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The Stories behind *Forever Changed*

BRITT BRAATEN AND TIM COOK

Abstract: This article explores the history behind the Canadian War Museum’s special exhibition *Forever Changed – Stories From the Second World War*. The curator and interpretive planner offer insight into the work underpinning the exhibition and some of the challenges and thinking behind the presentation. *Forever Changed* was the museum’s primary exhibition to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Through personal stories and artifacts, the exhibition provides a new way for Canadians to make connections to the Second World War and the part played by Canadians from many diverse communities, representing a range of experiences and service branches.

Résumé: Cet article explore l’histoire qui se cache derrière l’exposition spéciale du Musée canadien de la guerre *Vies transformées – Récits de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*. Le conservateur et le planificateur en interprétation donnent un aperçu du travail qui sous-tend l’exposition, y compris certains des défis et réflexions qui ont ponctué sa création. *Vies transformées* est la principale exposition mise sur pied par le musée pour marquer le 75e anniversaire de la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Par le biais de récits personnels et d’artefacts, l’exposition propose une nouvelle façon pour la population d’établir des liens avec la Seconde Guerre mondiale et le rôle joué par les membres de diverses communautés, en présentant un vaste éventail d’expériences et de branches des Forces armées.

To mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the Canadian War Museum (CWM) produced the major special exhibition, *Forever Changed – Stories From the Second World War*. This is a brief recounting of the history underpinning the exhibition and some of the challenges and thinking behind the presentation. While there were dozens of
colleagues and contractors involved in this exhibition, the two authors were the primary historian and interpretive planner of *Forever Changed*.

**THE CHALLENGE**

The development of this exhibition should be understood in the context of the CWM’s activities during the centennial of the First World War, between 2014 and 2018. This was a high-profile commemoration period at the museum with many successful offerings, including publications, lectures, a school outreach kit, a social media campaign, multiple special exhibitions, several major updates to the permanent exhibitions and more. During the centenary period, the CWM launched one major commemorative special exhibition\(^1\) per year.\(^2\) These exhibitions were visited a total of 385,102 times and many more benefitted from the many other products at the museum, in schools or in the digital realm.

Despite the success of the First World War centenary offerings, concerns over the risk of “anniversary fatigue” led to a different approach with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The CWM focused its efforts with fewer offerings. *Forever Changed – Stories From the Second World War* is the museum’s only major exhibition commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary, although there are several small exhibitions, digital products and a new education kit for teachers and students.

In developing the approach for the exhibition, our most significant challenge was the museum’s permanent gallery. *Gallery 3 – The*

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this paper, a major temporary exhibition is one that is displayed in the CWM’s Lt.-Col. John McCrae Gallery. These exhibitions measure 3,000–7,500 square feet and typically run between twenty and thirty weeks.

\(^2\) Major CWM special exhibitions related to the First World War centenary: *Fighting in Flanders – Gas. Mud. Memory.* ran from 6 November 2014 to 26 April 2015, marking the 100th anniversary of the Second Battle of Ypres; *World War Women* ran from 23 October 2015 to 3 April 2016, looking at women’s varied wartime activities; *Deadly Skies – Air War 1914–1918* ran from 10 June 2016 to 29 January 2017, presenting the air war; *Vimy – Beyond the Battle* ran from 5 April 2017 to 12 November 2017, marking the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge; and *Victory 1918 – The Last 100 Days* ran from 25 October 2018 to 31 March 2019, exploring the hundredth anniversary of the Hundred Days Campaign and the end of the First World War.
Second World War is nearly encyclopedic in its coverage of almost every wartime campaign, battle and significant incident involving Canadians, all supported by several hundred artifacts and numerous film clips, images, works of art and other interpretive elements. It is the museum’s most visited gallery and since its opening in 2005, some 4.5 million visitors have passed through it. While the First World War centenary exhibitions focused on narrower aspects of the war—a region, specific actors, service branch or military campaign—the central Second World War exhibition for 2020 was expected to provide a broad picture of the conflict and the war’s impact. The exhibition team was tasked with finding a way to produce a new exhibition that presented the war’s history differently, without sacrificing the relevance and impact that characterises the permanent gallery.

THE APPROACH

Four ideas guided the exhibition team in distinguishing the temporary exhibition from other museum offerings:

1. Global approach: the Second World War was a global war and Canadians served, fought and endured the war from places and battlefields around the world.

2. Personal approach: the specificity of individuals’ experiences, when framed as compelling personal stories, make history relevant and relatable to a wide audience.

3. New content: the CWM has continued collecting in the fifteen years since the opening of Gallery 3 – The Second

A major exhibition involves dozens of museum staff from CWM and the Canadian Museum of History, as well as contractors in design (in this case, Haley Sharpe Design), fabrication and installation. The phrase “the exhibition team” or “the core team” indicates a smaller team of museum staff, which in this case consists of some or all of the following: Tim Cook (Historian), Britt Braaten (Creative Development Specialist), Arlene Doucette (Collections Specialist), Manon Tissot (Project Manager for year one) and Patricia Grimshaw (Project Manager for year two). While the core team engages most intensely on our exhibitions, there is not a single product at the museum that does not involve many hands working collaboratively.
World War and these new artifacts have typically not been displayed to the public.

4. Representation matters: in the fifteen years since the opening of Gallery 3 – The Second World War, there is increased awareness of the importance of representing a diverse range of demographic groups in history.

Taken together, these ideas were the foundation for the planning of Forever Changed – Stories From the Second World War.

In late fall 2018, the exhibition team, in consultation with CWM management, made the decision to produce an exhibition that would highlight Canadians in different locations and battlefields around the world. Focusing on Canadians’ contributions to the Allied global war against fascism abroad and at home, we would present the stories of those in the many fighting services, but also of civilians affected by or contributing to the war effort. But that was still a broad and massive undertaking, demanding further refining. The exhibition team needed to develop a main message for the exhibition—in effect, answering the question “what do we want to convey to our visitors?”—which would guide the selection of material culture and the development of exhibition experiences. The main message for this exhibition was: for Canada, the Second World War was a global war; for Canadians, it was personal.

