Canadian Military History

Volume 33 | Issue 1 Article 23

2024

“It Was Like a Dream”: War Pilgrimages in the Canadian War Museum’s Collections

Michael Petrou

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM
-
MUSÉE CANADIEN DE LA GUERRE

"It Was Like a Dream"

War Pilgrimages in the Canadian War Museum's Collections

MICHAEL PETROU

Abstract: This article uses material culture and oral histories held by the Canadian War Museum to explore war-related pilgrimages undertaken by veterans and their loved ones. The artwork, scrapbooks, mementos and recorded interviews reveal how meaningful pilgrimages can be for their participants. These are emotional or spiritual journeys as much as they are temporal ones. A pilgrim travels to a liminal space where the past appears closer and the dead are not beyond the reach of the living, and is transformed by it.

Cet article utilise la matérielle ethnographique et les histoires orales détenues par le Musée canadien de la guerre pour explorer les pèlerinages liés à la guerre entrepris par les anciens combattants et leurs proches. Les œuvres d'art, les albums de coupures, les souvenirs et les entretiens enregistrés révèlent à quel point les pèlerinages peuvent être significatifs pour leurs participants. Ils s'agissent de voyages émotionnels ou spirituels autant que temporels. Un pèlerin voyage vers un espace liminal où le passé semble plus proche et où les morts ne sont pas hors de portée des vivants et est transformés par eux.

In TIMOTHY FINDLEY'S short story "Stones," the narrator is the son of a Second World War veteran who returns to Canada damaged and ashamed because of a dishonourable discharge stemming from his perceived cowardice during the Canadian assault on the French port town of Dieppe. The father abandons his family and lives out his days "in little bars and back-street beer parlours, seeking whatever

solace he could find with whores and derelicts whose stories might have matched his own."[1] On his deathbed, the father asks his now-adult son to scatter his ashes at Dieppe, among the men he had betrayed by fleeing from his landing craft and swimming out to sea.

The son's subsequent voyage to Dieppe is made to fulfill his father's wishes but takes on a personal meaning for him as well. "I hadn't come to conjure ghosts," he says. "But the ghosts and the battle are palpable around you there, no matter what your wishes are." Resting against the sea wall, the son says to himself: *at last, my father has come ashore.*" The son's trip, in other words, has become a pilgrimage, a journey permeated with personal significance, or one undertaken with the goal of achieving a greater understanding about oneself or someone else.

War, because of the intensity of emotions arising from combat, comradeship and grief, can imbue a place with which it is associated with special meaning. A subsequent visit to such a place — whether it be a battleground, cemetery or monument — can be a similarly emotive experience. This is especially so when, in the classic arc of a pilgrimage narrative, it is reached at the end of a journey through a liminal space that serves as a bridge between past and present.[2] The protagonist in "Stones" cannot get any closer to understanding his father or feel any more at peace with his memories of him by burying his father in Toronto. He must instead fly his father's ashes to Britain, then carry them by boat across the English Channel until he reaches Dieppe, casting them into the channel and then among the stones on the beach itself.

Some of the meaning ascribed to war-related pilgrimage such as this are revealed in historical artifacts like scrapbooks, postcards and letters, and in oral history interviews with pilgrims. The Canadian War Museum's collections contain an abundance of this material, and this article will highlight a selection from the holdings. All these artifacts and oral histories illuminate, in different ways, how powerful and personal the war pilgrimage experience can be for the pilgrim — usually a veteran or a veteran's loved one — who undertakes it.

[1] Timothy Findley, *Stones* (Markham: Viking, 1988), 217.

[2] Bruce Scrates, "'Letters from a pilgrimage': reflections on the 1975 return to Gallipoli," *History Australia* 14, 4 (2017): 533. Regarding the idea of liminal space as a pilgrimage component, Scrates cites Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) and Ian Reader and Tony Walter, *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol33/iss1/23
DOI: 10.51644/XTCG9341

First, though, any discussion of war pilgrimages and related artifacts, especially for Canadians, requires a bit of historical context about pilgrimages themselves.

WARTIME TERRAIN AS SACRED GROUND

When Abraham Lincoln delivered his address before Union graves at Gettysburg in 1863 and described the ground as consecrated by the bodies of the soldiers who lay beneath it, he reflected a shift in public attitudes toward dead soldiers and the places where they fell, at least in what we might call the Anglosphere. Those who died half a century earlier in the 1815 Battle of Waterloo, by comparison, were buried in a mass grave and mostly ignored.[3] By the 1850s, as more people in Britain and continental Europe could afford to travel and transportation infrastructure allowed them to do so, large numbers of visitors were coming to the Waterloo battle site on organised tours. At least once visitor, in 1844, described the battlefield as "sacred," while others purchased battlefield relics such as buttons and bits of uniform, some of which were fakes.[4] The site, in mid-century, appeared to have appealed to those seeking both spiritual enrichment and souvenirs.

The Thomas Cook travel agency advertised battlefield excursions to South Africa during the Anglo–Boer War of 1899 to 1902, even as fighting still raged. But there was not broad public consensus about how visitors should comport themselves once they got there. The satirical British magazine *Punch* magazine published a poem in 1900 that mocked picknickers drinking champagne at the Spion Kop battle site where more than 200 British soldiers fell. This suggests some travelers were motivated more by curiosity and a search for vicarious excitement than a desire to commemorate the dead or undergo a transformational experience, and that some observers found their behaviour off-putting.[5] A change in public opinion regarding battle sites and dead soldiers might also be seen in the fact that the graves

[3] David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919–1939* (London: Berg Publishers, 1998), 21.
[4] A. V. Seaton, "War and Thanatourism: Waterloo 1815–1914," *Annals of Tourism Research* 26,1 (1998): 151 and 138.
[5] Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 21.

of British Anglo–Boer War dead received far more care and attention than did those who fell at Waterloo.[6]

The unprecedented trauma of the Great War accelerated this shift in how the public perceived wartime dead and the places they died. Much as Lincoln had said Gettysburg was consecrated ground, British officer and writer Hugh Pollard described the Ypres salient as holy because of the British, French and Canadian dead beneath it.[7] When the war ended, battlefield tourism resumed, now including explorations of the Great War's Western Front. Some 60,000 visited its sprawling network of trenches and killing fields in 1919 alone.[8] Some of these tourists, like the picknickers at Spion Kop a generation earlier, attracted scorn from veterans who saw their jaunts as frivolous and disrespectful. But for others, who usually had a personal connection to the conflict because of previous service or a fallen loved one, these trips began to take on the shape of a spiritual quest. "The French have a better term for what in this country are described as battlefield tours," concluded *The Times* in June 1920. "They call them pilgrimages."[9]

