

Colours of Nova Scotia's First World War fighting units repatriated

The 25th and 85th battalions' King's and regimental colours have been conserved and are now on public display at Government House in Halifax.

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1 / 3 Textile conservator Ann Shafel talks with Col. Michael Sullivan, chief of staff for the 5th Canadian Division, about the First World War colours of the 85th Battalion, which were recently restored and put on permanent display at Government House, along with the colours from the 25th Battalion. (RYAN TAPLIN / Local Xpress)

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The colours of two of Nova Scotia's First World War infantry battalions have been preserved and are now on public display at Government House.

A wish of veterans of the 25th and 85th battalions that the colours be prominently displayed has been fulfilled, said Lt.-Gov. J.J. Grant, at a ceremony on Oct. 15 in Halifax.

"As a young soldier I had the opportunity to meet some of those who served in the 25th and 85th battalions. I have little doubt that they would approve of their colours being placed on permanent display here, where thousands of visitors now come every year," said Grant, who is a retired Canadian Army brigadier-general.

"The colours are located in the main foyer and every day when I walk past them I feel a sense of pride in what they symbolize for our country - a legacy of valour, courage and duty," Grant said.

Colours, similar to flags, are one of a unit's prized possessions and for centuries have been displayed in a prominent place such as churches, museums, and government buildings. Colours also show a unit's history; battle honours, in the form of small embroidered scrolls, are sewn onto the fabric. But colours are more than a flag because they are consecrated; they are blessed in a ceremony, said John Boileau, military historian and retired army colonel.

To soldiers, colours are a symbol of a unit's heritage and tradition, and give a written record of its main battles in wars. Also, soldiers have an emotional connection to their colours as they spend their entire careers as part of one unit, unlike the navy or air force, whose servicemen and women are often posted on more than one ship or squadron, said Boileau, who gave historical advice on the colours' project.

Christopher McCreery was one of the driving forces behind the repatriation of the colours. McCreery, who is the lieutenant-governor's private secretary and executive director of Government House, had asked staff at the provincial archives, the previous holders of the colours, for photographs. None were to be had and eventually the provincial archivist offered the colours to Government House.

"We were coming up on the centennial of the First World War and the lieutenant-governor had an interest and the public has a real interest in it. We didn't have a lot of military history here on display in the house, which is strange because Halifax has always been a military town," said McCreery, who holds a PhD in Canadian political history.

He secured a \$35,000 grant from Canadian Heritage, hired textile conservator Ann Shafel to stabilize the fabric, and set up the display in Government House.

The colours have had several "homes." In 1923, the battalions' colours were brought to Government House where they were paraded for the last time and then were displayed at Province House for 12 years. From there they went to the archives.

The volunteer curator of the Army Museum Halifax Citadel is pleased to see the colours prominently displayed.

"For decades, the provincial archives had been home to the King's and regimental colours of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) and 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders). After significant conservation work, they will have a new home in the foyer of Government House, where more people will be able to see them and to have another opportunity to reflect on the service and sacrifice of Nova Scotia's soldiers during the First World War," said Ken Hynes, who is a retired army major.

The 85th and 25th battalions were Nova Scotia's only two fighting units that made it to the front, intact, in Europe during the First World War. Even though there were 11 infantry battalions raised in the province, the other nine were broken up for reinforcements once they arrived in England.

The 85th and 25th have storied histories. The Never Fails and the Master Raiders as the battalions were nicknamed, respectively, earned great respect during the war for their surprising victories and for their soldiers' tenacity.



The Canadian National Vimy Memorial is located near Arras, France. Soldiers with 25th and 85th battalions participated in the battle in April 1917. (CHRISTINE SOUCIE MADILL / Local Xpress)

THE MASTER RAIDERS

The 25th Battalion was authorized by the Canadian government in October 1914 and left for Great Britain on May 20, 1915. Their most significant battle occurred in 1916 during the Battle of the Somme, said Boileau. Led by the 25th and 22nd (Van Doos) battalions, the Canadians captured the village of Courcellette in northern France on Sept. 15.

"They fought through the village, they captured it, and defended it against 12 or 13 counter attacks over the next few days. ... That was the first of 250 villages, cities and towns liberated by the Canadians during the first war. After Courcellette, the 25th went into every major battle that the Canadian Corps fought," said Boileau.

This victory was only one of a few Allied victories on the Somme battlefields, according to the Canadian War Museum's website. During the four-month campaign, the Canadian Corps suffered 20,000 casualties.

THE NEVER FAILS

It would be another seven months before the 85th Battalion would see action on the Western Front. And it was a last-minute command decision to send them into the fray at Vimy Ridge, on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1917.

The soldiers had only landed in France in February and since they weren't battle-tested, their duties at Vimy Ridge, as part of Canada's fourth division, were to carry ammunition and rations to the front lines, dig communication trenches and lay barbed wire.

The first three divisions of the Canadian Corps had taken their objectives on Vimy Ridge but the fourth division hadn't been able to capture Hill 145, the highest point on the ridge, from German forces.

"The commanders didn't want to put the 85th in because they had never gone into battle. But the situation was desperate, so two companies of the 85th, C and D, were ordered to attack Hill 145; one company under Capt. Harvey Crowell, from Barrington, ... and the other, Capt. Percival Anderson from Big Baddeck. ... At 6:15 that night, they launched their attack against Hill 145. They were supposed to get an artillery barrage to support them but that didn't happen," said Boileau.

"So their first battle was their most important battle, and the one that secured Vimy Ridge for Canada. This was quite amazing for raw, untested troops."

The 25th and 85th battalions were disbanded after the war and are perpetuated by the Nova Scotia Highlanders and the Cape Breton Highlanders. Lt.-Gov. Grant is the former commanding officer and honorary colonel of the Nova Scotia Highlanders.

BATTLE HONOURS

25th Battalion: Mount Sorrel; Somme, 1916, '18; Flers-Courcellette; Thiepval; Ancre Heights; Arras, 1917, '18; Vimy, 1917; Arleux; Scarpe, 1917, '18; Hill 70; Ypres, 1917; Passchendaele; Amiens; Hindenburg Line; Canal du Nord; Cambrai; Pursuit to Mons; France and Flanders, 1915-18.

85th Battalion: Arras, 1917, '18; Vimy, 1917; Ypres, 1917; Passchendaele; Amiens; Scarpe, 1918; Drocourt-Queant; Hindenburg Line; Canal du Nord; Valenciennes; Sambre; France and Flanders, 1917.