To further distinguish the exhibition from our permanent gallery offerings, there was a desire to include new artifacts and personal stories. The core team reviewed hundreds of submission documents for the thousands of Second World War artifacts acquired by the CWM since its opening in 2005. Each submission was assessed based on several factors, including presence of a compelling story, relevance to specific historical activities or events and broad representation of battles and campaigns, as well as gender, race or ethnicity of the person or people involved, interest or uniqueness of the artifact(s) and more.

With the goal of having visitors make connections to the material culture and history, the exhibition’s primary message encouraged the core team to use personal stories as the main content unit in the exhibition. This contrasts with the CWM’s usual approach of having the historical storyline as the primary narrative spine, with personal stories inserted at a secondary
content level. One of the challenges faced by most CWM exhibition teams is a desire to better tell the stories of Canadians. Museum staff often use the phrase “personal stories” to describe the combination of biographical information, photographs, art and, of course, artifacts used to present the lives of people. While it can be easy to provide basic facts, bringing the actions, fears, worries, heroics and other emotions into the museum space is always a challenge. We are continually trying new techniques and ways of making strong connections for visitors between the past and the present in our special exhibitions. With *Forever Changed* centred around the people—as opposed to battles, campaigns, technology, tactics or other themes—we challenged ourselves to find new interpretive systems to delve deeper into their lives.

Reflecting on past CWM exhibitions that put more emphasis on individuals, the team developed a new approach by selecting compelling narratives, creating two distinct levels of interpretation (“deep-dive stories” and “secondary stories”) and forging links between the different historical actors. Too often museums may call something a “personal story” when it should more accurately be considered a collection of facts about a person. In a war museum, this might mean listing a name, military rank, date and place of birth and places of service. The exhibition team felt that this information, while important identifiers, failed to provide visitors with the desired connection. To test new approaches and to strengthen the visitors’ emotional resonance with Canadians who lived and died in this costly if necessary war, the exhibition team adopted a story-telling writing style and used first names as a way of encouraging familiarity with visitors.

Another consideration in selecting personal stories was a range of demographic and experience factors, including gender, race, civilian perspectives and branch of military service. For gender and race,
the exhibition team set itself explicit targets for representation. For military and civilian stories and branches of service, no explicit targets were set but the exhibition team strived for appropriate balance between these groups, while also seeking to tell lesser-known stories of Canada’s wartime contributions. This resulted in an exhibition that aimed to be representative of the Canadian public in a broad sense but was also true to the historical record. In this way, the exhibition also provided new insight into the nuances of the Canadian wartime experience that spanned the globe and affected every Canadian.

The exhibition team selected six deep-dive characters, who could act as anchors around which other stories would be told. They are: Edith Vollrath, a factory worker in Ajax, Ontario; Able Seaman George Boyer who served on HMS Nabob; Major Alex Campbell, an infantry major who led British and Canadian soldiers in North Africa, Sicily and the Italian mainland; Sergeant Hugh McCaughey, a combat cameraman who filmed Canadians in Northwest Europe; Lieutenant Winnie Burwash, a nursing sister who tended to the wounded and sick in Britain during the war and then served in post-war Europe; and Flight Officer William Kyle whose Dakota went down in Burma.

Each of these six central characters are presented alongside other historical actors (the secondary stories), interweaving their respective experiences. This approach is intended to help the visitor make connections between historical actors throughout the exhibition and to reinforce the messaging presented through the many artifacts, images, works of art, activities and other exhibition components. Rather than providing a series of unrelated stories, the secondary stories serve to expand on the world of the six deep-dive characters, bind together the exhibition components and provide additional insight into how the war impacted Canadians. These six deep-dive figures also have key visitor experiences, which use varied interpretive

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5 For example, the exhibition team set itself a target of 40 per cent of the stories being about women. The exhibition team also set a target of 10 per cent of the stories being about visible minorities or Indigenous people. Ultimately, the team met or exceeded both targets (40 per cent of stories are about women and 17 per cent of stories are about visible minorities or Indigenous people). Note that targets were set around number of stories, not number of people – some stories were about more than one person. In all, 31 per cent of the people in the exhibition are women and 14 per cent of people in the exhibition are visible minorities or Indigenous.
techniques, such as reconstructed spaces, audiovisual presentations or interactive games, to convey powerful moments in their stories. In practice, this means that the deep-dive character’s narrative arc is spread across a section, interspersed with secondary stories. As the visitor walks through a part of the exhibition, their understanding of the deep-dive character’s life and wartime experiences grows every time they encounter deep-dive content (colour-coded for easy identification). This is not, in any way, attempting to reduce the Second World War to the experiences of six Canadians, but to use the six to explore multiple aspects of the conflict and, with the dozens of supporting characters, to create a cohesive structure for the visitor. Further to our desire to connect with visitors, we employed the words and observations of these eye-witnesses to history—drawn from their letters, memoirs or remembrances—to delve deeper into the importance of artifacts to those who had once created, used and kept them.

**THE EXHIBITION**

The exhibition is divided into five content areas, each of which is moved through in turn. Visitors start in the introduction then pass through Zone 1 – Supporting and Defending, Zone 2 – The War Against Germany, Zone 3 – The War Against Japan and ending in Zone 4 – A Country Shaped by War. In addition, there is an exhibition hub, which can be reached from any of the zones. It is intended as a space for gathering, group orientation and mid-visit breaks.

While the exhibition is about Canadians engaged in the war effort overseas and at home, the chronological unfolding of the war is not the main driving force in *Forever Changed*. Rather, the three main content areas (Zones 1–3) are based on an action, an enemy and a rough geographical region. The exhibition uses these as organising structures, situating our dozens of personal stories within a narrative of the war. This organisational structure further distinguishes the exhibition from the chronology-driven offering in the permanent gallery.
Upon entering the exhibition, visitors find themselves in a relatively simple introduction. This section performs three functions: setting up the exhibition by providing primary messaging, introducing the six deep-dive characters and orienting visitors in the physical space.