These trips were always more feasible for citizens of Britain and countries in continental Europe than for Canadians and Newfoundlanders who lived farther away and for whom travel to Great War battlefields required far more time and expense. Relatively few Canadians visited the Western Front during the 1920s, although some 75,000 Canadian veterans gathered for three days of comradeship and reminiscing in Toronto in 1934, demonstrating that the war still mattered to its veterans.[10]

That same year, The Legion announced that it would organise a "pilgrimage" for veterans to Great War battlefields that would include witnessing the unveiling of Canada's national overseas memorial, designed by Walter Allward, at Vimy Ridge. 6,200 Canadian veterans and their loved ones made the trip in the summer of 1936. They traveled on special trains and were seen off by thousands of well-wishers. The Vimy Memorial, featuring two pillars of white limestone

[6] Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 22.
[7] Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 21.
[8] Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 57; cited in Eric Brown and Tim Cook, "The 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage," *Canadian Military History* 20,2 (Spring 2011): 40.
[9] Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, 13.
[10] Brown and Cook, "The 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage," 40.

that stretch into the sky above the ridge captured by Canadians in 1917, became the focal point of the pilgrimage, drawing the living to the monument to mark the nation's dead. A ceremony at its unveiling was attended by dignitaries including King Edward, Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe and wartime prime minister Sir Robert Borden, along with tens of thousands of French. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, unpopular among veterans because he did not serve during the war, elected to stay home.[11]

It was a moving experience for those who were there. "Furtively at first, but then with an overpowering rush, memories of companions, of dirty days and worse nights, came back," wrote one veteran.[12] Another described it as "by far the most momentous event in the lives of Canadian ex-service men."[13] A souvenir booklet accurately predicted that the memorial would be "a sacred place of pilgrimage" for years to come.[14] Much like the Gallipoli battlefields for Australians and New Zealanders, Vimy became not just a place for visitors to commemorate those who died in the battle for Vimy Ridge, or indeed throughout the war, but also to contemplate the country's imagined birth as an independent nation. As Eric Brown and Tim Cook have written, "The battle had been remade, and forged into something new."[15]

Canada was slow to create a national overseas memorial to mark the sacrifices of its military personnel during the Second World War. There were legitimate logistical complications. Unlike during the Great War, Canadians during the Second World War fought in large numbers in multiple theatres, on the seas and in the air, so there was not a singular geographic locale that represented Canadians' sacrifices in the century's greatest conflict. A larger, challenge, however, was successive Canadian governments' uninterest in publicly celebrating Canada's martial success or commemorating its wartime dead.[16] This did not prevent Canadians from visiting battlefield sites and

[11] Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2017), 256. Cook notes that many veterans also disliked King because of how he treated Governor General Julian Byng during a 1926 constitutional crisis.
[12] Cook, *Vimy*, 271.
[13] Cook, *Vimy*, 272.
[14] Cited in Brown and Cook, "The 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage," 52.
[15] Brown and Cook, "The 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage," 51.
[16] For a more detailed discussion of discussions around a Canadian Second World War overseas monument, see Tim Cook, *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada's Second World War* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2020), 375–93.

cemeteries, or smaller monuments to Canada's wartime dead, from Sicily to Normandy. But the 50th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day arrived in 1995 with Canada still lacking a significant national overseas monument.

It was a Second World War veteran who eventually changed this. Garth Webb, who landed on Juno Beach on D-Day, raised millions from private donors, regional French governments and, eventually, the shamed Canadian government to found the Juno Beach Centre, a museum and memorial that opened on 6 June 2003 with a ceremony attended by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and veterans who had paid their own way to get there.[17] The centre, overlooking the beach where Canadians stormed ashore, has become a pilgrimage destination, displacing Dieppe to become what Tim Cook describes as Canada's "primary Second World War site of memory."[18] As will be discussed below, Canadians may embark on Second World War pilgrimages elsewhere, depending on their own experiences and histories, but Juno Beach's singular status is fitting. Despite the global nature of Canada's Second World War efforts, Normandy is where the liberation of Europe began in a campaign involving all arms of Canada's fighting forces.

Canadian veterans of the Korean War have long lamented the paucity of official and public recognition for their service and sacrifice in what many came to sardonically dub "the forgotten war." The Korea Veterans Association memorial was built in 1997 and located in Brampton, a suburb of Toronto, rather than Ottawa. For years, major anniversaries of the war's armistice passed without much notice. Canadians, in the decades after Korea, wanted to put wars behind them and reimagine their country as a peaceful one. Besides, as Second World War veterans would occasionally remind veterans of Korea at Legion halls or other gatherings, more Canadians died in one day at Dieppe than during the entire Korean War.[19] This neglect has changed in the last couple of decades. But Canada's newfound enthusiasm for commemorating the war still pales beside

[17] Cook, *The Fight for History*, 389.
[18] Cook, *The Fight for History*, 382.
[19] Tim Cook and Andrew Burtch, "Canada's Korean War in Commemoration, Memorials, and Memory," in *Canada and the Korean War: Histories and Legacies of a Cold War Conflict*, eds. Tim Cook and Andrew Burtch (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2024), 278.

https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol33/iss1/23
DOI: 10.51644/XTCG9341

efforts of the Republic of Korea to celebrate Canada's contribution to its defence and to thank Canadian veterans who participated in it.[20]

The Korean War, however, has always been important to the Canadians who fought it. In 1974, they formed an association to maintain ties with former comrades and worked to see the Korean War added to local cenotaphs.[21] In 1975, the 25th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, the American Korea Veterans Association organised veterans' tours to South Korea and invited their Canadian counterparts to join them. Several did, visiting battlefields, monuments and the UN Memorial Cemetery at Busan, in what might be considered the first sizeable Korean War pilgrimage. Others would follow in ensuring decades.

