

Cadets mark 99th anniversary of Vimy Ridge with 9.9km trek



By Brock Weir

Aside from his eyes, which were protected from the wind by dark-rimmed glasses, Omar Paker was covered from head to foot as he and his friends bundled up for a 9.9 km trek around Aurora.

A bundle in a rust coloured jacket, weighed down by a heavy backpack, Omar was in good company as his fellow members of the Queen's York Rangers braced themselves on an unseasonably chilly April morning to mark the 99th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

It was hard to miss them ? and that was by design.

Their aim was not only to trek across Aurora, but raise awareness of the decisive Canadian victory in the First World War and raise funds to help them get to that hallowed ground within France next April to mark the centenary of the day many Canadians feel defined Canada as a nation.

Collecting pledges in the lead-up to Saturday's trek, this was just one of several fundraisers carried out by the cadets over the last two years to hit their goal of raising \$150,000 to send 40 of their most deserving members to the commemorations.

As of Saturday's journey, they're now well over the \$100,000 mark.

The frosty morning took the cadets from the Royal Canadian Legion on Industrial Parkway North, through the Aurora Community Arboretum, east along St. John's Sideroad before veering south, hitting Vandorf Sideroad, and travelling westward on Vandorf to Industrial Parkway South, winding their way north to the finish line at the John Graves Simcoe Armoury.

?People are going to be seeing people trekking back and forth and people might ask [what we are doing] and that will get the word out,? said cadet Alexander McLaren before embarking with the team. ?The Battle of Vimy Ridge was one of the most successful battles in Canada. It presented to the other Great Nations that Canada is more of a useful asset in the war. The Battle of Vimy Ridge, and how big a success it was, made Canada its own nation as a whole.?

This was a view shared by Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson, who joined the cadets to give them a pep talk before the trek.

?I just wanted to show my support for the cadets here,? said Mr. Peterson before going into the fray to offer words of

encouragement. ?This is a very important day [on the road] to the 100th anniversary next year. This is a good chance for them to get out and show their support for each other and their commitment to our community. Our young cadets obviously have a great respect for our military and today is a very important day in Canadian military history.

?It was the birth of a nation. All four Canadian divisions fought together for the first time from all Regions of Canada, but it came at a cost, of course; nearly 3,600 died and over 7,000 were wounded. It is an important battle in our history and one we need to remember.?

This is a point the leaders as the Queen's York Rangers Cadet Corps have been working to drive home to the teens.

The corps boasts 130 cadets, but they need to whittle that number down to a more manageable 40.

?The finish line is in sight so now we have to start thinking about security and making sure that everybody understands their role on the trip,? said Captain Sue Lusk. ?We have Duty Officers and cadets and the expectation is we represent not only our cadet corps, but our Town, our Province, as well as our country and the cadet system in general.

?Part of it is making sure that every time they get off the bus they remember who we are, remember where we are, and remember what they are doing so people are well aware of who we represent. We call it situational awareness and being situationally aware that while we are out there, we are out there for a good reason.?

They are getting close, she added, to whittling that 130 down to 40, with the cadets participating in a number of events and initiatives to showcase their behaviour, volunteerism, attendance, and fundraising.

?It is evident which kids will rise to the occasion and which have shown dedication throughout the time we have been fundraising and preparing,? said Ms. Lusk. ?I knew before we raised a penny [our \$150,000 goal] was possible. We have outstanding volunteers and outstanding support committee members and I think for some of those parents that were not involved, I think they now understand that this is a particularly cool organization and we do a lot of awesome things for their kids, and they need to be involved.?

Right now though, the cadets are keeping their eyes on the prize.

?It is going to be an amazing trip,? said cadet Matthew Greig.

?But,? added fellow cadet Ry Church on learning who made the final cut, ?we have to wait!?