The first text that visitors encounter is the exhibition’s overview statement: “Canadians served, struggled and endured far away and close to home, in challenging environments and on deadly battlefields around the world. They were forever changed by their experiences of the Second World War.” Adjacent to this text is an acknowledgment that the exhibition has been designed to complement the “comprehensive history of the war presented in the Gallery 3 – The Second World War.” There is also a map of the exhibition indicating the location of different interactive and audiovisual elements to help visitors plan their time in the exhibition.

The most prominent elements, however, are the life-sized, eye-level photographs of the six deep-dive characters, each with a short...
text teasing the story to come, such as “His ship was torpedoed in the Barents Sea, near Russia,” “She witnessed the consequences of war in Germany” and “His war ended in Burma.” The purpose of these short statements is to give visitors a sense of what to expect in the rest of the exhibition.

ZONE 1 – SUPPORTING AND DEFENDING

The first of the exhibition’s content clusters, Supporting and Defending, examines how Canadians supported the Allies with war supplies and trained aircrew, while also defending North America and Britain. There are two deep-dive experiences in this space, based on factory worker Edith Vollrath (born in 1925) and Able Seaman George Boyer (1922–1979).

DEEP-DIVE CHARACTER: EDITH VOLLRATH

In 1944, at age eighteen, Edith Vollrath worked with Aircraft Repair Limited, and later Defence Industries Limited, making ammunition as a “bomb girl.” She was one of 300,000 Canadian women who held jobs related to wartime production during the
Second World War. Through Edith, we present Canada’s enormous wartime production that included the manufacture of 8,655 ships and small vessels, 42,966 artillery guns, 800,000 military vehicles and over 1.7 million small arms.

The centrepiece of Edith’s story is a digital game, embedded in a reconstructed factory space. CWM historian Dr. Stacey Barker supplied the historical information for the interactives and recreated spaces in the exhibition, putting together research packages for external designers, determining critical details and finding that proper balance between historical accuracy and playability. For example, the purpose of the game is to race against the clock to build 25-pounder shells, of the type that Edith helped assemble. Using training manuals from Defence Industries Limited, the team quickly realised that the actual process—involving over a hundred steps and multiple locations—was too complex for an exhibition interactive, which must be intuitive enough for a wide range of visitors. Barker worked with the exhibition team and game designers to simplify the process into seven steps. The exhibition team is upfront with visitors about this simplification, framing the game as follows: “The men and women of Defence Industries Limited performed over 100 steps to make each shell. Can you accurately carry out the handful of steps included here to build high-explosive 25-pounder shells for the war effort?”
historical accuracy is further reinforced with the inclusion of wartime factory photographs to illustrate the different steps.

The secondary stories associated with Edith are centred around the idea of supporting the Allied war effort: Canadian wartime industry, Canadian aviation, industrial dangers and the lasting impacts of wartime experiences on individuals. For example, as a counterpoint to Edith’s direct involvement in Canada’s wartime industries, we selected Mrs. William Laing7 (1883–1956), who, while not involved in the construction of HMCS *Runnymede*, was chosen to launch the ship. HMCS *Runnymede* was launched on 27 November 1943, seventy-seven days after construction began, and Mrs. Laing was given a ceremonial tray. “Presented to Mrs William Laing on the occasion of the launching of HMCS *Runnymede* at the works of Canadian Vickers Limited Montreal on the 27th of November 1943,” reads the inscription. The tray and other souvenirs mattered to her and she kept them her whole life. She was selected for this honour as a representative of the sacrifices of Canadian mothers: her eight sons

7 Typically, people are addressed by their full name in the first instance and subsequently by their commonly used first name or nickname. In the case of Mrs. William Laing, however, this form of her name has been used based on the wishes of her descendants.
were serving in the armed forces. The Laing family did not escape the war unscathed. One son returned home suffering from post-traumatic stress while another, John “Scotty” Laing, was killed at sea.

One of the most gut-wrenching stories in the exhibition is captured through the personal belongings of twin brothers Pilot Officer Alexander Grant Campbell (1922–1944) and Flying Officer Robert Roy Campbell (1922–1944). The twins, who went by Grant and Roy respectively, both served in Bomber Command and they were killed in April and May 1944. Among the artifacts on display are the charred remnants of a map and change purse that were found in Grant’s hand after his bomber went down. After the war, the objects were returned to his parents, who made a trip to Europe to see their sons’ graves and to find out more about their deaths. When the purse was passed to the family, his father recognised it as “unmistakably the one we gave [Grant] for Christmas the year before he enlisted in the R.C.A.F.”

This story of family loss connects to Edith’s story by way of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Edith worked with Aircraft Repair Limited to repair damaged

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8 Reverend Harvey Campbell, letter, 5 January 1948, service personnel file of Robert Roy Campbell (J 22573), Library and Archives Canada.
aircraft so that trainees like the Campbell twins could learn to fly and join in the fight overseas.

DEEP-DIVE CHARACTER: ABLE SEAMAN GEORGE BOYER

The second deep-dive character in this zone is Able Seaman George William Boyer (1922–1979). George was from a Saskatchewan family of thirteen, who traced its ancestry to Métis leader Louis Riel. He joined the Royal Canadian Navy and served on ships in the Atlantic, ensuring the safe transport of goods, equipment and personnel across the ocean. He also spent some time in Britain after the aircraft carrier he was serving on, HMS Nabob, was torpedoed. George was part of the skeleton crew who helped navigate the vessel back to Scapa Flow, Scotland.

The dramatic attack on HMS Nabob is explored in detail through a sound-and-light production, presented inside a reconstructed space of HMS Nabob, a Ruler-class escort aircraft carrier crewed by Canadians. The ship was part of an operation to sink the feared German battleship Tirpitz, stationed in enemy-occupied Norway. At 5:16 p.m. on 22 August 1944, Nabob was preparing to fuel an escort vessel in the Barents Sea when German submarine U-354 struck and a torpedo ripped a 10-metre hole through its hull. Drawing upon eye-witness accounts, archival documents and blueprints of the vessel, the exhibition team sought to reconstruct the confusion and chaos of the torpedo strike that killed many upon impact and left the ship lurching and taking on water. Ultimately, twenty-one sailors died in the attack.

