

Your Story

Finding Uncle Danny

Left, Virginia Foley signs a registry at Nine Elms Cemetery near Vimy Ridge, the final resting place of her great-uncle, Daniel Foley.

Below, an image of Danny Foley as a young man.



ALDO WINDHA

The young soldier fell at Vimy Ridge and was soon forgotten. Nine decades later, his descendant, Virginia Foley, would find him and leave him a piece of her heart.

“Oh, Danny boy...” The old song sticks in my mind as I stand beside the towering statue of a cloaked and hooded woman, her eyes downcast. I feel small, very small. Together we overlook Vimy Ridge, she depicting Canada mourning her lost sons and I to pay homage to my great-uncle, who lost his young life on this lonely field in France ninety years ago.

Through a grey sky, thick with heavy rain clouds, I swear I can see the shadows of soldiers climbing up the ridge, clammy hands clenched tightly around their rifles. As thunder rolls in the distance, I imagine the deafening roar of machine guns, mortars, and cannons. I try to imagine dampness mingling with

the smell of cordite, choking the air. But gazing hard across this pockmarked hill, I realize I cannot possibly bring to mind the smells, the sounds, and the agonizing fear that gripped every young man who began his ascent on April 9, 1917.

Vimy Ridge had been under German control since 1914. With its unobstructed view for tens of kilometres, it had enormous strategic importance and thus had to be taken. The Canadian Corps was about to try.

Made up of volunteers, two-thirds of the corps was British-born. One of the soldiers was my great-uncle who had left his home in Scotland to travel to Canada and signed up with the Alberta Infantry Regiment. Family lore suggests that his mother disapproved of him joining the

British army — his brother Thomas had enlisted a year earlier — so he ran away to Canada and signed up under a false name, Daniel Fowler.

His real name was Daniel Foley. He



was one of six children from a family of poor means, an average bloke in the industrial city of Perth. He worked in the coal mines and, like many of his peers, perhaps looked to the war with a sense of adventure, a way out of his bleak destiny in the mines.

On Easter Monday morning, April 9, 1917, almost two years to the day after he'd enlisted, the battle for Vimy Ridge was set to begin. Danny had already been fighting in France for six months but this battle was different. It was the first time that all four divisions of the Canadian Corps were to attack simultaneously.

At 5:30 a.m., it all began. Mines exploded in no man's land, creating craters to shelter advancing troops from machine-gun fire. Allied artillery barges whistled overhead. Together with his comrades from the 10th Battalion, Private Daniel Foley advanced. Only days earlier, perhaps realizing the difficulties that would be created if he died under a false name, he had confessed to his superiors and his records were changed to reflect his real identity.

The first advance reached its initial objective in less than an hour. There was a brief rest for the men on the ground, then another advance, and another. After three days of steady fighting and hard-won victories, the ridge finally fell into the hands of the allies on April 12. But Danny wasn't there to celebrate the victory. He was killed in the first offensive. He was twenty-six years old.

In total, 3,598 Canadians lost their lives in the three days of the battle and 10,602 were wounded. In 1922, France donated two hundred and fifty acres in perpetuity to the people of Canada, where now resides the largest of Canada's war monuments.

As I stand beside the great and sorrowful stone lady, I mourn those whose lives were lost.

Six and a half kilometres away, past a field where rows of corn sway quietly in the wind, I find my great-uncle's grave at Nine Elms Cemetery and crouch down to trace his name in the stone. I reflect on the path that had taken me here, to the gravestone of a man of whom I had heard very little about as I was growing up. While both of



The gravestone of Danny Foley, killed in action during the battle of Vimy Ridge.

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my grandfathers saw active service during the Great War, they were among the fortunate ones to return home. Danny seemed a forgotten soul.

My journey to honour his memory started in 2007, when my husband and I temporarily took up residence in Scotland. There was much I didn't know about my father's clan, so I visited Perth several times seeking connection to my roots.

My quest led me to a cousin, who had researched the family tree and posted it online. I hadn't realized until I perused the site that my great-uncle had died at Vimy Ridge.

As I learned more about this battle, Canadian pride welled up inside of me. I knew I had to go to Vimy, to see where my great-uncle and so many others had lost their lives. I needed to somehow let him know that his memory would live on.

My great-uncle is a long way from his homeland of Scotland and even farther

from Canada, a country he travelled to as the war broke out only long enough to sign his life away. Danny might have made Canada his home, had he lived.

In the stone wall surrounding the cemetery, there is a book in which I write: "To my Great-Uncle Danny: I never knew you but I'm leaving a piece of my heart with you today."

As I close the gate of Nine Elms, a gentle rain begins to fall and the words of the famous song, "Danny Boy," wash over me:

"And if you come, when all the flowers are dying / And I am dead, as dead I well may be / You'll come and find the place where I am lying / And kneel and say an 'Ave' there for me."

Virginia Foley is a Canadian writer of Scottish and Irish descent, currently living in Wisconsin with her British husband. She writes on many subjects and has just completed her first historical novel.