Because the Korean War ended with an armistice but no treaty and certainly no victory, a post-war visit could never have the same celebratory feel as Second World War veterans' return to western Europe. This raises the question of how veterans might find meaning, even satisfaction, in the outcome of war they did not outright win and that, officially, is still ongoing. For Canadian Korean War veterans returning to Korea, pride has often come from seeing how much South Korea has prospered since the war, and how grateful South Koreans are for what they did. Seoul, in ruins when they left it, was a thriving city of nearly seven million when the Canadian veterans visited with their American counterparts in 1975. Among them was veteran Vic Thompson, who later remarked on Koreans' "genuine affection for us."[22]

There is an interesting comparison here with American Vietnam War veterans returning to Vietnam. The two conflicts ended differently — the Korean War with an armistice that allowed South Korea to flourish even as North Koreans starved in a dystopian dictatorship, and the Vietnam War in a humiliating American defeat. And yet, as Brian Washam II writes, many American veterans of the Vietnam War who took post-war trips to Vietnam felt that their service was validated when they, like Canadians returning to Korea, discovered a modernizing country and a populace that treated them

[20] Cook and Burtch, "Canada's Korean War in Commemoration, Memorials, and Memory," 272–91.
[21] Cook and Burtch, "Canada's Korean War in Commemoration, Memorials, and Memory," 279.
[22] Cook and Burtch, "Canada's Korean War in Commemoration, Memorials, and Memory," 280.

with friendliness and a respect they had not received from their fellow citizens when they first came home from the war.[23]

Veterans' pilgrimages may be as much about the people a veteran might encounter as specific locations. Landscapes change, become unrecognisable. Those Canadians who returned to Korea in 1975 tried to find where they had dug in at Hill 655 and elsewhere without success.[24] But encounters with Koreans resonated. To give another example, when David Wake accompanied his father, Second World War veteran Evan Wake, on a trip to Holland to mark the 50th anniversary of its liberation in 1995, they were billeted with a Dutch couple who, David said in an interview with the Canadian War Museum, "had enormous fondness for my father." Nearly 30 years later, despite Evan's passing, they remain close friends whom David visits and travels with whenever he's in Europe. "They've become part of our family," he said.[25]

Such encounters need not even be planned. In 1947, John "Paddy" McElligott, a civilian sailor, found himself in Barcelona, where his ship had docked. McElligott had fought in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939 as a member of the International Brigades, volunteers from around the world who came to Spain to support a democratic left-leaning Spanish government against a fascist uprising led by General Francisco Franco and supported with troops and weapons by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The fascists won, and at the time of McElligott's return after the Second World War, Franco still ruled Spain and punished those who had opposed him during the war. Seeing the country under such circumstances could have brought McElligott little joy. However, strolling through the streets, McElligott recognised his wartime commander who was now working as a streetside bootblack (Spaniards also served in the International Brigades). When McElligott sat down to get his shoes shined, his former comrade said nothing but scribbled an address on a piece of paper and slipped it inside the cuff of McElligott's pant leg. Arriving at the prescribed location later that night, McElligott

[23] See Brian Washam II, "Validation in Vietnam: Motivations and Experiences of Vietnam Veterans who Returned to Vietnam as Tourists" (MA thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 2022).

[24] Cook and Burtch, "Canada's Korean War in Commemoration, Memorials, and Memory," 280.

[25] Oral history interview with David Wake, 20 January 2023, Canadian War Museum (hereafter CWM) Military History Research Centre (hereafter MHRC).

met other Spanish anti-fascist veterans of the war who hugged and kissed him and, he remembered years later, "tears just rolled down my goddamned cheeks."[26]

In the decades following the Korean War, tens of thousands of Canadian military personnel deployed on overseas operations around the world, most often as part of NATO or United Nations peacekeeping missions. Among the largest of these were missions in the former Yugoslavia, which violently fragmented into smaller states during the 1990s. Some 40,000 Canadians served there from 1992 to 2010. In total, more than 125,000 Canadians have served on peacekeeping operations around the world, of whom approximately 130 have died, according to Veterans Affairs Canada.[27] The image of the Canadian solider as a peacekeeper became a powerful one in the latter half of the twentieth century. A prominent monument to Canadian peacekeepers, titled "Reconciliation," was completed in Ottawa in 1992. But this popular image did not always acknowledge the dangers peacekeepers faced and the combat in which they sometimes participated. Canadian peacekeepers notably engaged in a pitched firefight against Croatian forces in the 1993 Battle of Medak Pocket in the former Yugoslavia, for example, a clash that received little public attention at the time.

There is no singular overseas monument to Canadian peacekeepers that might act as a paramount place of pilgrimage for Canadian peacekeeping veterans, and given the many locations in which they served, it is unlikely that one might emerge. But this has not stopped veterans of these operations from making small-scale pilgrimages of their own. In May 2018, for example, Wounded Warriors Canada, a charity which helps veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress, organised a bike tour of Bosnia and Croatia for veterans who had served there twenty-five years earlier. Daniel Fortin was trepidatious about returning but was uplifted to encounter a country at peace. "People moving around, they're

[26] Michael Petrou, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 182.

[27] "Canada and International Peacekeeping," Veterans Affairs website, accessed 20 March 2024, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/wars-and-conflicts/peacekeeping

running, not trying to hide. They're just living like we are. That was an instant healing," he told the CBC.[28]

Some 4,500 Canadians served in the Gulf War of 1990–1991 that was fought by an international coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which it had invaded in August 1990. The combat phase of the war lasted less than two months, including a four-day land campaign, and was unambiguously successful. The coalition soundly defeated Iraq's armed forces and restored Kuwait's sovereignty. Canadian forces were involved in little combat and suffered no casualties. American troops, who comprised the bulk of the coalition's forces, returned to large celebratory parades. "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all," U.S. President George. H. W. Bush declared.[29] The response in Canada was comparatively muted, but returning personnel were greeted by public displays of affection and gratitude. Canadian veterans of the Gulf War have since formed an association to mark anniversaries and preserve wartime bonds.

Like other veterans of conflicts and operations since the nation-defining clashes of the First and Second World Wars, Gulf War veterans sometimes feel forgotten. The war was a meaningful time for them, though, as it is for veterans of almost any conflict. But recapturing some of that meaning, or perhaps confronting trauma rooted in the war, by revisiting the places where they served is not practical. Canadians served at sea, in the air, and in Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and there is little in the way of affordable and accessible travel infrastructure for Canadians who may wish to return to the places they served. Pilgrimages are not a significant part of the Gulf War veteran's experience.

The Afghanistan War was Canada's mostly costly military mission since Korea. Some 40,000 Canadian Forces personnel served in the conflict; 158 Canadian soldiers died, and more than 2,000 were wounded. Canada's mission in Afghanistan ended when Canada

[28] Rebecca Martell and Kim Garritty, "Veterans Return to Balkans to Make Peace with Wartime Memories," *CBC*, 3 January 2029, accessed 20 March 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/veterans-return-to-balkans-to-make-peace-with-wartime-memories-1.4919278#:~:text=Montreal-,Veterans%20return%20to%20Balkans%20to%20make%20peace%20with%20wartime%20memories,saw%20ripped%20apart%20by%20war

[29] E. J. Dionne Jr., "Kicking the 'Vietnam Syndrome,'" *The Washington Post*, 3 March 1991, accessed 20 March 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/04/kicking-the-vietnam-syndrome/b6180288-4b9e-4d5f-b303-befa2275524d/

withdrew the last of its military trainers in 2014. Seven years later, in August 2021, the Taliban, which Canadian troops had battled for years, retook the Afghan capital, Kabul. This has made it all-but-impossible for veterans of that conflict to visit the country now. Family members of Canadian soldiers who died in Afghanistan did visit Kandahar Airfield, where Canadian troops were stationed, during the mission, and at least one mother of a deceased soldier found a way to be physically close to the place where her son served and died, as will be discussed below.