The exhibition team could not determine with certainty where George was located at the time of the attack. One of his letters written after returning to Scotland refers only to the death of a friend, Dave Melrose, but not his own actions. Absent concrete evidence as to his exact location, the exhibition offers a compelling experience for visitors by funnelling them into the belly of the ship. Visitors experience the shock of the torpedo explosion and the chaos that followed. George’s story, including his medal set and poignant letter home, grounds the cluster, tying together the experiences of other people related to the war at sea and the defence of Britain.

Over 500,000 Canadians served in Britain, where they defended against the threat of a German invasion, engaged in naval convoys
or patrols and flew aerial sorties against German-occupied Europe. Midshipman Robert Benny Brett (1899–1980) was one such Canadian, a First World War veteran of the Royal Canadian Navy and member of the British Merchant Navy, who served with distinction during the evacuation at Dunkirk in late May and early June 1940. Complementing this story is one of a different kind of Canadian contribution: Flying Officer William “Bill” Paterson Sprenger (1911–1940) and his service in the Battle of Britain. Twenty-nine-year-old Bill was among the one hundred or so Canadians who flew in the Battle of Britain within Royal Air Force squadrons and as part of No. 1 Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Writing to a friend back home in Montréal, Quebec, he described the relentless combat as “a thrilling game, full of scares, spills and some sorrow.”9 Bill’s letters provide insight into the service and strain of the constant battles, such as one on 3 September 1940 where he wrote to his sister Ruth about a dogfight:

Briefly what happened was this—we were on a patrol looking for an enemy raid when suddenly from a blind spot several enemy aircraft came down upon us—one picked me as a target and bullets seemed to be popping all around the inside of the cockpit—the aircraft started to smoke so there was no alternative but to get out which I did at about 15,000 ft. The parachute opened very nicely and everything was calm and quiet as I floated towards the ground. I was greeted by some farmers who immediately treated me to a cup of tea and called a doctor who tended the superficial wounds I had received but at first did not feel. A bullet apparently went right through the outside of my right shoe only leaving a blood blister on the second toe—anther bullet grazed my upper left leg, again only raising a blood blister—apart from those two actual hits I had a lot of fine (almost imperceptible) pieces of metal—like small filings—which apparently were white hot at the time they hit—embedded just under the surface of the skin down my right leg and on my hands. None of the “wounds” amounted to anything and I was back at flying on Monday, having had one day of rest, which was

9 Bill Sprenger, letter, 18 October 1940, 20120037-014, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum Military History Research Centre (CWM MHRC).
certainly all I needed. There is no question that I was lucky and we will try to see that it does not happen again.10

Bill’s luck ran out on the morning of 26 November 1940 when his Hurricane dived steeply and crashed. With typical flying conditions and no enemy activity in the area, officials were mystified to the cause of the accident, although it was likely mechanical failure. On display are his letters and the Memorial Cross sent to his parents to commemorate their son—one of almost two dozen Canadians killed during the Battle of Britain.

With shortages of civilian goods and the looming threat of attack, life in wartime Britain was hard. Canadian service personnel nevertheless forged many positive relationships with the Britons among whom they lived. Gwendoline (Green) McDonald (1922–2016) met her future husband on a bike ride one day, striking up a friendship with a Canadian airman, John McDonald. They married two years later. We use their story to present the realities of wartime scarcity and rationing, allowing visitors to design a wedding dress according

10 Bill Sprenger, letter, 3 September 1940, 20120037-014, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM MHRC.
to wartime rules, which is then displayed on a screen adjacent to her actual wedding apparel.

The zone also explores different facets of naval service, expanding upon George Boyer’s experiences. This includes the story of Leading Seaman Keith Edward Jones (1924–2018), which offers insight into the Battle of the Atlantic. The young sailor, who enlisted at age seventeen, was aboard vessels that ran the gauntlet of U-boats and recorded his experiences in a diary. Both the mundane and the poignant fill its pages. His account of Operation Neptune, the naval support operations of D-Day (6 June 1944), reads in part: “0745 the big ships have been shelling. We can’t see land for fire and smoke. It sounds like thunder.”11 The diary is on display alongside Keith’s Murmansk Run Medal, a Soviet-issued honour recognising his participation in the cold and dangerous Murmansk Run—the northern supply operation of Russia.

The Supporting and Defending zone includes thirty-nine artifacts with significant personal meaning to our featured Canadians. However, during the research phase of the project, the exhibition team noticed that many of these artifacts, like letters, souvenirs and

11 Keith Jones, diary, 6 June 1944, 20180400-001, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM MHRC.
medal sets, were small and depended on the associated story text for their impact. Most large kit and weapons in the CWM collection did not bear the same personal provenance. The exhibition team recognised the need for additional visually impressive artifacts, in particular combat-related artifacts. To that end, the team searched the collection—which numbers close to 500,000 objects—for artifacts that could illustrate zone messages. Some of the artifacts included a 20 mm Quadruple Heavy Machine Gun used in the defence of Britain, a battered flag flown from Canadian corvette HMCS Arrowhead and a hand-stitched quilt created by an anxious Londoner to calm her nerves during air raids. However, when Collection Specialist Arlene Doucette brought forward one of the strangest artifacts, the exhibition team could not pass up on it. Though little is known about its origins, the small ceramic decoration, painted as an ear, would have been attached to a wall to dissuade gossip about the war, with the literal message of the “walls have ears” printed on the back.

This same process of selecting general zone artifacts was repeated for Zones 2 and 3. Examples of artifacts chosen for those areas include the last surviving example of the “Land Mattress” rocket launcher, the nose art decoration from a Lancaster Mark X bomber, an inflatable life jacket belonging to a German pilot and a Japanese heavy machine gun. In some cases, the artifact has a story that adds
to its interest, as with the life jacket that was worn by a German pilot shot down by Canadians on 14 July 1944 in France and then signed by the Canadians who welcomed the prisoner into the mess for a drink.

