

1st Canadian Parachute Battalion Association

Joanne de Vries

Jan and I attended the unveiling of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion Monument at Ex Coelis Mountain in September of 2000 but hadn't had a chance to return to the annual ceremony which has been held there each June. We decided that this was the year to return.

We landed in Calgary early evening on June 4th in preparation to attend a media event at the Military Museums in Calgary the morning of the 5th. Rory Cory, formerly of the Glen Bow Museum in Calgary, is now the Senior Curator/Director of Collections at the Calgary Military Museums. He was instrumental in arranging the Topham VC and medals along with one of Topham's uniforms to be displayed, on loan from the Canadian War Museum. Additional funds from the Topham VC Fund Raising Project have made it possible for the medals to travel to various venues in the country.

Battalion Veterans Jan de Vries, Bob Firlotte, Andy Anderson, John Ross, Vic Ramsbottom, Russ Dixon, George Little, and Andrew Roy, with their ladies attended the event to unveil the Topham medals for display at the museum. Betty Robinson and Trudy Fordyce, widows of Battalion veterans George and Gord respectively, attended as well.

At 1130 hours Tom Doucette, LCol (Ret'd), Director of the Military Museums of Calgary and a Reserve Forces Officer, acting as MC, introduced the Military Museums, explained why the museum has the Topham VC and medals on display, gave brief information regarding the ceremony to take place on June 6th at Ex Coelis Mountain, then introduced the 1st Can Para Battalion Veterans who were in attendance.

Jan de Vries, President of the Battalion Association, gave a brief biography of Cpl Fred Topham, then called forward Battalion veterans Vic Ramsbottom of Calgary and John Ross of Lethbridge to unveil the VC and medals. Rory Cory described Topham's other medals and outlined the history of the Victoria Cross. Cadet CWO Karley Alberto did an excellent job reading Topham's citation. Tom Doucette then invited attendees to view the uniforms which were on display opposite the volunteer lounge. A delicious buffet lunch was set up in the lounge where we all had time to socialize with the others who attended the event.

It was a pleasure to meet Monsieur Gérard Carlier, Honorary Consul of France, who resides in Calgary and who showed a keen interest in meeting the Battalion veterans.

Sincere thanks to Rory Cory and Tom Doucette for organizing this most successful event. We also thank representatives of local Military units, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, The Calgary Highlanders, the Cadets, as well as a number of additional veterans for their interest and support at the ceremony.



The Topham VC Medals Display at the Calgary Military Museums, June 2007

Still a beautiful sunny warm day, but with forecast of heavy rain, we departed north to the David Thompson Resort on Hwy 11, just a twenty minute drive east of the Siffleur Falls staging area where Ex Coelis Mountain and the Battalion Monument are located. Our timing turned out well as we only experienced light rain en route. There was heavy rain and flooding in some areas and others were not as fortunate in the timing of their travels and had to pull off the road to wait until the weather abated a little. At this point we all were concerned regarding the forecast of inclement weather over the next couple of days.

Jan and I arrived at the Lodge about 1800 hours with just enough time to unpack and settle in before the Meet and Greet in the evening. This was a lively gathering held in a large permanent tent set up especially for reunions, weddings, etc. The bar was in full swing by the time Jan and I arrived and a buffet of salads, cold meats, rolls, pickles, cheese was set out for a very hungry bunch.

A group of re-enactors from Alberta and BC dressed in replica WWII 1st Can Para Battalion uniforms exhibited an excellent display of Battalion and WWII artefacts. They showed sincere interest in the history of the Battalion and are dedicated to present and carry on this history to the youth of today.

Airborne items for sale from Tailgunner Militaria were available, e.g. books, decals, clothing, badges, insignia, art, etc.

Bill Dickson, who runs Tailgunner Militaria and is president of the Airborne Social Club in Edmonton, and his members, keep the memory of 1st Can Para Battalion alive each year by organizing a gathering and ceremony at the Monument. Battalion veterans are particularly grateful for their dedication and support. Many ex Airborne Regiment veterans attend the yearly gatherings, as well as numerous Battalion veterans. This year, twenty four 1st Can Para vets were in attendance; 6 from Ontario and the balance from Alberta and BC. Perish the thought, but this may be the last time that many of 1st Can Para are able to make it to the mountain particularly due to their declining health. Unfortunately, Battalion veteran Walt Romanow, who did considerable planning and was the liaison with the various departments of the province of Alberta regarding the Topham Bridge dedication, plaque, and the planning for the new highway designation signs, was not able to attend the ceremony this year due to health. In just this one week alone, we were saddened to hear that four Battalion veterans passed away.

Over night heavy rains and an electrical storm developed but the storm passed and the rain had lessened a little by 0700 on the 6th when Neil Gow, a supporter of this annual gathering, sounded reveille. After breakfast, we all donned our rain gear and headed for Ex Coelis Mountain constantly watching the skies for a hopeful break in the clouds which were obscuring the tops of the mountains.

At 1200 hours with a blanket of cloud and a slight drizzle persisting, 1st Can Para Bn Association Patron MGen Herb Pitts conducted the ceremony at the suspension bridge over the North Saskatchewan River which is approximately one kilometre from the staging area. The bridge was to be dedicated in honour of Cpl. Topham VC. Herb gave a short address followed by a prayer by Battalion veteran Rev. Sam Voth-Doan. Jan de Vries unveiled the plaque assisted by Cpl Dave Bradley and Pte John Wong of 1 Field Ambulance, both qualified Paras and medical technicians. Dave has recently returned from Afghanistan and John is training to be deployed in February. Both received their medical training at CFB Borden.

