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## Preparing for the “Hall of Honour”: The Canadian War Museum

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# Preparing a "Hall of Honour"

Hugh A. Halliday

When the Canadian War Museum took possession of the former National Archives building in 1967, many exhibits were installed and afterwards were revised infrequently. The current medals room, located on the museum's second floor, has been little changed since 1977 and requires upgrading both to give a fresh approach and to give a broader appeal.

Currently on display are some 400 gallantry, campaign and long service awards, ranging from examples of the Victoria Cross, Congressional Medal of Honor and Imperial German *Pour le Mérite* down to Nazi Mothers' Crosses (for fecundity) and examples of the Canadian Forces Decoration for 12 and 22 years of service. Most are grouped by nation of origin (Britain, France, Germany, the United States), with medals laid out row upon row, lacking explanation or contextualization. Such captions as exist are of uneven quality. No attempt is made to explain the medals in terms of military heraldry, and little is done to relate them to individual careers. A display which should attract great attention is, in fact, one of the least popular.

Early in 1993, as part of the museum's Ten Year Exhibit program, work began to revise the exhibit area. From the outset it was determined that the emphasis must shift from the medals themselves to the individuals honoured and the deed they performed. Thus, the medals would represent individual acts of service or bravery, rather than mere military



iconography. This new approach would also permit the use of other artifacts to illustrate both the importance of the medals and the achievements of their recipients.

Several possible titles were suggested for the exhibit. "Hall of Heroes" was entertained briefly but rejected as having too much of a Peoples' Democratic Republic ring to it; Communist Albania might have had a "Hall of Heroes," but not a Western democracy. "For Services Rendered" was also considered, but rejected as being too prosaic, almost like a note appearing at the foot of an invoice. In the end, "Hall of Honour" was chosen as appropriately dignified and best conveyed the honorific and commemorative intent of the gallery.

The first step was compilation of an Approach paper (113 pages plus appendices and endnotes) describing the evolution of medals, their issuance under French and British regulations, and the development of uniquely Canadian awards. This search turned up some surprising and little-known facts, such as the discovery that in 1866 Lord Monck had proposed the establishment of a Canadian Order of Chivalry, similar to the Order of India; he had suggested it be named the "Order of St. Lawrence." Although two campaign medals had been struck earlier for specifically Canadian incidents (the Canada General Service Medal for events in 1866-1870 and the Northwest Canada Medal for 1885), it was not until 1943 that any systematic attempts were made to create a

series of distinctly Canadian awards. These had begun with the stillborn Canada Medal (1943), and progressed through to the Order of Canada (1967), the Order of Military Merit (1972), Canadian gallantry awards (Cross of Valour, Star of Courage, Medal of Bravery, all instituted in 1972), assorted Exemplary Service Medals (commencing in 1983), and subsequent awards such as the Meritorious Service Decorations and awards specifically for military valour. This Approach Paper, completed in August 1993, may be the starting point for other studies, such as the policies relating to awards of Victoria Crosses, quotas governing issuance of various honours (i.e. Mentions in Despatches), and the manner in which gallantry awards were made following the Dieppe Raid. Readers of *Canadian Military History* may anticipate reading more of this material, though frequently the research will generate more questions than answers.

Even as the Approach Paper was in preparation, lists of medals and their recipients were being made up with a view to seeing whose awards might be included in the display. This included biographical research on original owners. Although not particularly profound (the notes prepared on Dr. C.M. Douglas, VC, did not run beyond three pages), this did suggest certain medal groups as having particularly interesting stories to tell.

With the Approach Paper completed, a committee was struck to select 42 subjects for display in the revised "Hall of Honour." The number of cases was determined by the size of the room and the intention to display associated artifacts (uniforms, trophies, documents, illustrations) with the medals. It was also decided that the display, once in place, would **not** be static but would have approximately one quarter of the cases changed annually, "retiring" some figures while "recruiting" others. There was also to be a chronological, gender and service balance, so as to represent a range of campaigns and types of service. Gallantry awards would be included, but so too would honours granted for outstanding performance of non-combat duties.

The first case would deal with a *genre* of medals—early historical items (Croix de St. Louis, "Louisbourg Founded," "Montreal Taken," as well as Indian Treaty Medals). Similarly, the last case would display examples of current Canadian honours (Order of Canada, Order of Military Merit, Special Service Medals). Between would come medal groups honouring such units as the Nile Voyageurs of 1884-1885, and individuals ranging from Charles de Salaberry (1776-1829) to a Canadian casualty of peacekeeping in Bosnia (Sergeant Cornelius Ralph, who was killed by a land mine on 17 August 1992). Almost all the medals were in the museum's inventory, but it was necessary to borrow medal groups originally issued to Sergeant Ralph and Captain F.R. Maguire, a former military historian.