ZONE 2 – THE WAR AGAINST GERMANY

Zone 2 – The War Against Germany is the largest section of the exhibition, featuring three deep-dive stories with associated secondary stories. The primary message is expressed as follows: “Germany was Canada’s primary enemy during the Second World War. Canadians fought the Germans off the east coast of Canada, on the Atlantic, in the Mediterranean and in Southern and Western Europe. A series of long and difficult campaigns—on land, at sea and in the air—were required to overcome the German forces. Victory was eventually achieved, but at a terrible cost.”

While the framing of war against Germany is important, this exhibition area is again structured around Canadians. In this space there are three deep-dive characters, with the first being Major Alexander Railton “Alex” Campbell (1910–1943), the second being Sergeant Hugh McCaughey (1906–1973) and the third being Nursing Sister Winnifred Laura “Winnie” Burwash (1910–1987).

DEEP-DIVE CHARACTER: MAJOR ALEX CAMPBELL

As an officer in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (Hastys), Major Alex Campbell was an inspiring leader, as well as an artist and poet. Farley Mowat, a member of the Hastys and future environmentalist and writer, mentioned him at several points in his memoir And No Birds Sang, writing for example, “Alex was striding along like a colossus of old: huge, indomitable, indestructible. When he saw me he gave a great, fond shout of recognition and pulled me out of the jeep into a bear hug.”

Alex’s father had served in the First World War and been killed on the Western Front. The exhibition displays the father’s medals next to the son’s, introducing visitors to the theme of inter-generational service. Alex fought first in North Africa with a British regiment in 1942, learning battle craft

12 Farley Mowat, And No Birds Sang (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 231.
and leadership skills, and then returned as a company commander with the Hasty Ps in Sicily and mainland Italy. He was killed leading his company against a prepared enemy position outside of Ortona, Italy on 25 December 1943.

It is this final battle that inspires an original animated film, based on archival film footage of Ortona, depicting Alex’s final moments. In the days before his death, Alex wrote a poem about the responsibilities and burdens of military leadership, titled “Prayer Before Battle.” A dramatic recitation of the poem accompanies the film so that as visitors see him fall in battle, they hear the words:

These men of mine must never know
How much afraid I really am!
Help me to lead them in the fight,
So they will say: He was a man!

Augmenting this story are secondary stories related to ideas of families in service, bravery in combat and mourning the dead.

A letter dated 3 August 1940 from Alex to his mother, Sarah Jane Campbell, includes the line: “My biggest worry is that I may not be
as good a soldier as I should be to live up to Daddy.”¹³ This serves as a linkage to three related stories of families in service. These include First World War veteran Sergeant Henry Charles Byce (1887–1961), who re-enlisted in the Second World War along with his son, Sergeant Charles Henry “Charlie” Byce (1916–1994). Thomas Courtenay (1894–1951) served under Victoria Cross recipient Lieutenant-Colonel William Hew Clark-Kennedy on the Western Front in the First World War and was so inspired by his commanding officer that he named his daughter after him: Irene Doris Clark-Kennedy Courtenay (1920–2009). Irene later served as a nurse in Italy in the Second World War. Finally, two brothers-in-law, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Ridley “Bob” Labatt (1903–1977) and Captain John McGill Currie (1916–2013), fought together with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry Regiment and were both taken prisoner at Dieppe. Through these three sets of family members we explore a number of themes, touching on key battles, inter-generational service and the prisoner of war experience, and all are linked back to Alex’s story of his father’s service and sacrifice.

¹³ Alex Campbell, letter, 3 August 1940, 20100088-027, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM MHRC.
There are other stories in this section, notably that of John Keefer Mahony, VC (1911–1990), who is connected to Campbell’s experience in the army and as an officer. A militia officer before the war, John served with distinction and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his leadership at the Battle of the Melfa River in May 1944. Ordered to establish a vital bridgehead over the Melfa River, Italy, his company of the Westminster Regiment held the ground for five hours in the face of relentless enemy attack. His Victoria Cross citation notes that he served “with absolute fearlessness and disregard for his own safety.” John’s medal set is displayed alongside *The Hitler Line* (1944) by official Canadian war artist Charles Comfort. This striking work of art shows the 24 May 1944 assault on the German prepared position. The artist saw the devastation of the battle first-hand, depicting the Canadians fighting their way forward. His diary entry reads: “No tree, shrub or bush along this road has escaped. They are stripped, shorn, and shattered.”

After Alex’s death, he was mourned by family and friends, revealed in the form of a letter to his mother. Her experience connects
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to that of another grieving mother, Alta R. Wilkinson (1898–1990). Alta was devastated when her son, twenty-four-year-old Private Arthur Wilkinson, was killed in combat on 18 July 1944. She collected letters, telegrams, relics and photographs related to Arthur’s war service, curating them in three scrapbooks, one of which is displayed in the exhibition. The war that took her son forever haunted her and she vowed to keep alive the memory of that generation’s sacrifice in the fight against fascism. Alta was the national president of the Remembrance Association, Silver Cross Women of Canada, founded by the mothers and widows of the Canadian war dead. In that role, she visited Italy for the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. There, she was honoured as a representative of all the mothers of Canadians who had lost their lives in Italy.

DEEP-DIVE CHARACTER: SERGEANT HUGH MCCAUDGHEY

The second deep-dive story centres around Sergeant Hugh McCaughey, a combat cameraman with the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit. In July 1944, Hugh was sent to Northwest Europe to document the Canadian army through France, the Netherlands and Germany. His footage captured battles, post-war celebrations and daily life for service members. Associated with the story, the
team created a compilation of film footage taken by Hugh and his comrades from July 1944 to the end of the war. The footage is projected on a wall, surrounded by an evocation of ruins. Two techniques were used to encourage the visitor to consider not just the footage, but the cameramen who shot it. First, a reproduction camera is positioned as part of the scene. Second, the selection of footage deliberately includes some segments that would typically be excluded from a final production, such as out-of-focus footage and shots of the cameraman cleaning the camera lens.

