

The Canadian War Museum and Canadian Military History

[Slide: Canadian War Museum exterior]

Located in Ottawa, Ontario, the Canadian War Museum (CWM) is Canada's national museum of military history. While its origins can be traced back to the late 19th century, it formally emerged as a museum during the Second World War. After operating in a number of locations in the city, it moved to a purpose-built location that opened to the public just over 10 years ago, in May 2005. The museum tells the story of Canada's military history in its personal, national, and international dimensions, from thousands of years ago to the present day. This paper will present a brief overview of the origins of the CWM, and will talk about the ways in which it tells the story of Canada's military history to Canadians and to others, including through its cooperation with DND.

The CWM is part of the Canadian Museum of History, a Crown corporation that is accountable to the Government of Canada, but which operates at arm's length from it. It is not part of DND or Veterans Affairs Canada, but is rather part of the portfolio of the Department of Canadian Heritage, which is responsible for national museums. The CWM presents Canadian military history in its broadest sense: not only the story of Canada's armed services in wartime, but also in peacetime and during the Cold War and in the post-9/11 world. It likewise helps tell the story of the experiences of civilians involved in and affected by war and conflict, and how Canadians and Canadian society have been affected by these events.

Although the CWM is a civilian organization, much of its early history, and especially substantial elements of its collection, is directly connected to the Canadian

military and to efforts to record and memorialize its activities in both world wars. Significant collections of enemy and allied material from both conflicts, along with most of the output of the two wars' official art programs, help form the core of the museum's collection. They have been added to by subsequent transfers of material from DND, and by donations and acquisitions from a wide range of sources, including many individual Canadians and their families.

The museum can trace its origins back to 1880, when the Militia Headquarters in Ottawa began to collect artifacts and archival materials related to Canada's military history. The collection grew exponentially during the First World War. At that time, Dominion Archivist Arthur Doughty identified the need to preserve artifacts from the war. Securing support from the Canadian government, he arranged to bring to Canada German weapons captured as trophies by Canadians, as well as contributions from Canada's allies. He organized the first travelling exhibition of this material in 1916.

[Slide: War Trophies Exhibition, 1919]

While in England in 1917 to organize Canada's archival record of the war, Doughty also arranged to have new collections of weapons assembled for travel across North America. Between 1917 and 1920, and particularly after the war had ended, these exhibitions attracted large and enthusiastic crowds. In December 1918, the Canadian government established the Commission on War Records and Trophies to distribute captured enemy materials and representative Allied equipment that could be used in memorials across Canada.

[Slide: First World War Trophies, 1920s]

Under Doughty's direction, the Commission retained a number of artifacts in the hope that they would eventually be displayed in a national museum. In the interim, they were housed in a newly constructed temporary building situated beside the Dominion Archives facility at 330 Sussex Drive in Ottawa, in what was known as the Trophies Building. After the outbreak of the Second World War, numerous trophies and artifacts across the country were scrapped to help provide materials for the war effort. Many of the items scrapped in Ottawa had been set aside for the planned Canadian War Museum, an institution that was formally opened in 1942.

[Slide: The Trophies Building, 1960s]

Following the German surrender in 1945, the "First Canadian War Museum Collection Team," instigated and commanded by Captain Farley Mowat, who later became well-known as an author and activist, traversed the Netherlands and Allied-occupied Germany. This quasi-official unit collected hundreds of tons of German military equipment, and arranged for its transport back to Canada. Part of this collection made its way to the Museum, and some of these pieces are on display in its galleries.

From 1945 to the 1980s, the Museum's collection gradually grew, including offers from DND to transfer obsolete Canadian equipment and examples of enemy equipment used for technical evaluation to the Museum's care. Heading into the 1990s, the collection received gifts of material from the former Soviet Union, Ukraine, and Germany. Museum staff also sought out important artifacts in private collections and other museums in order to expand the Museum's holdings, as well as to address gaps in its collection.

[Slide: Canadian War Museum and Annex, 1967]

While the collection became increasingly impressive, its accommodation remained far from ideal. In June 1967, the Museum had moved into the former home of the Public Archives of Canada. Much of the collection remained on display next door in the Trophies Building, which was renamed the Annex. The artifacts remained there until 1983, when the Annex was demolished to make room for the new National Gallery of Canada.