The federal government has also selected a design for a national Afghanistan War memorial to be unveiled in Ottawa in 2027. This choice has attracted some controversy because the government ignored the advice of the independent jury it had appointed, which chose a different design.[30] But the monument will likely still become a pilgrimage site for veterans of that war.

In the meantime, veterans can visit the "Kandahar Cenotaph," located inside National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa. The cenotaph was first built and erected in Afghanistan by soldiers serving there to honour fallen Canadian and American troops. For most of the war, it stood at the Kandahar Airfield and became a gathering place for serving soldiers and visiting family members who wanted to remember and commemorate those who had died. The monument was then transported back to Canada when Canada's combat mission in southern Afghanistan ended in 2011. Veterans and other members of the public can visit the monument only on certain days of the week and after an online form is submitted, which surely leaches away some of the spiritual resonance of visiting it.

It seemed unlikely in 1975, as Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese and U.S. personnel scrambled aboard a helicopter taking off from the American embassy roof, that American veterans would ever return to Vietnam in peace and be welcomed. But as we have seen, this is what has occurred. So, while it appears farfetched today, Canadian veterans might similarly one day return to Afghanistan, completing pilgrimages that are now out of reach. Benjamin Hertwig, who served as a corporal in Kandahar in 2006, a time of much combat and

[30] Murray Brewster, "Veterans minister under fire for ignoring winning design of Afghan war memorial," *CBC*, 31 October 2023, accessed 20 March 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/afghan-war-canada-memorial-1.7014669

numerous casualties for Canadians in southern Afghanistan, would welcome an opportunity to go back, but not as a soldier.

"I think for me and a lot of other veterans, seeing the impact of the war on civilians and the people of Afghanistan has been really, really difficult," he said in a 2024 interview. Hertwig said he still wants "to be useful or — I don't want to say to atone for the violence of the war — but to remember somehow that the people of Afghanistan continue to live through the horrors of this conflict and wanting … to see Afghanistan as a place where young people have hope and possibility for a future again."[31]

MATERIAL CULTURE AND PILGRIMAGE IN THE CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM'S COLLECTIONS

It is difficult for material objects to capture the essence of a pilgrimage, which at its heart is an inner journey. It is the pilgrim who is changed; an object can only reflect a shadow of that transformation. The Canadian War Museum's holdings nevertheless contain numerous evocative artworks, artifacts and oral histories that speak to the richness of the pilgrimage experience. They reveal and preserve the varied and sometimes conflicting emotions embedded in a war pilgrimage: pain and pride, grief and celebration, and, almost always, remembrance.

THE SOLDIER RETURNS

Images of the D-Day beaches in Normandy, France, assaulted by Allied troops on 6 June 1944 to begin the liberation of western Europe during the Second World War, are among the most iconic of that conflict. Robert Capa's photographs of American soldiers struggling onward in the rolling surf of Omaha Beach have been imprinted on the collective memory of every generation since. Bill Grant of the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit captured footage of the Canadian seaborne attack on Bernières-sur-Mer at Juno Beach that is every bit as powerful. Filmed from a landing craft approaching the beach, Grant's footage shows Canadian soldiers of A Company

[31] Oral history interview with Benjamin Hertwig, 20 February 2024, CWM MHRC. Interview transcript not yet publicly available.

The Soldier Returns by David Whittaker. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 20220010-001]

of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment crouched behind the beach-facing doors of the craft that bobs and sways in the waves and wind. Those doors swing open and the soldiers jump into thigh-high water and advance toward incoming fire. Before one young man leaves the craft, we see the hand of a comrade behind reach out to pat him reassuringly on the shoulder, the glint of a wedding ring visible on his left hand.

Countless filmmakers and television producers have tried ever since to recreate those fraught moments on the beach when the war, and so much more, hung in the balance. And, as discussed above, Juno Beach itself has become a Canadian pilgrimage site. But its

gravitational pull is not universally felt, including by veterans who took part in the invasion.

"I really was trying to forget everything about the whole thing, about the past, about the war," Russell Kaye, a D-Day veteran of the 12th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, said in an interview, explaining why he did not want to visit Juno Beach to mark the 75th anniversary of D-Day in 2019, despite his family's encouragement. "So many years I tried to forget about the whole thing, then all of a sudden they wanted me to remember."[32]

Kaye's family eventually persuaded him to return to Normandy as an ambassador for the Wounded Warriors charity. He was joined by his son and two daughters. Despite Kaye's initial reluctance, he later described the trip, on which he paid his respects at the graves of his comrades and chatted with French locals who were children during the war, as a highlight of his life.

The War Museum has a painting of Kaye standing on Juno Beach during his return trip to Normandy. Painted by his son-in-law David Whittaker, it depicts Kaye at the water's edge, hands thrust in his pants pockets and a baseball cap on his head as he looks downward at gentle waves advancing and receding on the beach. The sun, just above the horizon, gives the water, sand and sky a soft glow. It is an affecting piece of art whose impact is increased by a message Kaye has written on the back of the painting, addressed to his great-grandchildren: "To Luka & Lain/ There is no Glory in war. It is a costly and uncivilized way to end a dispute./ Your Great Grand Dad Russ Kaye Oct 9 2019."[33]

RETURNING AS A BIRD

Benjamin Hertwig, the Canadian veteran of Afghanistan who, above, said he would like to one day return to the country, became a poet and artist when he left the military. Writing, he says, helps him process his emotions from the war, while pottery means creating something with his hands that does not involve violence.[34] He's far from alone in using art to express, confront and manage the emotional potency of

[32] Oral history interview with Russell Kaye, 27 January 2022, CWM 20220035-015, CWM MHRC.
[33] *The Soldier Returns*, CWM 20220010-001, CWM MHRC.
[34] Oral history interview with Benjamin Hertwig, 20 February 2024, CWM MHRC.

