

Preface

Verdun is an unusual and fascinating place. Someone should set a novel there – and I’m not suggesting this just because I was born and raised in Verdun. But sometimes truth is more interesting than fiction. To really understand the local culture and grasp the nuances of daily life in that city, you almost have to be a Verdunite. To get a measure of Verdun in the early 1940s, the following imaginative exercise might help: take about 70,000 working-class people of almost exclusively British or French ethnic origin, confine them in a rectangular area of about six square kilometres, oblige them to live on top of each other in nearly identical two- and three-storey tenement flats where everyone knows everyone else’s business, nearly surround the whole by a river and an aqueduct, and deprive the residents of a rail connection, an intercity bus depot, any hotels, nearly all forms of industry, or any licensed establishments. At this point you have created a rough uniformity of experience and an unmistakable sense of geographic distinctiveness. Finally, overlay the greatest military conflict the world has ever seen and observe what kind of responses and intracommunity dynamics develop. This is what this book is about.

In 1990 or so I purchased a splendid book from a remainder table in a well-known bookstore chain. Len Burrow and Émile Beaudoin’s *Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death of HMCS Athabaskan* describes the operational history and eventual sinking in 1944 of one of the Royal Canadian Navy’s most powerful fighting ships, the Tribal-class destroyer *Athabaskan*. At the end of the book the authors listed the names and hometowns of the ship’s crew who had survived and those who had perished. To my surprise, there were five or six Verdunites. Growing up in Verdun in the 1960s and 1970s, I knew that there were many First and Second World War veterans residing in the community. I lived for eleven years on the street named for one of Canada’s most famous wartime figures: George F. Beurling, the legendary fighter pilot, who was from Verdun. But it was in reading the names of a handful of Verdunites who had died in Canada’s war that I was suddenly seized with the desire to learn more about my hometown’s wartime history. What kind of place was Verdun in the 1940s, and who were the Verdunites? How many residents enlisted? How many became casualties? How did the community participate in the war effort, and how did it respond to the consequent loss of life? Did the war change Verdun? Within a year, I had quit my job as a technical editor with a defence contractor and enrolled in the doctoral program in history at McGill University.

While researching these questions for the doctoral thesis on which this book is based, and in finalizing the present manuscript, I learned much about my hometown during the war. But I realized early on that I was also learning a great deal about myself, my past, and that of my family. Historical investigation enabled me to place my own formative years firmly within a broader chronological and geographical context. Many of the names, places, events, and issues of the 1940s that I encountered in my explorations persisted into the 1970s and beyond. An unexpected benefit of seeking to explain Verdun to others in a scholarly historical work has been the enhanced meaning of the streets, buildings, public spaces, institutions, and people of my community. For me, no walk down Wellington Street, the city's main thoroughfare, can be separated from the ghosts that are everywhere now plainly visible to me. They tell an important and inspired story in which the community's Second World War experiences figure prominently.

Notwithstanding the sad losses and lasting bereavement that struck the city, the years of the Second World War were, in many respects, Verdun's halcyon days. Perhaps they were also Canada's. Verdunites faced the challenges of war while seizing its opportunities. This book is their story.

THE AVAILABILITY OF SOURCES has influenced the scope and shape of this study. Most of the archival sources are of Verdun origin, most were in English, and most were generated by or maintained at city hall. The municipal archives are a rich repository of meticulously kept records of local wartime organizations as well as of much important material related to the local war effort. This collection yielded the essential correspondence, memoranda, reports, minutes of meetings held by various wartime bodies, and other material on which the core of this study is based. The records of such local institutions as schools, churches, and community organizations, however, were a different matter: few remain. The municipal council minutes were very helpful but, as is the case with most such material, sparse. Various record groups at Library and Archives Canada, especially those of the Departments of National Defence (RG 24), Munitions and Supply (RG 28), and National War Services (RG 44) were valuable for specific topics. These complement local sources and help place wartime Verdun in its national context.

Verdun's two wartime weekly newspapers provide a bonanza of detailed local information, full of flavour for the era, and rife with political opinion and social commentary. They were especially useful in helping connect the dots and fill in some gaps in the official records. The fervently patriotic, conservative, and even dour *Guardian*, available in bound copies at the Verdun Cultural Centre, served Verdun's English-speaking community and reflected many "old country" views. Ever a civic booster, it also regularly paid homage to Verdun's working-class character. Virtually everything to do with the war in Verdun was reported in the *Guardian*: a multitude of fundraising activities, enlistments and casualties, air-raid

precaution news, war-related economic and social conditions, municipal involvement in the war effort, local community groups' responses, and religious views. In fact, the *Guardian* helped galvanize Verdunites' domestic war effort. A close reading of every edition between January 1939 and mid-1946 yielded valuable results. In February 1942, the *Guardian* claimed a circulation of 18,200.

The bilingual (though mainly French) *Messenger/Le Messenger* had a circulation of 15,000 during the war and also served readers in neighbouring districts of Montreal, such as Ville Émard and Point St Charles. This weekly was demonstrably less robust in its reporting on local war activities than was its competitor. Nevertheless, it regularly detailed events of local wartime significance, published details on enlistees, and diligently reported casualties. Unlike the *Guardian*, the *Messenger* proudly cited French-speaking Verdunites' war service, in and out of uniform. Unfortunately, a postwar fire destroyed extant copies prior to January 1943, and this has left some important gaps in the record of Verdun's war from the French Canadian perspective.

Both of these weeklies provided a comprehensive chronicle of events and acted as superb sources from which to glean the texture of local social culture. The vagaries of community public opinion and the specific details of many events are often to be found only in local newspapers. In addition, the Montreal press, especially the *Montreal Daily Star* and *La Presse*, offered details concerning wartime Verdun. These sources at times also added a metropolitan context for events taking place in Verdun.

Perhaps two dozen Verdunites were interviewed for this study, though not all their voices are heard in the narrative that follows. Curiously, despite Verdun's astounding enlistment record during the war, tracking down local veterans was not always easy in the 1990s and later. Not only had natural attrition taken its toll, but during the politically turbulent and economically distressed 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of aging Verdunites had moved to other communities. Oral history is also frequently easier to obtain than to use effectively. Here, it helps reflect Verdun's wartime mood. Some Verdunites' recollections led to other intriguing leads and, in general, provided helpful background information, cleared up misunderstandings, and nuanced some information obtained elsewhere.