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# CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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### Canadian War Museum

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The mission statement of the Canadian War Museum is: "To share in the remembrance of, and serve as a memorial to those Canadians lost in, or as a result of war; to examine the war and war related history of Canada and its effects upon Canada and Canadians; and to document Canada's commitment to peacekeeping and the maintenance of international security." To this end the CWM maintains an exhibition facility with three floors of galleries, and a collections building housing close to half a million artifacts.

### The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies

The purpose of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS) is to foster research, teaching, and public discussion of military and strategic issues of national and international significance. The Centre is intentionally multi-disciplinary; it has strong commitments in military history, with emphasis on the Canadian experience, and in strategic and operational studies, with emphasis on disarmament. LCMSDS supports both basic and applied research as well as teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition, the extensive program of LCMSDS workshops, conferences, public lectures, and publications encourages informed discussion of international security and of Canada's national interests in military and strategic issues - past, present and future.

The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies was founded in 1991 as a Research Centre affiliated with Wilfrid Laurier University. Its primary support has come from the Department of National Defence and from Wilfrid Laurier University. The Director of the Centre is Dr. Marc Kilgour, Professor of Mathematics, and the Co-Director is Professor Terry Copp, Professor of History.

## From the Editor

On the 11th of November I received an email from a friend. She asked me a simple question - "What does Remembrance Day mean to you?". The historian in me immediately prepared the obvious answer. Of course it is the day we remember those brave men and women who gave their lives fighting for our freedom. Over the past century, hundreds of thousands of young Canadian men and women have volunteered to put their lives on hold to fight for their beliefs. During the First World War these soldiers went off to Europe to stop the Kaiser and his minions from dominating Europe. A generation later their sons and daughters went back to stop an even more monstrous evil. For the last 50 years Canadian troops have gone to such disparate places as Korea, Cyprus, Kuwait and Bosnia to uphold the basic human rights and freedoms we believe that every person deserves. November 11 is about honouring this noble sacrifice as a nation - to remember those who never returned, or were never the same, or who gave up their innocence and youth. This is what Remembrance Day means.

But as I reread the message, I realized I had missed the mark entirely. She wanted to know something quite different - "What does Remembrance Day mean to ME." That was an entirely different question - and not one that I had clearly enunciated before. In my heart I know what it means to me, but communicating that to someone else is another matter entirely. First and foremost, I think of my grandfather. My memories of him are those of a young boy. At the time, I knew that he had been a soldier during the Second World War, but didn't know much more. And he wasn't one to talk about it. I remember spending a lot of time in his basement reading his books. He had dozens of books on the war, and I think that was the genesis of my interest in military history. Sadly, my grandfather died before I knew enough and realized that it was important to talk to him about his wartime experiences. One of my most treasured possessions is his cap badge from the 48th Highlanders. It is old and tarnished and pinned to a tattered piece of tartan, but for me it a

tangible link to the past. Over the years I have tried to find out what I could of his military service. What follows is a summary of my discoveries - and an attempt to share what Remembrance Day means to me.

William Samuel Bowman was born in Hamilton, Ontario on 21 January 1924. He completed part of grade 10 before leaving school to work. He was employed variously as a unskilled labourer on a pick and shovel driving team, an assistant shipper at Westinghouse and as a labourer on a steel furnace at the Steel Company of Canada. On 29 April 1941 he enlisted in the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders of Canada (Princess Louise's) of the Canadian Active Service Force at the age of 17 having lied about his date of birth. After spending three months training in Canada the Argylls were shipped to Jamaica. They replaced the Winnipeg Grenadiers who were fated to go to Hong Kong. By most accounts the 21 months spent by the battalion in Jamaica were relatively uneventful. The primary task of the battalion was to guard a local internment camp housing German and Italian merchant seamen. The remainder of their time was spent in training, and enjoying the natural beauty of the island. For my grandfather, however, his time in Jamaica was to change his life for it was here he met Miss Vivia Tomlinson, my future grandmother. They were married on 15 January 1943 and a little over nine months later my mother was born.

