

## IN THE NEWS

# Inside the new Canadian War Museum

By Jacqueline Chartier

I recently made one of my rare excursions to Ottawa, braving a four-hour flight and crossing two time zones. There is nothing like the journey Down East from Alberta to underscore the reality of living in the world's second-largest country.

Determined to take advantage of my brief stay in the National Capital Region, I had generated a mental list of must-see attractions, and I'd been eagerly anticipating touring the new Canadian War Museum. The highly publicized 136 million-dollar project has been hailed as a dream come true for those involved. For over 35 years the museum was housed in a cramped and dilapidated archives building on Sussex Drive. Space constraints at their old location meant that only a small percentage of the approximately 500,000 military artifacts could be displayed at one time.

As our cab approaches the new museum in the pouring rain I am confronted with a panorama of Ottawa's LeBreton Flats—the abandoned industrial area chosen for the construction of the colossal 40,860 square metre building. Considering its enormous magnitude, I find the exterior of the new Canadian War Museum to be relatively modest and unassuming. Raymond Moriyama, the project's chief architect, maintains that his goal was to honour, in an unpretentious way, the “quiet courage” of Canadian combatants. The structure's most eye-catching element is a towering copper-clad fin on its roof—a series of small windows spells out the words “Lest We Forget” in Morse code.

Upon entering the lobby I can sense the incredible newness of the five-week-old facility. I feel almost privileged to be visiting, as I am conscious that extraordinarily few western Canadians have had an opportunity to make the journey yet. On this inclement June morning the



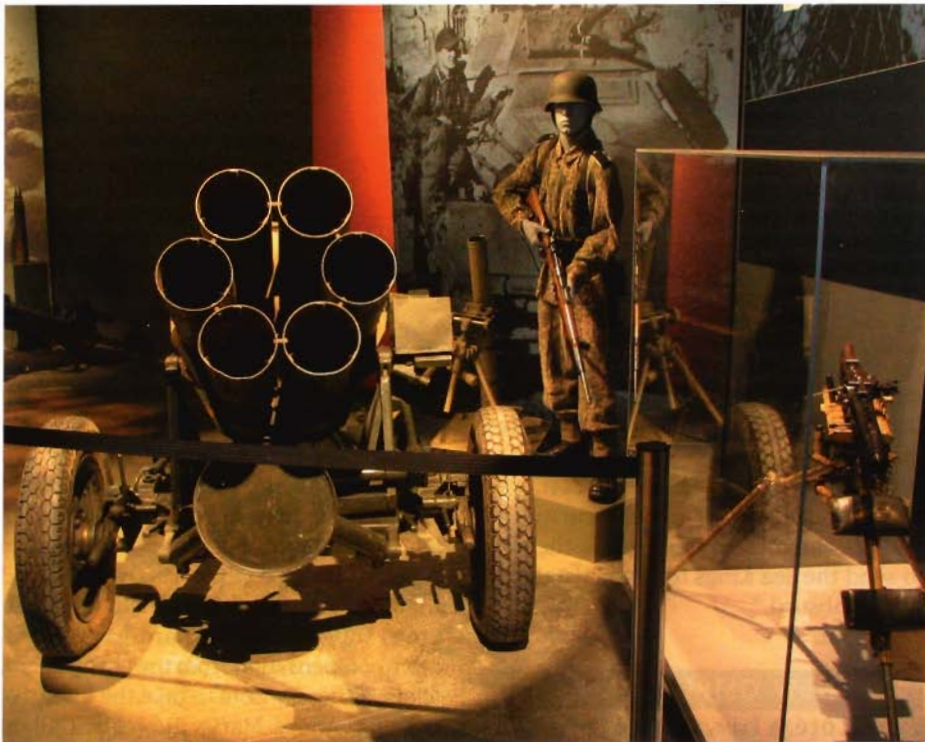
*The desolation of the war-torn Passchendale is vividly brought to life in a realistic, haunting diorama of the water-filled shell holes that dotted the landscape in 1917. (DARCY KNOLL/ESPRIT DE CORPS)*

lobby is bustling with hundreds of school children as they prepare for teachers or museum staff to take them on guided tours; outside the landscape is disturbingly reminiscent of a windswept battlefield. It takes several minutes for my travelling companion and I to become accustomed to our surroundings; however, we soon locate the main kiosk and purchase our admission tickets at a price of \$10 each.

