

Remarks of WO William Kenneth MacDonald

Vimy Award Dinner
20 November 2009
Canadian War Museum
Ottawa, Ontario

Madame Justice
General Natynczyk
Col (Retired) Pellerin
Dr Cowan
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen
Fellow Warriors

It is with humility and pride that I accept this award on behalf of all the NCO's of the CF. Having been selected as the recipient and the representative for all of my colleagues is truly an exciting experience. I did some homework, including reflection, on the significance and history of this prestigious award and so with trembling hands, because I now must live up to all the nice things you have said about me, I would like to say a few words.

The battle of Vimy Ridge from 09 to 12 April 1917 was perhaps the single most important battle fought in our storied history as a nation and as a military. Not only did our predecessors succeed in taking an objective which was widely thought to be unachievable, but they applied the most modern tactics available and incorporated all their assets with great skill and great success. The vision and the warrior spirit which evolved from competent leadership and, more importantly, trust, is something which still lives on in today's military. Evolving tactics, excellent equipment and combined arms cooperation has led to many successes on all of Canada's battlefields since that time. One of the keys to that success was leadership. In reflecting on this, I began to think about leadership and that raised some questions.

What does it mean to be a leader? It means to me that you accept responsibility for failure as an individual and that you share in successes as a team. That is and always has been the spirit of the Canadian soldier, sailor and airman/ woman. Humility and silent professionalism is and always will be a trait which uniquely categorizes our military. This is perhaps the single biggest reason why it is impossible for me to accept this award on a personal level. We, as a people, understand that it is impossible to be successful without good leadership and, even more importantly, supportive subordinates. In order for this to happen there needs to be trust, perhaps the single most important factor in success and in the shaping of a good leader. That trust must be both up and down the chain of command and in order to achieve this vital component, leaders must constantly strive to develop themselves personally and professionally. My personal successes have always come with a cost which invariably leads to the belief that everybody needs someone to lean on, regardless of rank or position and, in order to be comfortable enough to lean on one another, trust must be apparent.

It has been said that the definition of being a good leader is “Having the ability to persuade ordinary people to do extraordinary things”. I would disagree with this statement, militarily, as I do not feel that any Canadian service man or woman is merely “ordinary”. Volunteers all, and focused on a common goal is what sets them apart from the ordinary. With an almost certainty of finding themselves in combat, “ordinary” Canadians have lined up at our recruiting centres to volunteer for service.

Although I have stated that I am accepting this award on behalf of the NCO corps, I must also acknowledge the officer corps as I have had many Pl Comd’s, Company Comd’s and Bn Comd’s who shaped what I have become and afforded me the opportunities to develop both as a soldier and a leader. I will not say that I have always been so lucky as to have a good example; however, learning from poor examples is and was just as valuable.

I must also not forget the young men and women who form the Jr NCO ranks of our military and who are all important in our success. Good and supportive subordinates are key to achieving our goals. Their tenacity, motivation, forward thinking and respect is something which I personally will never forget.

Lastly, I need to recognize those who really epitomize the meaning of this award in its words of contribution to the defense and security of our nation and the upholding of our democratic values. Those who have left a part or all of themselves on our battlefields. Our Wounded Warriors and Our Fallen. It is for them that we really do owe a debt and an inherent need for recognition. I was asked, during an honours and awards board, where I was speaking on behalf of Cpl Bryce Keller, “Are you just doing this because he is dead?” My answer, at the time, was sufficient for him to receive, posthumously, the Medal of Military Valour. Looking back, if I had been bold enough, I think my answer would have been a question, “Is that not enough?” In reflecting on this, I also reflect on the families and what they have sacrificed. Without them, we could not do what we do and without their sacrifice(s) we would not be as successful as we are. They have stepped up to the plate time and again, and for that they deserve special recognition.

In closing, I would like to again thank the CDA and all the members of the selection committee. I would also like to recognize a few certain people who are attending this evening, my fellow warriors. LCol Hope, LCol Fletcher, Maj Mason Stalker and CWO Leger. Without your guidance, tenacity, insistence in success, compassion and rock solid leadership I don’t believe I would find myself as passionate about certain topics or as eager as I have become to develop without you and the impact you have had on me. I must not forget to thank the Canadian Infantry Association for the nomination and My Regiment the PPCLI who has provided a constant amount of support to me throughout the years. I only hope that I can live up to this award, what it represents and be as positive and inspirational a recipient as those who have won The Vimy Award in the past. Thank You.