

Ceremony to mark the 98th Anniversary of the Somme and Beaumont-Hamel

July 1, 2014

On July 1, 1916, at 09:15, eight hundred and one members of the Newfoundland Regiment rose from the St. John's Road trench and advanced toward the German front lines. They faced a blizzard of machine gun bullets. The Battle at Beaumont-Hamel lasted thirty minutes. The next morning only sixty-eight members of the Newfoundland Regiment were able to answer the roll call. It is said that no corner of Newfoundland was left unscathed by this terrible battle.

I have just returned from the ceremony to remember those brave men who fell at Beaumont-Hamel. About 200 Canadians took time to gather to remember and mark the sacrifice of the members of the Newfoundland Regiment. The music was provided by Terry Kelly, who sang "A Pittance of Time" and two choirs, an elementary children's choir from Gander Academy and the Atlantic Voices Choir of Ottawa, who were wearing the Newfoundland and Labrador tartan. The wreaths were laid by politicians; members of diplomatic corps; the Canadian military and Royal Canadian Mounted Police; universities; and, two children from Newfoundland, one of whom is a direct descendent of one of the brave men who fought at Beaumont-Hamel. It was a very moving ceremony.

However, one person was conspicuous by his absence, Canada's Minister of Veterans Affairs, Julian Fantino. On June 28, 2014, Veterans Affairs Canada issued a Media Advisory advising that "*The Honourable Julian Fantino, Minister of Veterans Affairs, and Senator David Wells, will participate in a commemorative ceremony in Ottawa to mark the 98th anniversary of the Battles of the Somme and Beaumont-Hamel*". On June 30, 2014, the Media Advisory was modified to read that "*On behalf of the Honourable Julian Fantino, Minister of Veterans Affairs, Senator David Wells will participate in a commemorative ceremony in Ottawa to mark the 98th anniversary of the Battles of the Somme and Beaumont-Hamel.*"

As the ceremony started, the veterans in attendance asked each other "Where is the Minister? Why isn't he here? Is he afraid to meet veterans?" One has to ask, was the Minister avoiding veterans again? Were he and his staff worried that he might have to actually speak to a veteran and/or their spouse, who might tell him how his department is failing to meet the needs of our veterans?

Once again, the Minister was a no-show, sending someone else to do his duty. Once again, the Minister showed his callous disregard for the sacrifices made by the men and women who have served our country with such distinction.

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