

## MAPLE LEAF EXCHANGE—MY EXPERIENCE

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I wasn't even tired. It was difficult to sleep knowing I was going away for yet another six weeks. So crazy to think that I was one of the few in Canada given acceptance for the trip of a lifetime at only 16 years old. It was July 5th, 2017, the day I would leave for my biggest endeavour yet; Maple Leaf Exchange. I arrived that day at Connaught and met people I had never before seen in my life, but I quickly made friends. The entire group was full of high spirited, welcoming people, it was inspiring to see. Our plane left a few days later and arrived in Manchester, England at 0800h on July 11th. I vividly remember my first step out of the plane like it was the step into of a whole new chapter, and the story had just begun.

Week one was British Army Cadet Training, we spent a lot of our time training for our own independence with the L98A2 5.56mm Cadet GP rifle. Through tons of safety training and preparation, we all passed our tests and were able to fire the rifles. On range day, we went out and not only fired the L98A2s, but also the British Military's main assault rifle, the LSW. Later, the British along with us Canadian cadets were trained in field craft which is basically field tactics and movements that suppress noise and improve stealth. We learned a wide range of movements, stances such as the low crouch and the leopard crawl. We were also tested on our new capabilities. The test was this: you start at the beginning of this huge field of tall grass and bushes about 600m in length and 300m in width, and had to get the information written on the signs that were placed on top of a hill at the end of the field. But also on that hill, were experienced British officers trying to spot you as you approached the hill to read the signs. This was especially difficult because the words were only big enough to spot within 12 metres of distance. A fellow Canadian exchange cadet, my friend Caleb teamed up with me to try and complete this test successfully. We cammed up, and concealed ourselves with grass and small sticks to help us stay hidden. Through the rain, mud, and bushes we had nearly reached the end of it. As we crawled through tall grass and made our way through mud and brush it really started to feel like a real mission. Anyways, we stayed about 12 feet apart so that we could still hear each other's whispers but not both be spotted if one of us made the wrong move. But we did make a wrong move. My friend Caleb was spotted as we were positioning our eyes above the grass trying to read the signs. It was too bad, I was caught a few seconds later after just retrieving the information. But our



Jacob and his teammate Caleb, prepare for an exercise with the British Army Cadets

achievement was that we got within 10 metres of the hill; 10 metres from the officers without being seen! Not only did we do training though, we also explored a bit in Manchester. All of us were taken to the Trafford Centre to shop and have some free time. The Trafford Centre is also one of the top 70 biggest malls. All in all, this was something we don't often get to do in Canada.

Week three was Adventure Week. I had applied to do inland/white water kayaking in Wales and I got into the team! The exchange cadets split up into two sections, 30 cadets went to Halton CTC in England and 30 went to Capel Curig CTC in Wales. Each section of cadets would do activities like inland kayaking, sea kayaking, mountain biking, hiking, rock climbing, and canoeing. To focus on my group, we were trained in all types of moving water situations, techniques for paddling and kayak control, and kayak surfing. We kayaked on flat water through the mountains in Snowdonia National Park, kayaked through white water in rivers, and kayak surfed on a beach. Although we were well trained, every person capsized at least once into water but hey, at least it was refreshing! At

the end of Adventure Week, all the groups in Wales came together and descended a gorge in a small mountain. We latched on to support lines and travelled down a stream flowing through the mountain until we reached the end of the gorge. At the end of the gorge was a small waterfall, and to get down, we jumped off the nearly 30ft waterfall and plunged into the water below! It was such an experience to have had and such a thrill to end off Adventure Week.

Week four and five were Culture and Tourism week. Week four focused on the culture aspect where we went to London and explored various parts of the city, we also went to places like Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, the National War Museum, Fort Nelson, Tower of London, the London Eye, Big Ben, Canada House, Trafalgar Square, Natural History Museum, Buckingham Palace, Canada Gate, Windsor Castle, and we even got to visit the D-Day Room where the original map for the D-Day mission was kept. In fact, we were the first 60 Canadian cadets to visit that map since it is very rare that they allow cadets to enter that room. We went to even more places but those were just the highlights of Culture Week. Many great times I was able to spend with great people and I'm very thankful for that. Week Five, the last week but certainly not the least, was the week of Battlefield Tours. We travelled

across the English Channel from Dover into Belgium and stayed in a hostile in Ypres. Now it was time to not only look back on what it is to be Canadian and learn about the history of World War I, but to feel it as well. We went to several cemeteries to reflect and learn. One of them had a very interesting feature; surrounding the cemetery were poles. Each pole represented a day from The Great War, there was a pole for every day the war lasted. 1568 poles. One day we participated in a re-enactment so we could experience just some of the things that the soldiers did. We were suited in replica WWI uniforms that came with a rifle and gas mask and performed drills and movements that they would have done. We even ate the food that they would have eaten.

We travelled down a long trail and often stopped to learn some facts along the way. At the end we reached a cemetery and walked through it in fully geared WWI uniforms and it made us feel so proud of the soldiers, yet so sad of what happened to them. When visiting the monuments like the Menin Gate in Belgium and Vimy Ridge in France, it gave a whole new feeling to remembrance. It's one thing to see, but another to feel.

Maple Leaf Exchange was the best experience I could have ever asked for. When I first heard about the Exchange as a cadet, I didn't think I could ever get into it but I guess that's where the motto comes from; "as the maple, so the sapling."