In May 1943 the Argylls returned to Canada via steamer and train. Instead of the leave they all expected, they were subjected to an array of medical, dental and quartermaster inspections in preparation for departure to England. The goal of this testing was to sort out those fit for overseas deployment. All the soldiers were subjected to the "M" test, a psychological aptitude screening. My grandfather scored 153 on the test which was well above average (most infantrymen scored around 125). The "Q" Card which detailed *my* grandfather's test results concluded that, "he is in good health.. .good appearance, [and has an] above average level of army intelligence. Fair



*William Bowman*



*Viola Bowman*

degree of mechanical aptitude. Stability and deportment appear sound, should have good combatant qualities." At the bottom of the form it stated, "Suitable for overseas service."

Upon arrival in England in July 1943 my grandfather was employed as an instructor on a variety of military courses. He was steadily promoted, from private to lance corporal to acting corporal to corporal. After a period spent at a Canadian general hospital, he was sent to an infantry reinforcement unit and shipped to Italy in May 1944. At his own request he reverted to the rank of private and was taken on strength with the 48th Highlanders of Canada. It is likely that he did this so that he could fill an empty slot in the unit and get into action more quickly. On 28 August 1944 a brief notation in his service record stated that he was wounded. During this period, the 48th Highlanders were engaged in operations to advance to the Gothic Line. On the 28th the battalion was ambushed in a small unnamed hamlet on the Arzilla River known in regimental lore as "the village." For the next 24 hours, the battalion, supported by artillery and mortars, worked to extract itself from the trap

and capture three key pieces of high ground beyond the village. This was accomplished and helped to drive the Germans back across the Foglia River. The battalion suffered significant casualties during this battle (most likely including my grandfather), but the incident barely rates a mention in the official history and the battle narrative created to aid in writing the official history describes the event as "difficult and unpleasant." This description sounds more appropriate to describe a battle with mosquitoes and black flies than something much more serious.

The remainder of my grandfather's military career is quite sketchy. Following his wounding he spent the next month in the hospital. In October 1944 he returned to the 48th Highlanders and served with the Regiment through the transfer to Northwest Europe and the final battles of the war in Holland. In total he spent 10 months in Italy as an infantryman and corporal section leader and an additional five months in Northwest Europe as a corporal section leader. He was demobilized in October 1945 and returned to civilian life where he had a



*My Grandfather, Grandmother and Mom (Beverly) shortly after the end of the war.*

long and distinguished career in the Hamilton Fire Department rising to the rank of District Chief.

As far as I know, my grandfather was completely unremarkable as a soldier. His demobilisation papers remarked rather blandly that, "during his service career he demonstrated his ability in rising to the rank of corporal, [was] employed as a military instructor and as an infantry section leader in action." He wasn't an angel - his service record mentions a number of instances where he was reprimanded for insubordination and being absent without leave for short periods. He wasn't John Wayne - his regiments don't sing songs about his feats. He

wasn't awarded any medals for bravery and he didn't hold any prestigious or high profile appointments. But to me, that is what makes him so remarkable. He was an everyday man. Just an ordinary guy who volunteered to do his duty - and in doing so he selflessly risked everything to give us what we have today. So to me, Remembrance Day is synonymous with my grandfather.

What does Remembrance Day mean to you? I would like to know.

Mike Bechthold  
November 1999



This is in response to the interesting letter on gas masks in the First World War in the last issue by Ed Storey, which was prompted by my article, "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid," in *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1999. If readers of *CMH* are interested in further details on Great War respirators and the effect of fighting on the first chemical battlefield in military history, they should turn to Tim Cook's "Through Clouded Eyes: Gas Masks in the First World War,"

*Bulletin of Material History*, #47 (Spring 1998). As well, there is a more detailed examination of gas warfare in my book *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War*, which has recently been published by the University of British Columbia Press.

Tim Cook  
National Archives of Canada

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