From the grand foyer one goes through the cavernous LeBreton Gallery—a superb showcase for the museum's large artifacts, namely its world-renowned collection of military vehicles and artillery. Before I can thoroughly examine any of the vintage tanks, jeeps or armoured vehicles my eyes are drawn to the floor, walls and ceiling. Visually, I'm finally starting to register the massive concrete structure that is swallowing us up. I later confirm that construc-

tion of the new museum required 32,000 cubic metres of concrete, enough to pour a sidewalk 127 kilometres long. When I at last turn my attention to the artifacts before me, I behold a multitude of battlefield treasures, what reviewer James Adams described as “seemingly every tank, cannon, personnel carrier, and ambulance made in the last 70 years.”

My companion and I spot several people congregating near a 1940s-era black Mercedes sedan/convertible. We join them and establish that the car once belonged to Adolf Hitler; it is therefore one of the museum's highly popular, but disturbing or controversial acquisitions. We scrutinize a number of bullet marks, the result of a test the Americans conducted to determine how bulletproof the Mercedes's glass was. The car was ultimately sold to a Canadian collector who, in turn, donated it to the Canadian War Museum.



Well-designed displays, showcasing several key historical elements, help to present a vivid storyline, balancing both war and peace, drama and pathos, conflict and resolution. (DARCY KNOLL)

I know it is time to move on as we haven't yet entered the section containing the museum's regular galleries. By this point I am aching to see samples from the museum's outstanding Beaverbrook War Art Collection. As an art enthusiast, I have long been aware of the collection, which consists of over 13,000 pieces. They range from giant murals to battlefield sketches in military notebooks. Artists include Alex Colville and members of the Group of Seven. Many of the works had to be placed in storage in an air-conditioned vault because the old War Museum had neither the space nor the climate controls to allow them to hang.

With the construction of a technologically advanced, luxuriously spacious building, the entire First World War art collection is out for the first time in its history. I realize to my astonishment that some of the monumental canvases are the size of billboards. Having only viewed reproductions, I had not been able to conceptualize their actual dimensions. Now on our walk to the galleries I suddenly come to a halt. I stand spellbound in the passageway gazing up at William Nicholson's *Canadian Headquarters Staff* (1918), which is hung against the bare concrete wall.

Desiring more, I elect to enter the Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae Gallery, a space built specifically for special exhibitions and works of art.

The inaugural exhibit is entitled *Art and War: Australia, Britain and Canada in the Second World War*. The show marks the first time art treasures from three of the world's biggest military museums have been presented together. As I scrutinize many of the compositions, I see through various artists the impact that the Second World War had on individual lives. Viewing images such as Charles Comfort's *Hitler Line* or Alex Colville's *Tragic Landscape*, I'm haunted by the faces of young soldiers and by the immediate horrors of overseas combat. Paintings such as *Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech-ring* by British painter Laura Knight are subtler; they speak to me of the war on the home front and reflect the immeasurable contribution of an entire generation.

#### THE IMPACT OF WAR

After nearly two hours exploring the new museum we're about to encounter the four permanent exhibition galleries. The first, titled *Battleground*, covers wars on Canadian soil from pre-Columbian times to 1885. It includes stone weapons, Viking swords, black-powder muskets and even the coat worn by Sir Isaac Brock at the battle of Queenston Heights in 1812. My companion and I choose to move though the pre-Confederation era of our nation's military history quite rapidly,

but the well-designed displays offer us a sounder appreciation of this early period. On a multifaceted level, I'm starting to perceive the challenges that faced the design team. According to Canadian War Museum officials, the design team paid particular attention to the dramatic impact of each area. The team devoted a great deal of time to developing the rhythm and pace of the storyline, balancing peace and war, drama and pathos, conflict and resolution. The amount of information being presented, the various forms it takes, and the emotional content are balanced in order to avoid confusing or numbing the visitor.

