring units and enemy forces. Throughout the TEWT, the historian/group leader plays the role of umpire. He answers any questions the syndicates might have, clarifies any misunderstandings, and perhaps most importantly, tries to keep the scenario within the realm of the possible. For instance, the students often want to use their tanks and tank destroyers as the focal point of their plan, frequently deploying them right at the front, or even beyond. This was inconsistent with existing Allied doctrine and would generally not occur. The students need to be told that if they, acting as a battalion or company commander, gave this order to a tank commander, he would probably tell you to 'shove it up your arse' and refuse to obey.

The next step is to take the group out onto the battlefield to do a reconnaissance of the terrain. Stops are made at key locations to gain an understanding of the interplay of the topography, built-up areas, roads and other features. Following

Once the planning process is complete, the students are asked to explain their intentions. Once all the plans have been presented, the historian provides a phase-by-phase account of the actual battle as it unfolded. Minimal emphasis is placed upon critiquing the plans devised by the students as would occur in a military TEWT. There is no proper solution other than what actually occurred. In this exercise, the focus is on the process, not the outcome. The ultimate goal is to better replicate the chaos and complexity of battle in a more tangible form. It is one thing to read about a battle and pass judgement from the comfort of home, but the intent of these TEWTs is to introduce some of the complexity commanders face in the field – limited and often conflicting information, the fog of war, finite resources, time constraints, the influence of geography and a host of other factors. Though the students are generally well rested and well fed, they do not have to fear being shot or captured and at the end of the day will return to a comfortable bed, the exercise does impart some lessons that cannot otherwise be taught. It demonstrates that combat is not a simple endeavour and that explanations and judgements of past battles are not as cut and dried as they first appear. What may be an obviously bad decision examined with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight may be entirely understandable given the specific circumstances in which the decision was made. Kelly Deschênes, a member of the Reserves and a student at RMC, found the TEWTs to be an excellent experience. “As an officer, I have taken part in a number of TEWTs. However, these TEWTs are generally carried out in a vacuum: the conditions are next to ideal. In today’s TEWT we were not allowed to ‘forget’ that the troops were tired, that some equipment was missing, that casualties had strained morale and strength, etc. We had to take all those factors into account when making our plans. It only made the exercise more realistic, more valuable.”²³ James Wood found that the exercise gave him a different perspective on events. “Our TEWT of the Bretteville defence has left me with a disdain for those who would criticize military commanders after the fact. These men bore what must have been crushing responsibility; what right do we have to pass judgement on their actions without walking a mile in their shoes? There is a place for historians to examine and scrutinize the decisions made by these commanders, but not to attack them personally for their failings and

mistakes. It is a fine line.”²⁴ A bonus of these TEWTs is that students have a great deal of fun participating in these scenarios. It is an atypical, non-lecture learning experience that many of the students point to as one of the highlights of the study tours.

As much as the CBF Study Tour is about understanding the soldier’s experience and trying to come to terms with what happened on the battlefield, the tour is also an exercise in nation-building. This may sound overly dramatic or even jingoistic, but the reality is that Canadian schools at all levels do a poor job of linking the events of the past with the realities of today. Canada has a proud history and there are many stories that need to be remembered and told. The field of military history in particular is poorly represented. The youth of Canada today need to know that an entire generation went off to fight to preserve the freedom that we enjoy today. It was always the hope that the students who participated in this tour would be energized by their experience. What they learned on the trip would inspire them to read much more. Even more important was the hope that they would pass on their experience to others in a meaningful way. Student journals show quite clearly that they recognize the importance of this. Andrew Godefroy stated that, “Standing in the quiet grove [in the Canadian cemetery], staring at row after row of dead men my own age, their lives cut short by this tragedy, I was made painfully aware that my freedom was not free. I can only make sure that I make every effort to teach others what I saw here today. We were given the opportunity this summer to experience something that way too few Canadians will ever see. We now have to take this knowledge and put it to good use. I feel I owe at least that much to those who fought and died for my future.”²⁵ Sharon Roe offered a similar verdict on her experience. “I can honestly say that it was one of the most profound experiences of my life. We could all read about war but seeing the battlefields and graves made it more real. It is our duty, to keep these lessons alive. We must teach the next generation what we have learned so these sacrifices will not be forgotten.”²⁶ To date, that seems to be happening. An overwhelming majority of the alumni from these trips are making direct use of their experiences. Most had an interest in military history prior to being accepted on the tour, but upon returning home



Arlene Doucette, a student on the 2000 CBNF Tour, sketches out a map for her briefing on the Dieppe landings.

a significant number have changed their career paths to take advantage of the knowledge and experience gained on the tour. Out of the 122 students who have participated to date, at least 15 are working on Ph.Ds in military history, and another 25 have completed or are in the process of completing a Master's degree. Also, a majority of the remainder have used their experiences on the tour to present lectures, lesson plans and other educational opportunities. Of perhaps more far-reaching potential are those tour alumni who go on to teach at the primary and secondary school level. Jeff Rivard, a grade 10 teacher in south-western Ontario, regularly uses his experiences from the tour to enrich his teachings on the First and Second World Wars. He states that, "despite all the excellent work being done [by academics in military history] today, only 1 per cent of it is read by the general public. I...didn't want to spend the rest of my career focussing on that. In high school I didn't have the advantage of being exposed to the wars in depth....I wanted to share our efforts with as many students as possible."²⁷ Overall, this is an excellent dividend on the investment by the CBF.

These study tours have had a dramatic effect upon the students who have participated. To say it has changed the lives of those who have taken part is not hyperbole. Trevor Rehel states, "Put quite simply, I don't think any other experience in my life has affected me quite as much as this trip has. The memory will last forever in my mind."²⁸ Lisa Goodyear shares a similar sentiment. "To say that this was an experience of a lifetime does not seem enough. This trip has meant more to me than anyone can really understand. I have finally become a patriot of my own country."²⁹ Denis Dubord comments on the

impact this experience will have on his future. "The study tour served to remind me that the study and understanding of military history is far from a simple or strictly academic pursuit. I think all the participants of the study tour have been invaluable and incalculably enriched. Our academic, professional and personal lives have been indelibly affected. Undoubtedly, I shall be a better military history student, researcher, writer and teacher thanks to this pivotal experience."³⁰

The CBF battlefield study tours have given students a unique opportunity to learn about the role played by Canada during the two world wars. Perhaps even more important than the knowledge gained on the trip is the fact that many of the students have been energized by their experience. They have been motivated to learn more about the topic and to share what they learn with others. To date a total of 122 students have participated in the tour. But it is safe to say that the experience gained on the tours has touched a far greater number. This is a lesson from which we all can learn.

Preparing for higher command: The British approach to the Normandy campaign staff ride

David Ian Hall

In mid-May, just before the official ceremonies to mark the 60th anniversary of D-Day began, I had the privilege of being a consultant historian on a NATO HQ's staff ride in Normandy. The HQ of the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps – Italy (NRDS-