

Paul Bieg. Bk.

Hassall, Harry

Vet to attend 75th anniversary of epic battle

Harry Hassall, 95, set to return to scene of battle of Vimy Ridge

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By JOHN STEWART
Staff Reporter

It has been 75 years now, but Harry Hassall remembers it as if it were yesterday.

"It was Easter Sunday morning of all days. There were four Canadian divisions. When daylight came, we were already in the trenches waiting to go. Vimy Ridge was a very small ridge in front of the city of Lens. It was a big coal-mining place.

"The Germans held that and they were working the coal mines there to keep their factories going. It was do or die to capture it. The French tried to take it but they couldn't. The Canadian government said they didn't like the Canadians being used for reinforcements. 'That's not what Canada stands for,' they said.

Wet snow

"The battle started in the morning and it was snowing. I remember clearly that it was wet snow."

In the two-day battle April 9-10, 1917, Canada took the tiny ridge, but at a horrific toll in human lives. Hassall was injured. A shell exploded near him and he suffered a concussion, head and leg injuries. He spent three months in a hospital in England before being shipped home in 1918.

His injuries also "affected the heart," Hassall said yesterday in an interview at Beechwood Place Retirement Home in Mississauga where he now lives. "It's not in too good shape even today," he says. When that response draws a laugh, Hassall reconsiders it. Coming from someone aged 95 who's making a trip to France next week for the 75th anniversary of Vimy Ridge, he realizes the remark sounds a little funny. He adds with a cheerful laugh, "still, I'm here."

The long-time Meadowvale Village resident will be one of the guests of honor at a state dinner being hosted by the Governor General April 5 before he flies to France for the ceremonies.

Hassall wouldn't think of missing the occasion. "It will be an honor to be there," he says simply. When the invitation came it was a complete surprise. "I

never, never expected it," says the father of four, the grandfather of six and the great grandfather of six more. "It was like something that came from the sky."

Although one of the few living Vimy Ridge survivors, Hassall admits he doesn't really like to talk about the fighting. At 17 he lied about his age to join the 64th Battalion Infantry and escape life in the Cape Breton coal mines where he never saw light in winter except on Sundays off.

Life in the frigid, dirty trenches of France was not glorious by any means. "I always say and I mean it too — it's like being in hell. I hope and pray there'll never be another one. Why does mankind hate people enough to go to war? Why can't we live in peace and enjoy what God gave us?"

Hassall lets the question no one can answer hang in the air for a few seconds. "We should help one another. That's what we're in this world for."

When he stands on the battlefield once again, Hassall will think about what happened there so long ago. He'll think about how he prayed and prayed that God would deliver him back home as he lay in the trenches. He'll think about his friend Charlie Graham, a bear of a man whom Hassall hadn't known in his native Cape Breton but who came to be his close friend on the battlefield. He'll think about how he read Charlie's letters from home to him and composed replies, since his friend couldn't read or write. And he'll think about the hardest letter he ever had to write, — the one to Charlie's widow.

Hassall will also think about his "wonderful, wonderful, wonderful" wife, who is now sick in the hospital. And he'll pray that once again God will hear his prayers and he and his wife can live together again "before God calls us away."

He may even think about the skinny 135-pound kid who signed up for the army oh-so-long ago. "They used to say I was the scarecrow" Hassall said yesterday as he remembered his beanpole girth. "I always say it's not the weight that makes a man: it's what comes from the heart."

No one will argue with the living proof of that statement.



Staff photo by Rob B eintema

Mississauga News reporter John Stewart (right) discusses the battle of Vimy Ridge with veteran Harry Hassall. The two-day battle, which began on Easter Monday, 1917, is considered an important event in Canada's drive to establish itself as an independent nation.