

Local student on historic European adventure

By Mark Pavilons

A high school student in King is connecting with her past through a flagship scholarship program.

Palma Gurdulic is currently on an amazing, two-week trip to Europe, as the national winner of the prestigious Beaverbrook Vimy Prize



Gurdulic was tops out of 200 applicants from across Canada and overseas.

The prize includes the fully funded, two-week educational program in England, France, and Belgium to study Canada's tremendous First World War effort. It includes classroom education and daily field trips to important First World War sites, including Vimy Ridge.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge was not simply a First World War battle. Students will learn how this event was Canada's coming of age. As Vimy Foundation Executive Director Jeremy Diamond noted: "Our forces gained such a reputation that their success and sacrifice resulted in Canada earning signing rights for the Treaty of Versailles and control over its foreign affairs, an important step toward full nationhood and independence. It was a seminal moment in our history, a victory that helped give us our own voice around the world."

For Palma, the Beaverbrook Vimy Prize is an opportunity to connect in a deeply personal way with her family history.

Her great-great-grandfather was mustard gassed during the war and she wanted to try to get a sense of his times, his terrors, his triumphs, by walking the same ground he did.

She said she found his old medal in some of her dad's stuff and he said it was from the First World War and that it was his great-grandfather's.

"That was all we knew, but then I investigated further and I found it was a Service Medal. I wanted to learn more, and when I saw a notice for the Vimy Award in a history magazine we have at home I thought that might be a great avenue to access experts and open up more resources. Now that I've been learning more about Vimy and both World Wars, my motivation is simply to receive the knowledge that this trip will bring and to care for it with respect to pass it on to others."

She was "super excited" that her submissions were chosen.

Stella Begic, the Vimy programs manager, noted that Palma was one of the youngest candidates ever, having been just 14 when she submitted her application.

"I was totally floored that I made it this year," Palma said.

Her submission involved a 500-word motivation letter, a 1,500-word submission answering the question of the role of youth in the remembrance of wars, and also a 500-word analysis of a work of art from the World War I collection of the Canadian War Museum. She answered one of the questions using her actual investigation and discovery process with the service medal.

"I genuinely had a conversation with myself and asked questions about what I aim to learn and answering with the concept of wanting to learn how to learn. Our role as youth is to learn how to learn, and what to learn, in order to prepare our minds and become the vessels for the holding of knowledge and to continue to pass it on."

She really enjoyed her submission on art, choosing "Mustard Gas," by Sir Eric Henri Kennington.

Her great-great-grandfather Robert Ewan fought in the trenches of World War I. He was mustard gassed at the German attack on Ypres Dec. 19, 1915 and was the only one to survive in his unit. This mustard gas attack was actually pretty big news at the time. Through her research, Palma discovered that her great-great-grandfather served as a private in the 5th West Yorkshire Regiment. That part of her family were all involved in the wool and textile trade in some way, which Yorkshire is famous for. Robert Ewan was no exception, and he first began as a clerk at Morrison's linen merchants in Knaresborough. He later married Mary Brazier in 1916, with World War I still going on.

?I'm still trying to figure out where my great-great-grandfather is buried ? all I know so far is it's not in Canada and it's not at one of the wartime cemeteries in France or Belgium.?

?That story, and the tellers interpretation of what it means, has now been heard by five generations and I guarantee my children and grandchildren will also hear it from me one day.?

Palma is also excited about the research, presentations and site visits during the trip.

Even after the trip, students have a responsibility to the Vimy Awards and for supporting Remembrance Day events.

?I definitely feel like I've been invited to join a special group, that I have a duty to give back in any way I can.?

There are 15 other participants as well as volunteers and Vimy staff who will be enjoying this experience as well. There are participants from the UK, France and Canada.

Palma believes the historical landmarks will imprint a sense of understanding that she didn't have before.

?It was really the personal connection that started it but I have to say that I am completely in awe of what I have already learned.

The world wars were events on a scale unlike anything the past three generations of people have experienced in their lifetimes. They were both heroic and horrific and should never be forgotten. I wish more kids my age could really connect and see how this part of our collective history was so exciting, scary, romantic, awful and so very, very real. Hollywood movies can never do it justice.?

Palma admitted she's just getting a firm grasp of it all. To this point, she has read and researched and , first-hand experience takes place.

?I expect to get a sense of my great-great-grandfather's times. I will try to imagine his terrors and triumphs by walking the same ground he did, breathing the air and hearing the waves crash on the landing beaches. I expect to read about the stories of others of his generation and better understand the factors at play and the grander arcs of history at work. I hope it makes me connect with the fact that these events really happened.

?I hope seeing these landmarks will keep reinforcing that reality, seeing rows and rows of graves of young people and knowing that I only exist today because my great-great-grandfather had the luck not to be one of them.?

Palma is going into Grade 10 this September and her hobbies include all kinds of art, reading and writing poetry and reading novels. She started playing rugby.

Her dream is to one day attend Oxford, a place the group will be visiting this month.