Returning as a Bird by William Allister. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 20170667-001]

wartime experience — sometimes even as it unfolds. Tim Cook, for example, in *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War*, describes Western Front trenches as a culturally rich world, largely and intentionally incomprehensible to outsiders, in which soldiers used plays, songs, cartoons, jokes and elaborate trench art made from bullets and shell casings, to protect themselves from the war's horrors, poke fun at its absurdities and generally buck themselves up.[35]

Second World War veteran William Allister used art to express himself before he became a soldier. The young man was an actor in 1930s Montreal. It was during the war, however, that his skill as a visual artist bloomed under unusual and difficult circumstances. Allister was among the 1,975 Canadian troops sent to defend the British colony of Hong Kong in November 1941. They were outnumbered and outgunned when Japanese forces attacked on 8 December but fought doggedly for 17 days before surrendering on Christmas Day. Two hundred and ninety Canadians died in the battle. Almost as many would die through abuse and neglect during nearly four years

[35] Tim Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2018).

of captivity in Japanese prison camps. Allister, who survived the battle and the camps, secretly painted scenes from his captivity, using crankshaft oil and stolen pieces of tent canvas to sketch images of an emaciated prisoner, a Japanese guard, and sunken sailing ships in a bucolic-looking Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong, only the easily overlooked barbed wire in the foreground exposing the artist's imprisoned perspective.[36]

Allister was not at ease with his wartime memories for many years. He struggled to reconcile his own experiences of abuse at the hands of his Japanese captors with what he, as an artist who had come to admire Japanese culture, believed to be the peaceful nature of the Japanese people. This led Allister and his wife, Mona, to make their own pilgrimage to Japan in 1983. Allister and Mona stayed in Kyoto. They absorbed Japanese culture and met with the family of one of Allister's captors. According to Mona, the trip allowed Allister to let go of his hatred.[37] Allister, in a memoir, describes the effect ubiquitous Japanese hospitality and respect had on him:

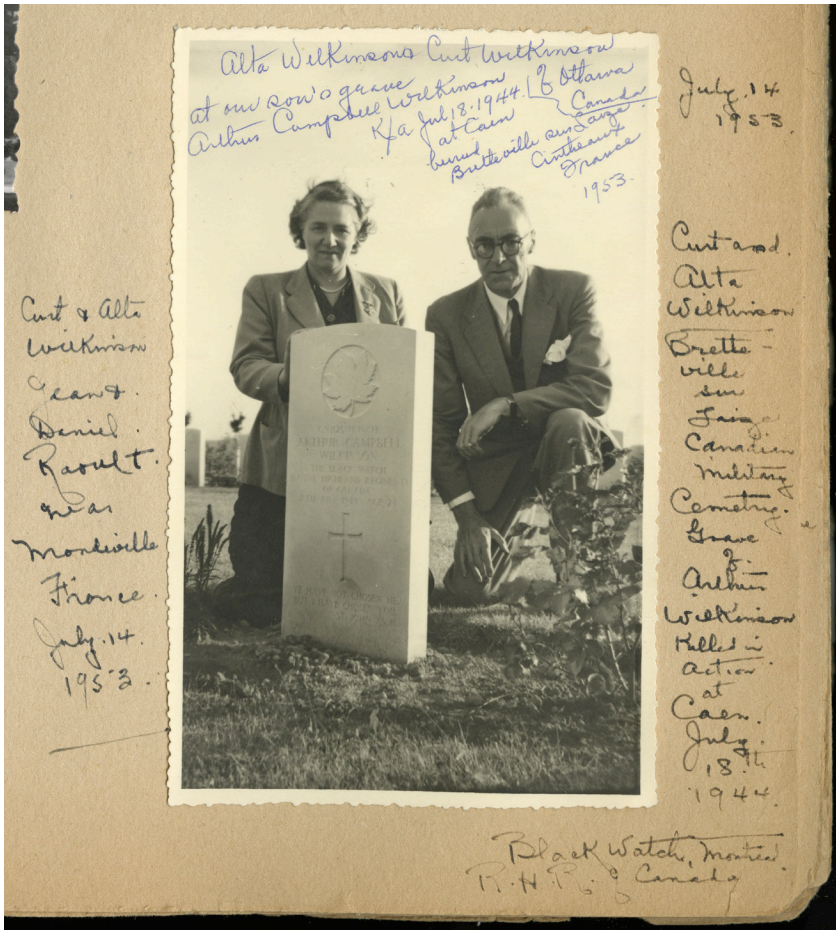
> It began to act on my spirit as a healing balm against the demons that plagued me. Weeks passed. As we lingered in the magical gardens and ancient temples, allowing the fascination of this land, its people, its haunting beauty to weave their hypnotic spell, there came a gradual easing of tensions, a growing serenity, a new plane of peace.[38]

The trip resulted in a series of paintings titled "East Meets West" that were later displayed at the Canadian embassy in Tokyo. *Returning as a Bird* was the first. A blend of Japanese and Western styles, it depicts a peacock, something Allister believed could symbolise the reincarnation of many things, including an enlightened warrior, which is what Allister believed himself to be on his 1983 pilgrimage.

[36] For more details on Allister's POW art, see Stacey Barker and Jeff Noakes, "From the Vaults: Objects Relating to the Canadian Experience in Hong Kong," *Canadian Military History* 30,2. (Spring 2021): 8. See also Tim Cook and Britt Braaten, "My Precious Inner Sanctum Remains Untouched, Untrammelled Through War & Famine": William Allister's Prisoner of War Diary," *Canadian Military History* 29,2 (2020).

[37] Artifact submission notes, CWM 20170667–001, CWM MHRC. See also William Allister, *Where Live and Death Hold Hands: The long road to forgiveness* (Delta, BC: Retsila, 2000).

[38] Allister, *Where Life and Death Hold Hands*, 3–4.



Curt and Alta Wilkinson at grave of their son, Arthur, killed in Normandy. Scrapbook trip to England, Holland and France. [George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM 19830600–007]

ALTA WILKINSON'S PILGRIMAGE SCRAPBOOK

Alta Wilkinson kept meticulous records in scrapbooks of the service of her eldest son, Arthur, in the Second World War. Letters, photographs, souvenirs and newspaper clippings tell the story of Arthur shipping out to England, joining the Battle of Normandy as a member of the Black Watch in July 1944, and his death that same month as his unit battled to cross the River Orne near Caen. She continued scrapbooking after his death and even after the Allies' victory in Europe. She traced the progress of the war, and when it was over, her scrapbooks hold touching evidence of the correspondence

relationship she forged with the Raoult family from Calvados in Normandy, who cared for Arthur's grave at the Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery.[39]

In 1953, Alta and her husband, Curt, undertook a pilgrimage to visit the Raoults and to see their son's grave themselves. This, too, she chronicled in a scrapbook that includes her diary of the trip. Alta's prose as she describes this journey, which included connecting with people with whom Arthur spent time in Britain, is often written in a restrained and matter-of-fact tone. She recalls seeing the very spot where Arthur died but does not record how she felt to be there. Still, the emotional impact of the experience on Alta is evident, especially at her son's grave. The cemetery overlooks a fertile valley, she tells her diary, and all its graves are well cared for, surrounded by flowers and frequently visited. Alta took a rose-like flower from Arthur's grave and included it in the scrapbook. "Curt and I were happy to know that Arthur's body was buried in such a beautiful place," she writes.

