

Make a dream come true? Sure, Sarnia can do that!

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson

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Next spring, a Vancouver Island girl will honour a Sarnia boy. It will happen in France, on hallowed land, its use ceded in perpetuity to Canada. The event promises to be both heartwarming and heartbreaking.

The architect of what is expected to become a national news story is a Victoria, B.C. music instructor named Emily Armour. Her endeavour is one in which the stars have aligned.

Early in August, First Monday was contacted by a couple named Michael Deegan and Helen Pengelly. They told us of a program operating in Victoria called the Music for Veterans Project.

Emily Armour has been introducing students, aged 5 to 18, to the lives of Canadian military veterans. Each student is assigned one veteran. They study the details of that veteran's life. They learn their stories. Having done so, the student creates a musical composition as a tribute to their soldier.

One of Emily's students, a 15-year-old girl named Ainsley, was assigned a Sarnia soldier by the name of Robert Arthur Batey.

In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, Batey, a resident of Julia Street, walked into a downtown recruiting centre to enlist.

"How old are you, kid?" the sergeant asked.

"Seventeen," Batey replied.

Told that he needed a note from his mother to enlist at this young age, Batey went home to plead his case with his mother.

Blanche Batey knew that her son badly wanted to serve. Like most Canadians, she believed that the war would be over within months. Soldiers were expected to quickly return home, drenched in glory.

"Yes," Blanche Batey wrote to the sergeant. "My 17-year-old son has my permission to enlist." So off Private Robert Batey went to war, and one year later the Sarnia soldier was dead on a battlefield in northern France. Hastily buried in the heat of combat, Robert Batey lies today in an unknown grave.

Turn the clock forward 111 years to young Ainsley.

We were impressed to learn that this student, now just entering Grade 9, has been performing her own piano compositions since age 10 in the Music For Veterans Project (MVP). "The Lancaster Flight" was her first composition in 2001, in tribute to her grandfather's RCAF service. Ainsley has also contributed to events such as "Honouring Commonwealth Aircrew" in 2023 and "Ready for the Fray," written for the 80th anniversary of D-Day. Ainsley has performed original compositions at Government House in Victoria for British Columbia's Lieutenant-Governor, and at Canada's Parliament in Ottawa in recognition of the Honourable Roméo Dallaire. She has won numerous prestigious awards for her music. Her most recent contribution, "Bluebird," is a work to celebrate the life of a Great War nursing sister in MVP's newly-established "Honouring Garden," commemorating women veterans.

In telling First Monday about the Music For Veterans Project, Deegan and Pengelly revealed that they, as well as music instructor Emily Armour, had read a story about Private Robert Batey that we wrote many years ago. There is more to the astonishing tale of this hero of Sarnia. We know that Batey lied about his age to enlist. What most didn't know, is that he was not 17 years old. Nor was he 16. When Robert Batey enlisted in 1914, he had just turned 14-years-of age. Slain at 15, Sarnia's Robert Batey is the youngest of the 11,285 names inscribed on the magnificent National War Memorial at Vimy Ridge – the roll call of Canadian soldiers who have no known grave.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge, fought from April 9 to 12, 1917, occupies a special place in Canada's historical canon. For the first time, all four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought together under Canadian command. The Canadians drove the German Sixth Army off Vimy Ridge, a feat which previous Allied assaults had failed to accomplish. The victory came at terrible cost: 3,598 Canadians were killed. Vimy subsequently became a powerful symbol of Canadian courage, sacrifice and emerging national identity.

In contacting First Monday, Deegan and Pengelly knew that Emily Armour had a dream for young Ainsley. The couple shared the same dream, and they were searching for help to make it happen.

"It is our hope," they wrote, "that this 15-year-old pianist will perform her composition next year on the same sacred ground where this brave soldier died at Vimy Ridge, on the battle's 110th anniversary."



Ainsley at her piano



Ron Realesmith, President, Branch 62,
Royal Canadian Legion

Why this dream? Deegan and Pengelly’s reason tugged at our heartstrings. “So that although separated by time, they will no longer be separated by distance and will always stay connected by music.”

Deegan and Pengelly’s final comment made wheels start spinning. “This dream may not happen. But If you know anyone or organization who might be interested in supporting this effort, I am sure Emily Armour would be more than delighted to hear from them.”

First Monday knew exactly who could help to make the dream come true. We called Ron Realesmith at Branch 62 of the Royal Canadian Legion. Ron is one of a handful of people familiar with the story of Robert Batey. Realesmith was enthusiastic and emphatic. “Find out how much Emily needs. We have to help make this happen.” Three days later, we were able to inform Emily Armour that Sarnia Legion Branch 62 would cover transportation to and from the Vimy Battlefield for her, Ainsley, and the young musician’s parents, as well as look after their expenses in France. Realesmith sent an impassioned email to a Veterans Affairs contact in France. John Desroisiers heads the team planning the Vimy 110 Anniversary

event. “The symbolism,” Realesmith wrote, “is extraordinary: a 15-year-old Canadian girl, 112 years after Private Batey’s death, performing an original composition in memory of a 15-year-old Sarnia boy who gave his life for Canada.”

“Private Robert Batey’s story,” Desroisiers replied to Realesmith, “continues to resonate with visitors from Canada and around the world.” He promised to deliver Emily and Ainsley’s initiative to his team planning the ceremonies.

And that’s where things stood until First Monday called Sarnia-Lambton M.P. Marilyn Gladu and told her what we were trying to do. Marilyn listened to our story and wept. She immediately telephoned Emily. “We’re going to make this happen,” Marilyn told her. “I’m going to the Minister.” And that’s what she did. Simultaneously, Veterans Affairs Minister Jill McKnight was fielding the same request from Jeff Kibble, M.P. for Emily and Ainsley’s riding of Cowichan-Malahat-Langford. Four days later, young Ainsley was told that she’ll be performing, at the Vimy Memorial, on April 9, 2027. When the stars align, music will indeed fill the air.

There are several people who deserve credit for this miraculous outcome. First, Music Instructor Emily Armour, of Victoria, B.C. and her impressive range of offerings under the Music For Veterans umbrella (readers will find detailed information at www.musicforveteransproject.com where donations are welcome). Emily’s is the only program in the world in which students honour veterans, living and dead, with music. This creates a powerful living history that is uniquely Canadian.

Michael Deegan and Helen Pengelly alerted First Monday to the dream of this astonishing musician. Ron Realesmith and Branch 62 of the Legion provided financial support, and Marilyn Gladu and Jeff Kibble erased the final hurdles.

“Sarnia citizens,” Mayor Mike Bradley told Emily in a phone call, “have a long and proud tradition of honouring those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. The Music For Veteran’s project with Ainsley’s tribute to Sarnian Robert Batey, who at age 15 was killed fighting for Canada, is a moving and powerful tribute, from one generation to another. The project explores a unique way to say, ‘We will remember them.’”

What could be more fitting than to have young Ainsley stop in Sarnia while enroute from Victoria to Vimy? We’re planning to build an evening of entertainment, topped off by Ainsley performing her homage for Private Robert Arthur Batey. The event will take place mere blocks from his Julia Street home.

There’s more of this truly amazing story to come!