Hugh was originally sent to France in July 1944 to document the Battle of Normandy. Complementing that aspect of his story are three Canadians who played very different roles in the battle: Major Gustave Daniel Alfred “Guy” Biéler, DSO, MBE (1904–1944) who worked behind the lines in France before the Allied landings to lay the groundwork for the invasion, paratrooper Private Leslie Abram Neufeld (1922–1944) who was among the first Canadians to land in France and Pilot Officer Kam Len Douglas “Doug” Sam (1918–1989) who participated in bombing runs in support of the Normandy landings. Both Guy Biéler and Leslie Neufeld were killed and Doug Sam had a close call after he was shot down and narrowly avoided capture with the help of the French Resistance. Together with Hugh, these stories help visitors understand the hundreds of thousands of service personnel and civilians who risked their lives before D-Day, on 6 June 1944 and in the subsequent weeks of grinding battle during the Normandy Campaign. Their courage and sacrifice are given voice in a poignant letter from Colonel Maurice James Buckmaster to Marguerite (Geymonant) Biéler about her husband’s death after he was caught and executed by the Gestapo: “You may well be proud of [Guy]. He and the brave men who worked with him truly paved the way for the successful landing in June 1944. The lot of the pioneer is always hard and these men volunteered cheerfully and with full knowledge for the hardest task of all.”

Hugh’s story and related secondary stories look not only at how the war was documented and preserved, but highlight the people who did the work to make these records possible. Official historian Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Perry Stacey (1906–1989) is presented along with his uniform and two of his historical volumes—one in

14 Maurice Buckmaster, letter, 23 November 1945, 20130345-001, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM MHRC.
English and one in French. In addition, visitors encounter Marcel Alexis Ouimet (1915–1985), a French-Canadian journalist who reported for the CBC and Radio-Canada. In the two years he spent overseas as a war correspondent, Marcel filed more than 500 stories. Visitors can listen to excerpts of six of his battlefield reports in their original language (three in English, three in French), as he reported from Italy, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Marcel’s stirring descriptions of events, combined with background sounds—whistling shells, revving engines, cheering crowds—help visitors imagine what it would have been like to learn about the war from their radios.

One goal of the Canadian effort to document the war in various media was to carve out a Canadian identity, distinguishable from the British. The exhibition explores perceptions of “Canadianness” and Indigeneity through Private Mary (Greyeyes) Reid (1920–2011). When Mary joined the Canadian Women’s Army Corps, she was looking for opportunities beyond those available on the Maskêko-Sâkahikanîhk (Muskeg Lake Cree Nation) reserve. As the first Indigenous servicewoman in Canada, Mary was often ordered to public events as a symbol of the country’s total war effort that included all Canadians—English, French, new Canadians and Indigenous. She appeared in a famous photograph which was published in newspapers in Canada and overseas. This photograph is displayed in the exhibition, which was initially catalogued and reproduced with the misleading caption: “Unidentified Indian princess getting blessing from her chief and father to go fight in the war.” Accompanying text unpacks the problems with the original caption, namely that “princess” is a European concept that was frequently misapplied to young Indigenous women; the man in the photo was neither a chief nor Mary’s father; and the scene was an imitation ceremony, done for the benefit of the camera. The image and accompanying text are used to prompt visitors to think critically about historical photographs, considering the motivations of the people behind the camera.

DEEP-DIVE CHARACTER: NURSING SISTER WINNIE BURWASH

The last deep-dive story for this zone starts where some might expect the exhibition to conclude: the end of the war in Europe. Nursing Sister Winnie Burwash spent much of the war in England, caring for Canadian patients, before receiving word that she was being sent to continental Europe. When Victory in Europe Day (VE Day) was
Private Mary Greyeyes, from Maskêko-Sâkahikanihk (Muskeg Lake Cree Nation) reserve, Canadian Women’s Army Corps, with Harry Ball, Piapot First Nation. [Library and Archives Canada, PA-129070]
marked on 8 May 1945, Winnie wrote home with mixed emotions: “I am at the reception depot on my way overseas and what a place to be on V-Day. We are confined to barracks and can’t celebrate. We came up here yesterday afternoon and shortly after we arrived we heard the news over the radio and we all felt very low not being with our unit with all the people we know (to celebrate).”  

This letter serves as the foundation of Winnie’s key experience—a recreated army barracks with simulated windows onto the world. A motion-activated audio track starts a dramatic reading of an excerpt from Winnie’s letter. After that, each of the “windows” lights up in turn, revealing glimpses into VE Day around the world, with simulated soundscapes. The scenes include the celebrations that one might expect—of the type that Winnie was so disappointed to be missing—but also include subdued views, such as the relief of some Canadian soldiers in the field, the despair of German civilians and the suffering of Allied prisoners of war in the Pacific and South-East Asia where the war was not yet over. The experience is intended to draw attention to the range of emotions experienced around the world on VE Day and also to note that the war against Japan continued.

Winnie was ordered to Europe after the surrender of Germany, where she cared for the wounded and sick, including concentration camp survivors, malnourished civilians and mistreated prisoners of war. Through her story, we also present the important message of Canadians liberating Europe. The interwoven stories range from the creation of art by Aba Bayefsky (1923–2001), who was sent to make a record of the horrifying scenes at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Accompanying his artwork, we also include a witness statement by him: “For the first time I became aware of man’s monstrous capacity for evil.” Lotta Hitschmanova (1909–1990) also witnessed the reprehensible Nazi regime and is featured for her aid to those living in the ruins of the war’s aftermath. Lotta, an anti-Nazi journalist, fled German persecution and immigrated to Canada in 1942. When the war in Europe ended, she helped establish the Canadian branch of the Unitarian Service Committee to assist the people of France and Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic).

The story of Albert Reinder “Bert” Kahrel (born in 1928) is also presented. Bert was a Dutch teenager who was liberated by the
Canadians. Through him we examine the Dutch celebrating their liberation and thanking their liberators. Bert was so enamoured with the Canadians that he was one of the tens of thousands who emigrated from the Netherlands to Canada after the war. While these varied stories offer a glimpse into the many effects of the war, this section of the exhibition provides some deeper insight into both the trauma and legacy of the Second World War.