[Slide: Vimy House, 1996]

At this point, the Museum's holdings, including the technology and large vehicle collection, were relocated to Vimy House, a former streetcar barn and bus garage that became the museum's storage facility and an occasional display area. In September 2003, the facility was closed to the public and the Museum's National Collection was transferred to its current location at LeBreton Flats. Today, all of the museum's exhibition space and almost all of its collection is housed in its new building, with permanent and temporary exhibition galleries, public programming space including a dedicated theatre, a military history research centre, artifact storage, workrooms, and workshops.

[Slide: Canadian War Museum, 2005]

There are a number of ways in which the museum helps tell the story of Canada's military history to Canadians and to others. These include its collections, its research, its exhibitions, and its public and education programs. There is often considerable overlap – a special exhibition, for instance, draws upon the museum's research and collections, and will often have public programs to engage and educate visitors.

Work in all of these areas can include co-operation and collaboration with other institutions and organizations. As part of its collecting and research, for instance, the CWM continues to work with DND to collect artifacts and information that will help tell the story of Canada's military history. In some cases, this involves the transfer of surplus equipment as artifacts for the museum's collection. Recently, this has included the collection of artifacts and personal histories relating to Canadian operations in Afghanistan. Sometimes, this is carried out through personal connections established by museum historians and collections staff, while at other times it is through more formal arrangements with DND.

[Slide: G-Wagen]

A couple of examples connected with Afghanistan include the transfer of a heavily damaged G-Wagen. This particular vehicle was struck by an IED in December 2005, and returned to Canada for analysis. It was transferred to the CWM the following year from 202 Workshop, in Montreal.

[Slide: helicopter nose art]

More recently, the museum has been displaying examples of helicopter nose art from CH-146 Griffon helicopters, which are on loan to the museum from DND.

Other artifacts sometimes arrive as the result of research undertaken for museum exhibitions. In preparing to host the temporary exhibition *War and Medicine*, museum historians established professional relationships with various individuals and organizations within DND. One of the outcomes was the collection of a medic's uniform, medical pack, and other equipment following his final deployment to Afghanistan, as well as interviews and a video of him in uniform, discussing his medical pack and

showing how he used it. The artifacts and the video were presented as part of the exhibition, and provide an interesting example that can be duplicated with readily available audio-visual equipment – having an artifact's original owner or user demonstrate the artifact's use and discuss its significance. Not only does it add to the exhibition potential of the artifact, but it also adds to its research potential, and helps document its history and the ways in which it was used.

[Slide: CFAP art]

The CWM is also involved with DND in programs intended to help create an artistic record of Canadian military activities. Building on earlier official war art programs, the postwar Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Program and the subsequent Canadian Forces Artists Program helped revive institutional support for military art. Since its establishment in 2001, artists with the Canadian Forces Artists Program have captured the experiences of Canadian military personnel deployed in Canada and overseas, most notably in and around Afghanistan. Increasingly, these works reflect the heightened dangers facing military and civilian personnel in zones of conflict.

[Slide: Permanent Exhibitions – Normandy]

The museum's collections help support one of the main ways it helps tell the story of Canada's military history – through its permanent exhibitions. The permanent exhibition space occupies some 55,000 square feet. Divided into a series of four galleries, it presents Canada's military history from earliest times, before the arrival of Europeans, to the present day, and does so in a generally chronological manner as part

of a national story. A fifth permanent gallery examines the history of how Canadians have remembered and commemorated war and military service.

The museum tells a national story, and while many visitors have a knowledge of and interest in history, the exhibitions have to be accessible to a general audience, who may not have any prior specific knowledge of Canadian military history. This applies to Canadian and to non-Canadian visitors alike. The museum therefore avoids the use of unnecessarily complex language, of specialized military terms and acronyms, and of long texts. There is also the understanding that for some visitors this will be their first and perhaps their last sustained exposure to Canadian military history. At the same time, the exhibition also has to work for those visitors knowledgeable about the subject, be they serving members of the Canadian military, veterans, professional and amateur historians, or others. It also has to be accessible to a wide age range of visitors, from those who visit with young children, to the many school groups that visit Ottawa, to the elderly.