Alta and Curt returned to Arthur's grave another day. Here, her diary entry lays bare her pride, grief and happiness, emotions that swirled about inside her throughout the trip, some surely more dominant than others depending on the time and place and the memories they evoked. Above all, Alta's account demonstrates the continuous impact of wartime loss on loved ones long after the war itself is over.

> It was our last visit as we were leaving the following day, so we were sad, but we Musn't be sad because I am sure Arthur had fulfilled his mission in life even though he had died young. He had left love wherever he had gone and now we were loving the people he knew and they were extending so much love and kindness to us — if this were multiplied many times just think how much happier the world would be — so we were very proud of our darling son. How I wished all the mothers and

[39] For more on Wilkinson's wartime scrapbook, see Stacey Barker, Krista Cooke and Molly McCullough, *Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914–1945* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2020), 251–55; and Teresa Iacobelli, "Bearing Witness to Sacrifice: Death, Grief, and Memorialisation in the Collections of the Canadian War Museum," *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 (Spring 2023): 15–19.

> relatives of those who had fallen could have the opportunity we are having of visiting our loved ones grave.[40]

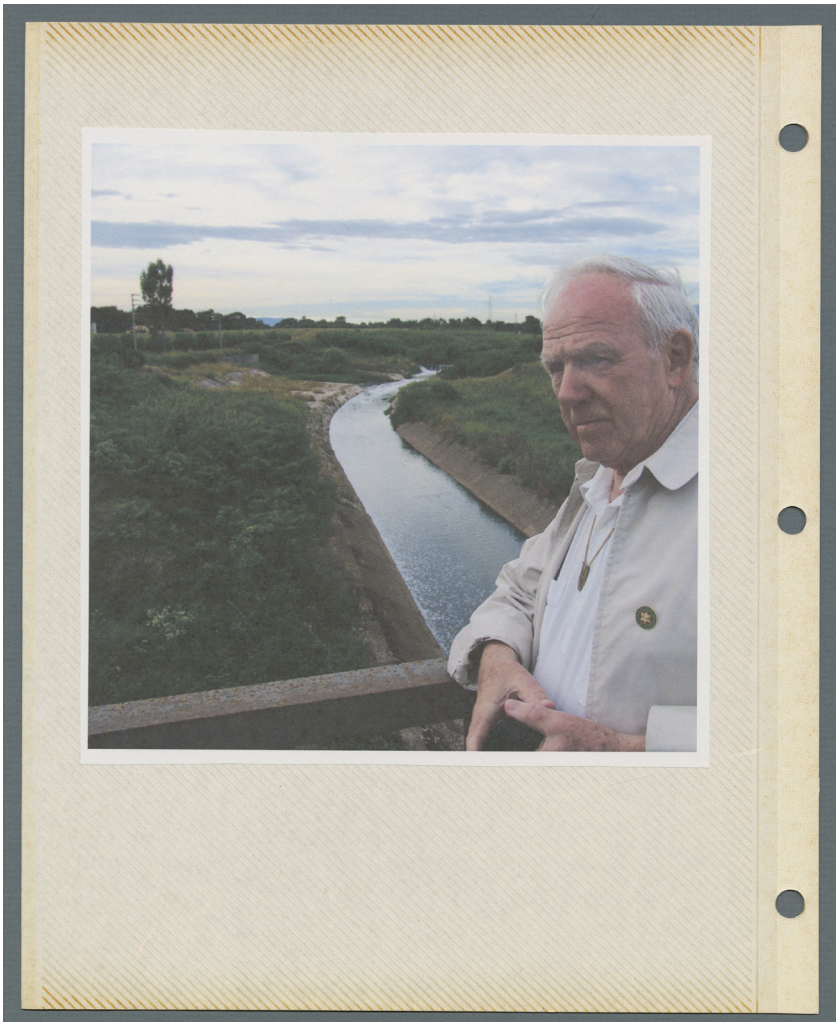
Alta and Curt soon leave France. The Raoults insist on driving them to Dieppe, where they catch their boat, and here again Alta's rawest emotions come to the fore, her grief over her son's death mixing with sadness to be leaving the family who looked after his grave: "We stood out on deck … and waved again and again as the boat sailed out to sea and I cried and cried as I hated to say goodbye to them. I felt so lonesome thinking of Arthur and memories flooded back, I wondered if we would ever see them again."[41]

WILLIAM "SAM" MAGEE PILGRIMAGE SCRAPBOOK

William "Sam" Magee, who got his nickname from the Robert Service poem about the Yukon winter cremation of a gold prospector named Sam McGee, was a veteran of the 1st Special Service Force, a unique Second World War unit of Canadian and American soldiers known as the Devil's Brigade. The much-decorated unit served in the Aleutian Islands, Italy and France before its disbandment in December 1944. Today, special forces in Canada and the United States trace their lineage to the Devil's Brigade. Magee, a Canadian recipient of the U.S. Bronze Star and Silver Star for gallantry, died in 2014 at the age of 91.

A decade earlier, in May and June 2004, Sam Magee joined former Devil's Brigade members on a tour of Italy to visit the places they fought and mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Rome. Magee created a scrapbook of his trip, containing photos, letters, press clippings and the transcript of an address given to the veterans by then-Italian president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. All these collectively speak to both the enduring importance for Magee of having served in the unit, and of returning with his comrades to the places where they had suffered and accomplished so much together. Magee is more explicit about the trip's impact on him in a letter he wrote afterwards, a copy of which is also included in his scrapbook. It is addressed to then-U.S. president George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, who had

[40] Alta Wilkinson scrapbook, CWM 19830600–007, CWM MHRC.
[41] Alta Wilkinson scrapbook, CWM 19830600–007, CWM MHRC.



William "Sam" Magee during 2004 pilgrimage to Italy. Scrapbook. [George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM 20190474–001]

sent Magee a photo of the two of them, also preserved in Magee's scrapbook.