ZONE 3 – THE WAR AGAINST JAPAN

In passing from Zone 2 to Zone 3, visitors leave behind post-war Europe as the exhibition turns to the war against Japan. With this zone we had an opportunity to broaden visitors’ understanding of the impact of the war against Japan to include lesser-known stories of civilian and military personnel caught in the war.

DEEP-DIVE CHARACTER: FLYING OFFICER WILL KYLE

The deep-dive story revolves around Flying Officer William Joseph “Will” Kyle (1922–1945). He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in September 1942. Will was two years out of high school, working in an office and engaged to be married. The recruiting officer noted that he was “keen to fly” and had many of the traits—neatness, confidence and a good attitude—that made for a desirable recruit. Will served 449 days overseas, starting in Britain in April 1944 before being sent to India later that year. He and other members of the Royal Canadian Air Force delivered personnel and supplies to the Allied ground forces. On the morning of 21 June 1945, Will went missing while on a sortie over Burma. The plane and crew of six were lost for five decades.

Around this, we weave stories of service, grief and the cruel prisoner of war experience. Squadron Leader Leonard Joseph Birchall (1915–2004), known as the Saviour of Ceylon, is depicted here. As a member of the RCAF’s 413 Squadron, on 4 April 1942, Leonard and his crew spotted a large Japanese fleet while on their first—and last—patrol. They were attacked and shot down, but not before sending a crucial warning message to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) to prepare for the coming assault. Birchall survived the crash and was captured by the Japanese. He became a leader among the
prisoners at his camp by standing up to cruel guards and facing merciless beatings as a result. His fellow prisoners considered him a hero. Visitors can listen to a Japanese broadcast of Leonard from 19 July 1943, in which he speaks to his family. Broadcasting messages from prisoners of war was common practice, although this was not altruistic for the Japanese as they used these messages to attract North American listeners, desperate for information, to their radio propaganda. Nonetheless, it is a voice from the past and one that echoes more than seventy-five years later.

Leonard was freed at the end of the war, as were the surviving prisoners of war captured after the Battle of Hong Kong. In late 1941, two Canadian battalions, supporting troops, headquarters staff and nursing sisters were sent to strengthen the British garrison at Hong Kong. Despite the reinforcements, the Allies knew that the garrison would not be able withstand a sustained Japanese attack. After heroic and costly fighting, the doomed garrison surrendered on 25 December 1941. William Allister (1920–2008) was an artist and wartime signaller who survived the brutality of battle and the camps and documented it through works of art and an incredible diary
(which we explored at length in a previous issue of this journal).\textsuperscript{16} “If you’ve lived through it, you know what it is. If not, you’ll never understand,” wrote William about the feeling of freedom after years of captivity.\textsuperscript{17}

The exhibition also tells the little-known story of Canadian civilians caught in the Pacific War. Canadian Hermena Jean Oppen (1911–2005) was an auxiliary nurse in Hong Kong when it fell and she and her British husband, Reg, endured deprivation and indignity in squalid internee camps until they were released in a prisoner exchange in September 1943. The couple settled in Canada after the ordeal. Before they left the camp, they dispersed most of their goods to other prisoners and kept only their Japanese army blankets, stitched with “Oppen.”

An equally powerful story of survival is presented through William Gun “Bill” Chong (1911–2006), born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia. Bill was in Hong Kong, handling his father’s estate, when the Japanese invaded. Worried for his life, he fled to China where he served as an Allied undercover agent. Known as “Agent 50,” he travelled through Japanese-occupied territories to smuggle medical supplies in and guide stranded aviators out to safety. He was captured twice by the Japanese and once by bandits. Each time, he managed to escape against the odds. In 1947, Bill was awarded the British Empire Medal, the highest British honour for gallantry awarded to non-citizens.

Finally, we tell the story of Ethel Rogers Mulvany (1904–1992), who was captured when the British fortress at Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942. A teacher before the war, Ethel made it her mission to bring comfort and aid to the 3,500 imprisoned women and children held in Changi jail. For prisoners of war, surviving on a meagre diet of rice and stew, food became an obsession. Ethel hosted “tea parties” in the jail, where the lack of tea did not stop attendees from socialising and swapping recipes. After the war, she created a culinary memoir—\textit{Prisoners of War Cook Book: This is a Collection of Recipes Made by Starving Prisoners of War When


\textsuperscript{17} William Allister, diary, 5 verso, 20120037-014, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM MHRC.
They Were Interned in Changi Jail, Singapore—as a reminder of the friendship and resilience of the women at camp. Twenty thousand copies were sold to raise funds to help former prisoners of war. These and other artifacts, stories, art and eyewitness accounts provide a new way to understand Canada’s commitment in the global war and its enduring legacy.

This section ends with a powerful display of artifacts from Will Kyle’s missing Dakota C-47. His family, and those of the other five crew, waited for word that never came. It was not until November 1990, when a hunter in northwest Burma (Myanmar) came across aircraft wreckage, that the fate of Will and his crew was finally revealed. This discovery was brought to the attention of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) in July 1995. VAC worked with the Department of National Defence to recover the remains of the Canadian servicemen and wreckage from the aircraft, more than fifty years after they went missing. In Forever Changed, twenty-seven pieces of wreckage are displayed in an area evoking the Burmese jungle from which they were recovered. The artifacts are shown in cases embedded in walls and in the floor, representing the crash site.

In a fitting end to this zone, we show video footage from the recovery mission and ceremony to bury the aircrew’s bodies in early
1997 when an official delegation of family, veterans and Canadian military personnel travelled to Burma for a military funeral. We present the Canadian flag that was used to cover the coffin during the ceremony.

ZONE 4 – A COUNTRY SHAPED BY WAR

An important aspect of the exhibition was to acknowledge the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. It comes as most veterans have passed away, with fewer than 23,000 of the 1.1 million remaining. While an exploration of the war’s many legacies went beyond the scope of the exhibition, the core team sought to highlight the war’s impact on Canadians, focusing on returning veterans, new immigrants and civil liberties. The exhibition uses three Canadians to explore how war shaped them and continued to reverberate through their lives.