As part of being accessible, the museum's exhibitions have to be able to attract and engage this wide range of visitors, and this is done through a variety of means. One of them is that the museum generally avoids giving detailed, blow-by-blow accounts of the progress of campaigns, and instead presents and discusses more general themes, principles, and narratives. Another way of engaging and communicating with visitors is through the inclusion of personal stories and details that help illustrate and support broader themes and stories. These can range from well-known individuals to those known only to family and friends.

[Slide: Volunteer Interpreters]

One of the ways in which visitors encounter personal stories is through museum volunteers in the exhibitions, who are there to share and discuss their experiences. Their presence is one of the many ways in which volunteers contribute to the museum, and visitors consistently mention the opportunity to meet these volunteers as a notable part of their experience.

[Slide: Special Exhibitions – *Fighting in Flanders*]

The CWM also presents a range of special temporary exhibitions to its visitors. These allow the museum to expand on themes from its permanent galleries or to present new material to the public. Sometimes these are developed in-house, like the recent exhibition *Fighting in Flanders*, seen here, which tells in greater detail the history of Canadians fighting in that area of Belgium during the First World War, and of the war's lasting effects for Belgians and Canadians. In other instances, exhibitions are developed in partnership with other institutions, or are borrowed from them.

[Slide: Special Exhibitions – *Canada Under Attack*]

Some of them tell regional stories, such as *Canada Under Attack*, which dealt with the Battle of the St. Lawrence, or *New Brunswickers at War*, which explored the experiences of one province's residents during both world wars. The CWM also creates travelling special exhibitions on a variety of subjects. Often, these are smaller travelling versions of temporary exhibitions created in-house. Some of these include artifacts, while other versions are created for venues where climate controls and security aren't suitable for the display of artifacts. As a result, the CWM works with a range of museums and historical institutions, from relatively large organizations like the Military Museums of Calgary, to individual base, regimental, and local museums. In addition to

exhibitions, this co-operation includes short-term and long-term loans of artifacts to both military and civilian museums. In other instances, it has involved assistance with the conservation of artifacts.

As a consequence of the museum's activities, its staff are often called upon by members of the media. This includes requests for immediate support, such as historical commentary on anniversaries, as well as support including interviews and access to materials for longer-term projects such as documentaries. The museum therefore engages a wide and diverse audience, which includes people with a professional or strong personal interest in military history.

[Slide: MHRC]

A further part of this engagement can be found in the museum's Military History Research Centre, or MHRC. The MHRC owes its origins to the belief that the new CWM should become a location for research, discussion, and debate about Canada's military history. It combines the museum's library and archival holdings, and is used by museum staff and members of the public alike. This includes genealogists, professional authors, and academic historians. The museum isn't an official repository for documents, but it does have a strong and growing collection of personal materials, especially for the two world wars.

[Slide: Studies in Canadian Military History]

Another aspect of this engagement is through support for military history publishing. The CWM supports a number of publications, including *Canadian Military History*, a journal published by Wilfred Laurier University since 1992. More recently, this

has grown to include a *Studies in Canadian Military History Series* jointly undertaken with the University of British Columbia Press.

[Slide: Public Programs – Hands-on]

As a further part of its engagement, the museum undertakes a wide variety of public programs. These can include hands-on learning opportunities for visitors of all ages, which are often tied to specific exhibitions or to broader themes, such as Canadian naval history, as seen here.

[Slide: Education – Supply Line]

The museum also presents educational activities, such as Supply Line, a travelling, hands-on educational tool available for free to schools across Canada. This learning kit contains authentic and reproduction artifacts related to the Canadian experience of the First World War, along with materials to support in-class activities and lessons. It can be borrowed free of charge by any school in Canada for a 2 week period.

[Slide: Thank You]

I hope this presentation has given an idea of the Canadian War Museum, its history, and the ways in which it helps tell the story of Canada's military history to Canadians and to many others.

And finally, on a related note, the Canadian War Museum will be hosting next year's Society for Military History Annual Meeting. We encourage all of you to attend and to come visit us in Ottawa in April 2016. There's still time to submit proposals!

Thank you.