Despite these efforts, as I tour the second gallery there are times when I start to feel vaguely overwhelmed. For *Crown and Country* spans the years 1885 to 1931, a time when Canada's contributions in overseas wars led to growing autonomy and international recognition, but at a horrendous cost. The gallery includes a haunting diorama in which visitors seem to be gazing out across the shell-blasted landscape of the 1917 Passchendaele battlefield. Recorded noise of explosions, wind, orders being barked, gun fire, brass and fife bands playing *The Maple Leaf Forever* and *Rule Britannia* serve to de-emphasize the so-called glory

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The modern weapon display includes aircraft and tracked and wheeled vehicles. (DARCY KNOLL)

of combat while amplifying the anxiety and disorientation caused by war.

My apprehension is intermittently relieved, especially in Gallery Three (Forged in Fire, The Second World War, 1939-45). Here, many of the displays turn away from the terrible devastation of war and emphasize the positive contributions made by Canadian servicemen who helped defeat Nazism. The visitor is witness to the incredible level of economic activity and technological innovation that occurred during the Second World War. In stark contrast to our contemporary society, we are reminded of the sense of unity, civic pride, and collective purpose that an all-encompassing war created on the Canadian home front.

The fourth permanent exhibition gallery is entitled A Violent Peace and its focus is on 1945 to the present. I'm too young to remember the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and '60s, but for many patrons its displays representing fallout shelters, the nuclear arms race or the threat of Soviet spies awaken vivid memories. Like many individuals of my generation, I find these graphic images of the Cold War era amusing, but oftentimes disquieting. As I evaluate the gallery I'm frequently reminded of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or of Arthur Miller's timeless play

*The Crucible*. Both deal with themes of paranoia, intolerance, and political totalitarianism.

#### HOPE AND REGENERATION

Nearly every architectural feature of the new Canadian War Museum suggests regeneration and remembrance. The architectural team knew these would be the concepts behind the design of the huge building. Just as the landscape recovers

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and heals itself following the devastation of war, the museum would emerge from its own scarred landscape. To the north and west, the building appears to emerge from the Ottawa River. To the east, its acute angles and copper roof link it to Parliament Hill and the Peace Tower. "Nature may be ravaged by human acts of war, but inevitably it hybridizes, regenerates and prevails," says architect Raymond Moriyama. "From the healing process emerges hope."

Physically removed from the other galleries is Regeneration Hall, a space that perhaps most evokes these concepts. It provides a quiet environment where visitors can reflect on Canada's military his-

tory or contemplate the millions of Canadians who have served their country. Illuminated by a skylight, the concrete of Regeneration Hall shimmers in the glow of natural light, even on this heavily overcast day. I'm moved by the austere beauty of my surroundings and also by the hall's principal artifacts. On display are the neo-classical plaster maquettes Walter Allward used in 1936 for his phenomenal Vimy Ridge monument.

Looking around I also notice a single window high on the southern wall, while on the opposite wall is embedded the headstone of the Unknown Soldier. The architects say that at 11 a.m. on November 11 each year, the sun will beam through the window and illuminate the modest, bone-white tombstone inscribed: "A Soldier of the Great War. A Canadian Regiment. Known unto God." For more than 80 years that stone marked a grave at the Cabaret-Rouge Cemetery just a couple of kilometres from Vimy Ridge. In 2000, the body in the grave was exhumed, flown to Ottawa, and reburied in the shadow of the National War Memorial.

As we take our leave of the new Canadian War Museum, I'm once again met by the sweeping vista of LeBreton Flats; meanwhile, the torrential rain has been reduced to a slight drizzle. It has taken us nearly four hours to tour the colossal building, and I estimate we walked well over a kilometre.

If I have any regrets concerning my visit it is that there was almost too much to see. The considerable crowds flocking to the newly opened attraction could also be a bit objectionable to deal with at times. It is reported that the new museum drew close to 129,000 visitors in its first month.

Overall, I agree with critics who have hailed the project as a triumph, one in which brilliant architecture and first-rate interior design come together. I'm grateful that I was able to travel across our vast nation and experience what I hope will be one of Canada's most enduring cultural treasures. ■