Wing Commander Hubert Brooks (1921–1984) served in the bomber war over Europe and went down on the night of 8 April 1942. He parachuted to safety but was captured and became a prisoner of war. After two failed attempts, in May 1943 he successfully escaped his German captors. Hubert spent the rest of the war serving with
The Polish Underground Army. After the war, he played on the RCAF Flyers, the hastily assembled team of current and ex-airmen that represented Canada at the 1948 Olympic games. They won Olympic gold and the exhibition features his jersey. Hubert served in the Canadian Forces for over thirty years and worked at the University of Ottawa after the end of his military career. While the twists and turns of his story may be unusual, Hubert was one of countless Second World War veterans to make significant contributions to his community and country after the war.

Although Regina (Rosenbaum) Gertner (1927–2009) was not Canadian at the time of the war, the story of this Jewish Holocaust survivor reflects the impact of the war on Canada through post-war immigration. At age sixteen, Regina was imprisoned in Auschwitz concentration camp. After months of struggling to survive, she was transferred to Gross-Rosen concentration camp as a slave labourer. She endured further starvation and relentless brutality until the camp was liberated by the Soviets in February 1945. Some 40,000 people died at Gross-Rosen camp, a horrifying figure but a fraction amid the millions murdered during the Holocaust. Between 1947 and 1955, about 35,000 Holocaust survivors and their dependants settled in Canada. Among them was Regina, her husband, Berek Gertner, and their children Henry and Eric. They arrived in Canada on 11 July 1953 to start their new lives.

The forced relocation of Japanese Canadians is told in Zone 4, in which we tackle the legacy of the war. The exhibition presents not only the wartime injustice, but also the post-war story of Japanese Canadians. Between 1941 and 1949, the Canadian government stripped thousands of Japanese Canadians of their homes and businesses and restricted where they could live. In 1942, more than 22,000 Japanese Canadians were forced to relocate from the west coast. We highlight Michiko “Midge” (Ishii) Ayukawa (1930–2013), a teenager whose photographs capture the experience of her family at Lemon Creek, BC, where they lived during the war years. Her collection of photos may surprise visitors. At first glance, the snapshots look like they could be of any happy Canadian teenagers, with smiling girls posing for the camera and cheeky captions like “Hubba, hubba!” scrawled under photos of cute boys. But the backgrounds of these scenes, showing uninsulated shacks and remote locations, offer a sense of the full story. Midge later recalled that she was “young enough to think that everything was an adventure,” rather than
the dehumanising violation of civil liberties that it was. Prevented from going back to Vancouver after the war, the Ishii family moved to Ontario in 1946. There, Midge studied chemistry. She married Kaoru “Karl” Ayukawa in 1955. Midge and her husband moved back to the west coast in 1980 where she started a career as an historian after a trip to Japan sparked an interest in the history of migration between Japan and Canada.

Of the fifty-one Canadians whose stories are presented in the exhibition, seven died and more were wounded. Most returned to Canada to carry on with their lives after the war. The exhibition team wished to tell the story of how the war had changed them, which is not always easy or apparent through wartime artifacts. As befitting the title and the nature of an important milestone exhibition, we carved out a final section in this zone to explore in more depth seven of the people in *Forever Changed* and to provide visitors additional information on what happened to them after the war. Elizabeth “Elsie” MacGill, a gifted aeronautical engineer during the war, was a successful and influential engineer and advocate for women’s rights after victory in 1945. A Dutch teenager, Bert Kahrel, who lived through the occupation and moved to Canada, made a new life here and in 2019, at the age of ninety-one, began volunteering at the CWM. Airman Doug Sam survived being shot down over France and
had a long and rich career in the Canadian Forces. Irene Courtenay, a wartime nurse, continued to practise and teach nursing in Canada and the United States. Though they did not survive the war, twin brothers Grant and Roy Campbell are commemorated in northern Saskatchewan where Campbell Bay was named in their honour. Signalman William Allister, captured in Hong Kong, struggled to find meaning and closure in his experience in prisoner of war camps. These are but a handful of the stories of Canadians whose lives were ended or forever affected by the Second World War.

CLOSING REMARKS

We would be remiss if we did not note that the exhibition was to have opened on 8 May 2020, the seventy-fifth anniversary of end of the war in Europe. It did not because of the Covid-19 crisis. Some modifications were made to the exhibition, as a result of public health measures, before it opened on 4 December 2020.

Throughout the exhibition, *Forever Changed* presents the experiences of individual Canadians as a way of better understanding the Second World War and its legacy. The interpretive techniques in the exhibition—including using interwoven personal stories as the foundation, promoting personal connection to the material through different text-writing styles, selecting stories to represent diverse perspectives and creating exhibition highlights to explore the deep-dive stories—reflect the possibilities inherent in museums for telling history in ways that affect visitors emotionally, while providing new insights into the historical contours of the global Second World War.

We feel it is appropriate to conclude this article in the same way that we end the exhibition. As visitors exit, the last text they encounter in *Forever Changed* reads: “To mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the Canadian War Museum recognizes the experiences and contributions of this generation. Close to 1.1 million men and women served in uniform, while millions of others served as civilian workers in war industry. Almost everyone at home was affected by the war. Some 45,000 gave their lives in this necessary war against fascism, defending the ideals in which they believed. This remarkable generation has almost entirely passed away.
Perhaps now is the time to reflect upon their service and remember their sacrifice.”


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim Cook is an historian at the Canadian War Museum (CWM) and the author or editor of thirteen books, including *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada’s Second World War* (2020). He was the historian for the CWM exhibition *Forever Changed – Stories From the Second World War*. Cook is a member of the Royal Society of Canada and the Order of Canada.

Britt Braaten is an interpretive planner who has developed more than twenty-five exhibitions for the Canadian War Museum (CWM), the Canada Science and Technology Museum and other cultural institutions. Her work reflects a strong interest in inclusion, accessibility and museum storytelling, as seen in the CWM exhibition *Forever Changed – Stories From the Second World War* (2020).