

## When the French sang O'Canada

*[Written after the ceremony at the Cinteaux Canadian Cemetery in Bretteville-sur-Laize in July 2015]*

Not too far from the city of Caen, which itself is about 20 km inland from Juno Beach, sits the Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery. Almost 3,000 Canadian soldiers were buried here, most of them died during the latter stage of the Battle of Normandy, which lasted a couple more months after D-Day. Although we have a few days left on our tour, it was at this hallowed ground that really marked the effective closing point of the Battlefields Tour sponsored by the Juno Beach Centre in Courseulles-sur-Mer.

We were privileged to be invited by the locals to join them for a Remembrance Ceremony at the cemetery, an event that spearheaded by Monsieur Le Baron, who organized this annual year for the past fifty-one years. From the moment I stepped off the bus, I knew it was an event with lots of pomp and circumstance: police escort at the perimeters, official looking people with their striped sashes, a few handsome giants --some with their kepis -- in sharp military uniform, and a group of grey-haired veterans who worn their berets and medals proudly.

When the clock struck 10:00 am, I followed the procession, walked passed the row of poles that hoisted the flags of every Canadian provinces and Territories, then filtered through the main gate, and finally stopped in front of the Cross of Sacrifice. This was when I realized a group of older men and a handful of women, each carrying a different flag that represented his or her unit, had formed a ceremonial semicircle behind the cross.

I found myself an inconspicuous spot on the far right of the podium and stood behind a row of nine veterans, who had formed part of an honour guard. I knew they were veterans by the grey of their hair, and for a few of them, by their less than ideal physique for combat. Mind you, they could probably still outrun me.

For the next forty-five minutes, there were speeches after speeches, in French. I could only make out a few words here and there: comité, Canadiens, bienvenue, monsieur mair, monsieur président, amis, la gratitude, bienvenue, se souvenir...

My eyes, naturally, had wandered off from the podium. The overgrown grey mustache of a veteran who stood a few feet in front of me kept my attention for several minutes. Turning behind to my left, a French woman who looked really familiar smiled at me. Ah, we had met at Le Mesnil-Patry, the village where a memorial that marked the 125 Canadian soldiers who were killed in the early days of the Battle of Normandy. We were served lunch there a few days ago. At the luncheon, she was the definition of exuberance. Turning slightly to my right, two young girls and a boy who looked like their younger brother were being given instructions. On their feet were over a dozen wreaths and flower arrangements. The girls were very attentive while the boy was struggling to remain still.

In the midst of a series of speeches, two members of our group, Crystal and Micheal, recited the famous lines from the poem For The Fallen by Robert Laurence Binyon. It was a tiny act that our group contributed to the observance but it was symbolic because it was as if we had become part of each other. When the speeches were finished, the girls to my right began to lift up the wreaths, one by one, from the ground. Some of flowers arrangements looked fairly heavy. They walked slowly and handed them to the dignitaries, who then laid them on the foot of The Cross of Sacrifice. A couple of times, while the girls were carrying with the wreaths, a single stem of flower would fall off to the ground. The boy, without urging by any adult, would pick up the stem and carefully placed it back into the wreaths.

The climax of the ceremony was the singing after laying of the wreaths. The air was flooded with the spirit of gratitude when the French did their rendition of O Canada. I always considered myself an Internationalist first, and a Canadian/Chinese second but it was impossible not be proud to be considered a Canadian to hear the French who sang O Canada whole-heartedly. I could see grown men around me rubbing their eyes, and it was not because of the intense

sun. After that, the French belt out Marseillaise with pride. To top it off, and I think very aptly, Ode to Joy, the official anthem of European Union was played on the speakers to end the observance.

As the crowd began to relax and break up, we all walked and shook hand with each and every flag bearer. Their grips were strong and their eyes said gratitude.

There was no better way than to use this occasion as the official end for the Battlefields Tour 2015.