Committee members had hundreds of candidates from which to choose, and it must be admitted that a certain degree of "horse-trading" occurred. General Sir William Otter (1843-1929) and Brigadier-General Laurence Buchan (1847-1909) were both considered, but only the former was included in the first round as their service careers (and hence the types of medals they received) were similar. Buchan will probably be recognized with a case when the Otter display is replaced. A First World War photographer (William Rider-Rider, MBE) was balanced by a Second World War press correspondent (Ross Munro, OBE).

The selection of candidates was accompanied by a search for related artifacts; the list was finalized in January 1994. In some instances it proved difficult to fill out the display cases. The museum holds the medals of Sir William Butler plus a certificate relating to his CB, but little else. Illustrations of Butler and examples of his books were chosen to give the display further depth. On the other hand, there was an abundance of artifacts for a case relating to Lieutenant-Colonel Horace Bishop (1895-1983), who had been prominent between the world wars in Canadian Bisley Shooting Teams. We possessed tunics, shooting rifles, photographs, documents and numerous trophies to supplement the display of his medals. Some items were eloquent in

themselves, such as the right-hand glove tailored specifically for Colonel E.A. Dunlop, OBE, CM, GM (1919-1981). He had lost several fingers in September 1943 when he risked his life discarding a loose hand grenade during a practice session with his new troops—heroism which brought him the George Medal award.

As the selection progressed, so too did the writing of captions. The general format for each case was to provide a biographical sketch of 80-120 words, plus short texts identifying and explaining the artifacts. Meanwhile, Collections Management personnel proceeded to verify all cataloguing information and arrange for photography of artifacts before they went on display.

The role of the Conservation staff has been particularly important, with Helen Holt bearing much responsibility in her role as Conservator (Insignia and Dress). Each artifact has been examined to identify problems that might jeopardize material while on display (i.e. sensitivity to light). When treatment was required, conservation proposals were drawn up, approved by appropriate Curators, then carried out. Treatments might range from sewing on proper rank badges to cleaning of medals. These latter, of course, tarnish very quickly when exposed to air. Nevertheless, the museum does not advocate lacquering or coating medals after cleaning, as this necessitates complete disassembly which in turn compromises the validity of the artifact and removes all indications of the original owner's personality. Thus, medals that were court mounted by their recipient will be displayed as such, but those received with only a bar mounting (or unmounted in any way) will be exhibited in the manner received.

While medals and uniforms were the most obvious artifacts requiring conservation, many other items were involved. Plaques and trophies were shined, a feather head-dress checked, and a suitcase radio repaired. Firearms were also examined and minor cleaning carried out.

Preparation of the "Hall of Honour" has been a total museum project, with virtually all Curators and Conservators becoming involved in its planning and execution. It is also exciting to CWM staff because it offers opportunities to embark on fresh display techniques and to employ new technology. It will be possible, for example, to incorporate computer data bases which will enable visitors to call up information on Canadian medal winners generally, whether or not the individuals are represented in the exhibition. Initially, this will be done with Canadian recipients of the Victoria Cross. One of our historians, Bernard Pothier, is updating and expanding the information contained in *Valiant Men: Canadian Winners of the Victoria Cross* for downloading into the computer (material which readers of this journal may anticipate reading in future issues). Eventually it is hoped to provide visitors with access to data on a much wider spectrum of Canadian medal winners (technology and budgets permitting).

Looking ahead, we have begun searching for medal groups which will help us relate fifty years of Canadian military history; we have yet to acquire a medal set that includes any of the gallantry decorations created since 1972, or the Meritorious Service decorations established since 1984. As of the autumn of 1994 the actual design and construction work for the "Hall of Honour" is being let out to private contract. The display itself is scheduled to open in May 1995. As mentioned earlier, however, the word "open" is not quite appropriate, for the "Hall of Honour" will be changing constantly, with new cases replacing old ones and new stories succeeding those already told.

Hugh A. Halliday has worked at the Canadian War Museum in various capacities since 1974. He has to his credit a number of books including *Typhoon and Tempest at War: The Canadian Story*, and *The Royal Canadian Air Force at War 1939-1945* (with Larry Milberry).