

A nation that doesn't know Vichy from Vimy

Susan Martinuk

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Last week John McCallum, Canada's Minister of National Defence, stood on the beaches of Dieppe, France, to mark the 60th anniversary of one of the most disastrous battles in our military history. In doing so, he made modern political history by admitting that he had no idea what he was doing. He frankly conceded, that until the previous week, he had never heard of the battle of Dieppe.

Since then, our Number One military man has been publicly pilloried by veterans, politicians and bemused historians. Mr. McCallum then decided to use an offensive manoeuvre and respond to critics in a letter to the editor of this paper. Wise tactic -- but he sustained huge losses when he mistakenly compared the Dieppe battle to Vichy (the Nazi capital of occupied France) rather than to Vimy [Ridge], the site of Canada's most famous battle in WW I.

Like Dieppe, Mr. McCallum's PR battle was a dismal failure.

Sadly, we shouldn't be surprised by these events. Our public ignorance of Canada's past has been well documented by *The Dominion Institute*, a group dedicated to educating Canadians about their common history and civic traditions. In a 1997 survey, only 33 percent of young Canadians (18-25) recognized 1867 as the date of Confederation. Even worse, another 33 percent couldn't even name the *Century* in which it occurred! In 2000, only 23 percent of Canadians passed a basic history quiz; in 2001, a mere 17 percent could correctly answer six of the 10 questions on Canada's citizenship test.

In April, 2002, Canadians were asked to identify the famous WW I victory where the Canadian military captured a "key ridge." Despite the overt hint, just 36 percent knew it was Vimy Ridge.

Oh, Canada. Tsk. Tsk.

Clearly, Mr. McCallum isn't alone in his ignorance of history. But (and this is rather unfortunate for him) he now symbolizes that consequences of our neglect for our past. That is, we now have a military and political leader who, despite a highly-privileged education, doesn't know the basic military/Canadian history that undergirds the very forces he governs.

If McCallum merely reflects our collective amnesia, then why should his gaffes matter?

Firstly, because knowledge of our common history connects each of us to the larger story of Canada. A common memory creates a common bond and a mutual understanding.

As our nation becomes increasingly multicultural and conducts its affairs in a global marketplace, there is an all-too-evident struggle to live as united citizens with common goals and a strong national identity. But knowing what we have collectively achieved can give us both purpose and optimism to overcome new challenges and cultural difficulties with an innovative spirit.

Secondly, history reminds us that Canada has heroes – even as a look at the despairing state of our own culture reminds us that we desperately need heroes.

In Western culture, heroism has been replaced by/confused with stardom and a fascination with celebrity. The ideal of heroism has been further tainted as the mass media tears down those whose model of greatness has somehow been deemed imperfect. As a result of these misguided and cynical intentions, we have successfully squelched the natural impulse of young people to emulate and idealize those who accomplish great things.

But in the wake of September 11, such cynicism has waned. Heroism is back in vogue and popular culture is once again encouraging the growth of virtues such as courage and self-sacrifice. We saw heroism in the acts of firefighters, soldiers and rescue workers -- and suddenly there was a desire to emulate it. But we shouldn't have had to look south of the border.

Models of true heroism (Laura Secord, Terry Fox, Arthur Currie) are present throughout Canada's history. We just forgot to mention them. We've neglected to tell their stories and use them to challenge and motivate our young people to live as citizens whose actions can – and will – shape the future of Canada.

In *The Decline of Greatness*, author A.M. Schlesinger, Jr. writes that we shouldn't be complacent about our ability to get along without great men. "If our society has lost its wish for heroes and its ability to produce them, it may well turn out to have lost everything else as well."

Indeed. As our past slips away, so does our future. Mr. McCallum would do well to familiarize himself with the stories of Canada and its heroes – and then use them to stimulate public ambition, to inspire great acts of heroism and to remind Canadians of their common purpose and identity.

Susan Martinuk is a Vancouver commentator.