At about this time, four members from the 3PPCLI B Coy (Para) returned from climbing Normandy peak of Ex Coelis Mountain. Due to adverse weather conditions, they were not able to make it right to the top, nevertheless did manage to a considerable height and deposited the ashes of Battalion member Roy Taylor who had died about a month earlier, and Ex Airborne Regiment/Airborne Social Club member Ed Bosch who died earlier this year. Then it was back to

the staging area to unveil the plaque inscribed with Topham's citation. Battalion veterans Monty Marsden from Mission BC and Vic Ramsbottom from Calgary AB unveiled this plaque which is mounted on a large boulder beside the entrance to the trail to Siffleur Falls. Numerous photos were taken at both locations.



Cpl Dave Bradley and Pte John Wong of 1 Field Ambulance flank 1 Can Para Assoc President Jan de Vries at the Topham VC Bridge

Carefully transported from the Military Museums in Calgary and under constant guard by the RCMP, the Cpl Topham VC and Medals were on display in a protective tent, erected specifically for his purpose, on the site near the monument. Obtaining the loan and transportation of the medals from the CWM is a very involved process. Stuart Adams, son of Battalion veteran, the late William Adams, and Rory Cory of the Museum were responsible in this respect.

Just previous to the commencement of the memorial service which followed the bridge ceremony, the light rain ceased and some of the clouds were dispersing. Interestingly, word has it that in the seven years of ceremonies at the mountain it has never rained on the memorial parade held in front of the monument. Someone is definitely watching over Airborne vets!

This ceremony was capably conducted by Bill Dickson with Gord Carter as Parade Commander. Jan took the Salute. Anthems were played and invocation was given by Rev. Voth-Doan. Andy Anderson gave a moving tribute to the Battalion's Wartime Commander and Patron, Brigadier James

S.L. Hill, who passed away shortly following his 95th birthday last year.

Greetings from The Honorable Greg Thompson, P.C., M.P - Minister of Veterans Affairs; Norman L. Kwong, CM, AOE - Lieutenant Governor of Alberta; Honorable Ed Stelmach - Premier of Alberta; and Lieutenant Colonel Malcolm Fox - Regimental Colonel of the Parachute Regiment (UK) were read.

The ceremony continued with the Airborne prayer; Last Post; Minute of Silence; Lament; Reveille; and Binyon's words; Wreath laying; the Queen; General Salute; Colours retired; and dismissal. Many photos were taken during the ceremony and later of groups at the monument with the impressive Ex Coelis Mountain in the background.



3 PPCLI Para Coy climbers with Ex Coelis Mountain in the background

The 1st Can Para Bn wreath was laid by Bob Firlotte and John Ross; the 3rd Para Brigade wreath by John and Rachael Butler. The Airborne Forces Worldwide wreath was placed by Pauline Zakaluk and Isobel Allen, widows of two Battalion members who attend the ceremony each year. The two daughters of Battalion member Norm Toseland, who was instrumental in having the mountain named in honour of the Battalion, assisted 3 PPCLI and 1 Field Ambulance in the laying of their wreaths. Wreaths were laid by a veteran of the Canadian Airborne Regiment; and the Bornewest group. This year the family of the late CSM Willard Minard MM laid a wreath in his honour, assisted by Jan de Vries who knew Minard well during the war.

Bill Dickson writes, *“The 3PPCLI personnel from B Coy (Para Coy) were led by Lt Terry Mac Cormac. 3PPCLI Para Coy members have participated in these events every year. The opportunity for these young soldiers, many now also veterans of combat tours in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, to mix with the veterans of the 1 CPB is very meaningful to them. We would hope this support of our ceremonies from Para coy continues in the future. 1 Field Ambulance personnel, Cpl Bradley and Pte*

Wong found the experience very rewarding and in their words "awesome"! A continuance of Para qualified medical personnel in future ceremonies at Siffleur is now something we should pursue.” 1st Can Para is most grateful for the support of 3PPCLI and of 1 Field Ambulance.

The ceremonies were covered by CITY-TV Edmonton, Global-TV Edmonton, CHTV Red Deer, and Legacy Magazine Alberta.

Gradually all departed from the site to return to David Thompson Resort for the evening BBQ and Social. The evening was a huge success; great steaks, baked potatoes, baked beans, salads and desserts, tea, coffee, and of course, the bar was very popular. There was lots of lively conversation and ‘catching up’ with friends old and new. Acknowledgements and thanks were made and good byes were said as many were departing early the next morning. Most of the old vets retired fairly early but I’m sure some of the younger ones lasted well into the night.

A crisp cool morning cleared to glorious sunshine. The tops of the majestic mountains surrounding the resort could now clearly be seen. The majority of attendees had left by mid-morning but Jan and I had arranged to stay at the resort for a couple of extra days of relaxation and some gentle hiking in the area. A return to Ex Coelis Mountain was a must. This area, known as the Kootenay Plains, is an ecological reserve with considerable history and breathtakingly beautiful.

The distance from the parking lot where the monument is located to the first set of Falls is four kilometres; an easy hike. The suspension bridge now named in honour of Topham VC spans the North Saskatchewan River. Further on, a wooden bridge spans the smaller Siffleur River.

The trail continues following the east side of the Siffleur River at the top of the gorge eroded over the centuries. This year with the heavy rains and spring run off, the river at the head of the falls was at one of its highest levels. The mighty roaring surge of water into the narrow gorge was even more impressive than that of our first visit to the Falls in September of 2000.

There are two more sets of Falls further along the river but the trail is not as clearly marked and the distance was too great for us to comfortably manage in one day. The Siffleur Falls Trail is one of the most popular in this area and we met several groups of school children, as well as a number of individuals. For the next couple of days Jan and I were immersed in the serenity of the mountains, rivers, and lakes. This was a very brief interlude in our busy life, but, in one of the most beautiful areas of our country.