



Rob Beintema/Metroland

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# Vimy veteran Harry Hassall saw no glory in war

*MN Apr. 7, 2017*

As the 1992 ceremony commemorating the battle of Vimy Ridge concluded in France 25 years ago, military bands played The Last Post, four Canadian jets swept overhead, and three chaplains recited closing prayers.

"And just as it was ending and everyone thought the lumps in their throats and the tears in their eyes just couldn't get any worse, Harry Hassall stood up," a story in The Globe & Mail reported the next day. "He leaned forward on his cane and began to recite the words of two old poems of war remembrance. This was not in the script. There was no microphone. But his clear words carried across the green plain: "... at the going-down of the sun, we will remember them ... Lord God of Hosts be with us yet, lest we forget - lest we forget!"

Just before he left for France, the 95-year-old Hassall spoke of his memories of that pivotal battle in the busy lobby of Beechwood Place Retirement Home where he then lived.

He must have told the story a thousand times before. Yet it was clear in his calm, methodical recital of events that they were as fresh to him as the wet snow that fell the morning the battle began 100 years ago.

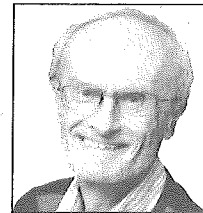
"When daylight came we were already in the trenches waiting to go."

The Germans held Vimy Ridge, a key strategic escarpment near the city of Lens. "They were working the coal mines there to keep their factories going," Hassall said. "It was do-or-die to capture it. The French tried to take it but they couldn't."

Somehow, Hassall's destiny seemed in-

trinsically linked to coal. He left his native England to escape becoming a miner only to land in Cape Breton, where he became one. He saw winter sunlight only on Sundays, his day off.

Because of his mining experience, he was drafted to help form the elaborate tunnel/trench systems that improved safety at Vimy.



**JOHN STEWART**  
My Back Pages

That's how he got to know Charlie Graham, also from Cape Breton. They hadn't known each other there. Graham was huge, while Hassall, a scrawny 135 lb., was nicknamed the "scarecrow."

Charlie was illiterate. Their bond grew when Hassall read the letters Charlie received from home and transcribed his responses.

The hardest letter he ever had to write, Hassall told me, was the one telling Charlie's wife she was a widow.

Seven Mississaugans died in the battle of Vimy Ridge. Hassall survived a subsequent shell explosion which left him concussed with head and leg injuries.

As one of the longest-living Vimy survivors, Hassall, who later established a garden centre on Burnhamthorpe near Dixie Road and was founding president of Cooksville's T.L. Kennedy Legion branch, regularly attended veterans' events.

He made it a point never to glorify his experiences.

"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?"