In his letter, Magee thanks the couple for the photo and tries to describe what the trip meant to him. "It is hard to express one's feelings in regards to our Rome tour," he writes. "The expressions of thanks, gratefulness and appreciation for our role. The fantastic hospitality. In a way, it was like a dream."

https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol33/iss1/23
DOI: 10.51644/XTCG9341

Some forty relatives joined the Devil's Brigade veterans on the tour. Magee notes that being there allowed the veterans' loved ones to better understand what their relatives had experienced during the war. Only six American and eight Canadian veterans made the trip — or, as Magee puts it, were there "in body." Echoing a persistent theme concerning the spiritual nature of wartime battlegrounds and burial sites, Magee suggests the pilgrimage group was in fact larger. "We know the many still there were with us during the week," he writes. "'Thanks' to them, we were able to return."[42]

"VIGILANCE" HOSPITAL SIGN

James Hayward Arnal's death from a roadside bomb while on a nighttime foot patrol in southern Afghanistan in 2008 devastated his mother, Wendy Hayward. "It's like living with that phantom pain," she told the CBC more than two years after his death. "I can feel him without him being there … I don't know how else to describe it other than half my life is gone."

Her son's death transformed Hayward in other ways, too. She said it gave her many "gifts," including clarity about how she wanted to live her own life. Arnal did not want to watch the world go by; he wanted to be a part of it, Hawyard said. "I think he made a difference, and I'd kind of like to live up to that." For Hayward, this meant moving to Afghanistan to take a job at the Tim Hortons coffee shop at the Kandahar Airfield. There, she could be near where Arnal lived and died, and provide coffee, cigarettes and conversation for other Canadian soldiers like her son. "I can't think of a higher honour … I see him in the eyes of everyone I serve," she told the CBC.[43]

By traveling to Afghanistan and working there for six months, Hayward found purpose and perhaps a measure of comfort. This is the heart of the pilgrimage experience: the pilgrim is transformed through travel; a physical journey makes possible an emotional one.

Wendy Hayward donated a large collection of artifacts from Afghanistan to the Canadian War Museum. These include Tim Hortons coffee cups, uniforms and gift cards. All provide windows

[42] William Magee scrapbook, CWM 20190474–001, CWM MHRC.
[43] "Soldier's mom serving coffee in Kandahar," *CBC* 6 November 2010, accessed 20 March 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/soldier-s-mom-serving-coffee-in-kandahar-1.970594

Wood from Role 3 Multinational Military Hospital at Kandahar Airfield. [CWM 20110008-031]

into her time there. Hayward also brought home an artifact with a more visceral connection to her son.

Following the 2008 roadside blast, a severely wounded James Hayward Arnal was brought to the Canadian-run Role 3 Multinational Military Hospital at Kandahar Airfield, where he was pronounced dead on arrival. Two years later, when Wendy Hayward was working at the airfield, the hospital was dismantled because the Americans were building a new one to replace it. Two Canadian Forces personnel, Cathy Campbell and Sanita Atwal, a Canadian military surgeon who was at the hospital when Arnal brought in, salvaged a piece of wood that once hung as a sign at the hospital and presented it to Hayward. The board, about sixty centimetres long and ten centimetres high, is painted white, though that paint has flaked off where it appears nails had once affixed the lumber to a wall. One word is written on it in black magic marker and capital letters: VIGILANCE, a guiding principle that must have resonated with Hayward during her time in Afghanistan, too.

ORAL HISTORIES AND PILGRIMAGES IN THE CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM'S COLLECTIONS

In 2022, the Canadian War Museum launched *In Their Own Voices*, an oral history project that explores the post-war and post-service experiences of Canadian veterans and their loved ones. As the project's historian, I have interviewed more than 200 veterans and

https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol33/iss1/23
DOI: 10.51644/XTCG9341

relatives, from men and women who enlisted during the Second World War to much younger returnees from Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as those who served in peacetime. These interviews shine light on how the impacts of war and military service ripple through the lives of veterans and their loved ones long after a veteran's military service ends, shaping them in ways that can be profound, intimate and far ranging.

Oral histories, like all historical sources, have their shortcomings and virtues. They can be manipulated by expectations of the interviewer that might be conveyed by how an interview is requested, the questions asked, even body language. The interviewee may try to meet those expectations and shape their responses accordingly, or they may be bothered by them and choose to say little. Interviewees likely also have a certain version of themselves they want to convey — elements of their past they wish to highlight and others they want to obscure. But oral histories can also contain insights, emotions and recollections that are rarely put in writing, because they are so intimate or because the interviewee lacks the means or inclination to record them. They are particularly well suited to exploring pilgrimages, often deeply personal experiences that occur after a war or deployment and are not typically subject to the same sort of historical scrutiny as are wars or military missions, or interactions with the state — which usually result in written records.

Richard Ratcliffe served in the Royal Canadian Navy aboard the HMCS *Nootka* during the Korean War. In an *In Their Own Voices* interview, Ratcliffe says he was back in Canada when the armistice was signed to end hostilities and did not give it much thought. Then, in 2015, Ratcliffe returned to Korea on a tour with other Commonwealth Korean War veterans from Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. He brought his 15-year-old grandson with him. Seeing how South Korea has thrived since the war, and meeting Koreans who told Ratcliffe how grateful they were for what he had done, changed how Ratcliffe thought about the conflict and his role in it. "You were almost embarrassed by the emotion that they had, being thankful for coming to their aid," Ratcliffe says in his interview.

> And you saw the country which … was in rubble in 1953…. And we go back there, and here's this jewel of the Far East now, one of the leaders of the industrial nations in the Far East, South Korea. And it's really

Richard Ratcliffe in uniform. [Photo courtesy of Richard Ratcliffe]

impressive. And from that point on, I've always had an affinity to the Korean people, for what they were able to do, to rise up out of the ashes of war and bring their country up by their bootstraps, really. And we're so lucky in Canada that so many Korean people have chosen Canada

https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol33/iss1/23
DOI: 10.51644/XTCG9341

Richard Ratcliffe in 2023. [Photo by Dave Deevey]

> as their new homeland. They really added a lot to the fabric of the Canadian nation.[44]

Here we see a pilgrimage that combines place and people. Ratcliffe's memories of his wartime experiences take on new significance because he sees the country he fought to defend and meets people whose life stories are different because he did so. By confronting up close how Korea and Koreans were changed for the better, Ratcliffe is changed too.

DAVID WAKE'S ORAL HISTORY

David Wake's pilgrimage with his father, Evan, was also shaped by the gratitude of people he encountered on it. David and Evan traveled to the Netherlands to mark the 50th anniversary of that country's liberation in which Evan, a Second World War veteran of the Canadian Army, took part. In his oral history interview, David recalls the massive crowds everywhere he went with this father and the other veterans in 1995. They lined the streets in their thousands, cheering and clapping. He speculates on what it meant for his father: "I guess it's a singular experience to be subject to that much worship

[44] Oral history interview with Richard Ratcliffe, 5 January 2023, CWM MHRC.

Evan (left) and David Wake in Holland, 1995. [Photo courtesy of David Wake]

and adulation. You know, for somebody who for the previous 50 years had gone to work every day, and commuted, gone to church, had his Scouts, took part in bridge clubs and things, and then suddenly you're transported into this world where you're a hero."

David describes the trip as the most moving experience of his life. If a personal transformation is often part of the pilgrimage experience, what changed for David, in a subtle way, is how he viewed his father: "I was very proud. I saw him, perhaps, in a different light. I guess sons always hold their fathers to a higher standard than they should, I suppose. But he rose in my estimation that two-week period, and it's a legacy for me."[45]

REG HARRISON'S ORAL HISTORY

As with any Second World War veteran who met their wife or husband because of the war, Reg Harrison lived with a reminder of wartime experiences throughout his marriage. Harrison survived four plane crashes as a bomber pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force. One of

[45] Oral history interview with David Wake, 20 January 2023, CWM MHRC.

Reg Harrison (left) and Donaldson "Buddy" Holloway. [Photo courtesy of Harrison family]

his closest friends, whom he met before shipping out to England, was a fellow pilot named Donaldson Holloway who went by the name Buddy. Holloway was engaged to a woman in Ottawa named Jean Woods. When Holloway wrote her, he would often invite Harrison to add a note to the bottom of the letter because, Holloway would say, "Who knows, one day you might meet her." Holloway died in a plane crash on 15 April 1944 at the age of 21. Harrison wrote Woods and promised to visit her if he survived the war. He did survive, but when he returned to Canada in January 1945, he was nervous and unsure what to say to her. Harrison telephoned Woods's family after his boat docked and told her sister, who answered the phone, that he did not have time to visit. A few minutes later, Harrison mustered up the courage to call back and told Woods he would, in fact, stop in Ottawa to see her. "I was gonna stay two days, and I stayed four," Harrison says.[46] The two married in 1946 and had forty-three more years together before Woods died in 1990.

In his interview, Harrison discusses his friendship with Holloway and his love-filled marriage with Woods. He also describes a 1978 trip he and Woods made to Britain, where they visited Holloway's grave

[46] Oral history interview with Reg Harrison, 14 March 2023, CWM MHRC.

Jean and Reg Harrison. [Photo courtesy of Harrison family]

https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol33/iss1/23
DOI: 10.51644/XTCG9341

Reg Harrison. [Photo courtesy of Harrison family]

at the Harrogate (Stonefall) Cemetery in Yorkshire. Even more than forty years later, Harrison gets emotional remembering standing at the foot of Holloway's grave:

> I said, "Well, Buddy, Jean and I are here to say hello to you." I said, "You always said that when I put the footnote on your letters that you never know, someday I might meet Jean." And I said, "Well, I did meet her." And then I said a few more words, and then I said to Jean, "Well, Jean, I'm going to leave you here … I felt really bad. And I often wondered how Jean felt, too. She never said anything, while I was talking to Buddy. But I just felt I should say something.[47]

I interviewed Harrison three times — once over the phone in 2022, and twice more in person at his home in Saskatoon in 2023. During our first in-person interview, I asked Harrison how his life has been changed by the war. Harrison thought about the question a lot and brought it up on his own the next day as our final interview wrapped up. He recalled different elements of his life — his marriage, his family, his work with his church, the Legion and in community affairs:

> In some ways, it's all tied in with my experience in the war. Otherwise, it would never have happened…. I would never have had those experiences.

[47] Oral history interview with Reg Harrison, 15 March 2023, CWM MHRC.

> I would never have met Jean. And then, of course, if I had got married, who would I have married? And I would have had an entirely different life. Entirely different. And I guess that thousands can say that, too.[48]

Harrison's conclusion that he would have led an entirely different life had he not gone to war hints at why war pilgrimages can be such emotionally powerful experiences for both veterans and those close to them. Cathartic for some and traumatic for others, they transport the pilgrim back to a time when they, or their loved one, were impacted in meaningful ways and force a contemplation of what has transpired since.

CONCLUSION

The narrator in "Stones" believes he can feel ghosts around him at Dieppe. They are "palpable," he says, as if in this place the ghosts do not belong solely to a spiritual dimension but can cross over into our own. Sam Magee says much the same thing when writing of touring old battle sites in Italy sixty years after he fought there as a member of the 1st Special Service Force. His comrades who died in Italy during the war are with living veterans who return on the pilgrimage. Harrison, too, speaks to his friend and wife's former fiancé, Buddy Holloway, at his grave. It is as if all these places of pilgrimage are portals where barriers separating the present from the past and the living from the dead are transparent, sometimes even permeable. The past becomes present; the dead walk beside us and hear our voices.

All of us are shaped by our personal histories. Whether that past be comforting or upsetting, we cannot fully escape it. In that sense, the veteran's experience is not unique. And yet, military service, and especially military service during war is, in many ways, unique, and so therefore is the impact it can have on veterans and those close to them. In his poem "iconoclast," Afghanistan veteran Benjamin Hertwig writes: "the war is over /and we are still // here."[49] Those lines might be interpreted to suggest that for the narrator the war is

[48] Oral history interview with Reg Harrison, 15 March 2023, CWM MHRC.
[49] Benjamin Hertwig, *Slow War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 40.

not really over, or that he feels guilty to be alive when it is. Either way, the narrator is bound to his past.

Wrestling with memory, for good or ill, is an integral part of what it means to be a veteran. Pilgrimages are one way veterans and their loved ones navigate their relationship with the past. They bring it into sharper focus. They permit communion with one's personal history and sometimes even with ghosts. They are personal journeys made not to be informed or entertained but enriched, even transformed. The objects and oral histories presented here from the Canadian War Museum's collections speak to that experience, illustrating the many forms pilgrimages can take and showing how pilgrims are moulded by these journeys.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Petrou is Historian, Veterans' Experience, at the Canadian War Museum. His publications include *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* and *Is This Your First War? Travels Through the Post-9/11 Islamic World*. He was the 2018 Martin Wise Goodman Canadian Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. Petrou previously worked for many years as a foreign correspondent. He has a doctorate in modern history from St Antony's College, the University of Oxford.