

THE

BEECHWOOD^{WAY}

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NATIONAL MILITARY CEMETERY OF THE CANADIAN FORCES

A 20-year retrospective

by Brigadier General Gerry Peddle (Retired),
Chair of the Beechwood Board of Directors

20 YEARS HAVE GONE BY since then Governor General Adrienne Clarkson officially opened the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces at Beechwood (June 28, 2001). Defence Minister Art Eggleton and Chief of Defence Staff General Maurice Baril participated in the ceremony held on a beautiful, sunny Ottawa morning. It featured all the tradition military ceremonial including a 21 gun salute, a full GGFG Ceremonial Guard parading in scarlet tunics and a fly-past by CF-18 fighter jets in lost-man formation.

However, the creation of the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces was not an overnight decision and took several years of planning, dialogue and conversations. A conversation with historian Jack Granatstein, who at that time was the head of the Canadian War Museum, set some planning in motion. With speculation that the new Canadian War Museum would be built at the Rockcliffe Air Base, Robert (Bob) White, then a member of the Beechwood Board, requested an introductory meeting between the two organizations to discuss possible partnership opportunities including creating a link to the Field of Honour (Section 27), which has over 2,400 graves including the graves of Second World War Generals Charles Foulkes and Henry Crerar. At that meeting, Beechwood also learned that DND wished to create a National Military Cemetery, here in Ottawa.

As CDS at the time, General Baril was personally committed to creating a National Military Cemetery as he believed that DND had the responsibility of providing a dignified final resting place for Canadian Forces members, particularly those killed in the line of duty, and that responsibility was not currently being met.

With the initiative and guidance of Bob White, Beechwood jumped at the opportunity to connect with DND and to offer insights and help. Bob then began a long and detailed process of conversation, consultation and detailed planning with Commodore Glen Davidson, a senior officer in DND, who, in their first meeting explained that the Rockcliffe property had been transferred to Lands Canada and that General Baril's vision might, unfortunately, have been put on hold.

Following that first meeting, several conversations and meetings were held to develop a plan that would allow General Baril's dream to become a reality. Both Beechwood and DND knew that a partnership, similar to those already existing in





the Veterans Section or the Commonwealth War Graves section or the newly established cultural community sections, would be necessary. Since Beechwood had plenty of available land that could meet the needs, an offer was made by the Beechwood Board to provide about 5 acres of land for the exclusive use as Canada's National Cemetery. A key step, before moving forward was to get approval from General Baril who, upon touring the proposed site, remarked:

"We have been offered the high ground of the Cemetery, in sight of our Parliament, next to veterans of previous wars and among the thousands of Canadians buried in Beechwood. This is exactly what we want."

Over the next weeks and months, many meetings were held between Beechwood and DND (primarily with Bob White, Commodore Davidson and Tim Graham, the then General Manager of Beechwood) to reach agreement on details. It was subsequently agreed that the land would be granted to the Canadian Forces provided that they would fund the landscape development and allow Beechwood to charge a reasonable rate for each burial. Beechwood prepared a three-page letter, which was signed by then Chair, Dr. David Roger, a veteran of WW2, and addressed to General Baril, which provided an outline of how the arrangement might work. The final paragraph stated:

"The Board makes this proposal in a spirit of public service, and with the interests of our Nation, our Canadian heritage and our Canadian Armed Forces in mind. We trust that it will be received in the same spirit, and that we may look forward to working together to realize this most important and worthy objective."

With a bit more work on all sides and Treasury Board approval, the agreement was finalized and formalized in a joint Memorandum of Understanding. Inspired by Commonwealth Cemeteries around the world, it was decided to have uniform headstones and ordered plantings. Generals would lie next to privates and rank would carry no privilege. There would be a central monument on the highest point of the land. The site of the monument and flags would offer a striking visual and symbolic link to the established Veterans Section in Beechwood, thus connecting the heritage of the past and the Canadian Forces of today and the future.

The central monument was inspired by the design of the First World War Passchendaele memorial in Flanders. Commodore Davidson authored the inscription, which was approved by General Baril, and which reads as follows:

**TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF CANADA'S ARMED FORCES WHO HAVE
SERVED THEIR NATION WITH DISTINCTION IN WAR AND IN PEACE**

Over the same period, Beechwood Management directed all of the business aspects relating to getting the National Military Cemetery up and running at Beechwood. The actual construction of the new five-acre section in accordance with the agreed upon landscape design was a major challenge since it involved eliminating a road that had previously been built and moving a great deal of earth.

Other functions included contracting for the central monument, surveying the land for plots, setting specifications for the individual monuments and ensuring that Beechwood had the required staff in place to meet DND's needs. On DND's side, there were also numerous tasks to be completed including finalizing the funding authorization through Treasury Board, writing appropriate policies and procedures and developing the communications program. Many individuals played a significant role in getting this cemetery off the ground.

On October 19, 2000, Treasury Board approved the establishment of the National Military Cemetery at Beechwood and authorized funding based upon the estimates that had been developed earlier in the year. The formal Memorandum of Understanding between DND and Beechwood, which is a very simple five-page document, was signed at National Defence Headquarters on March 2, 2001. Three days later the Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Art Eggleton, formally announced the creation of the National Military Cemetery.

A lot has developed in the last 20 years, including the unveiling the Tri-Service Monument on June 28, 2004. Inscribed on each side is a poem representing each branch of the Canadian Forces: *The Naval Hymn* for the Navy, *In Flanders Fields* for the Army and *When I Think of Famous Men* for the Air Force.

A further key development took place on September 13th, 2007, with the formal establishment of the National Military Cemetery. This connected all the military sections in Beechwood including the Last Post Fund Section (19), the Commonwealth War Graves Section (29) and the Veteran's Field of Honour (27).

As Beechwood Cemetery grew both as the National Military Cemetery and the National Cemetery of Canada, the Beechwood National Memorial Centre was created. Officially opened in April 2008 by the Governor General Michaëlle Jean, the nine-sided Sacred Space, within the Beechwood National Memorial Centre is considered to be unique in the world. The Department of National Defence heavily supported the development of this centre with a cheque presented by the Defence Staff General. This cheque was also considered advance payments for future interments of those killed on duty. This support augmented the MOU and helped Beechwood create the Hall of Colours that exclusively serves the memorial needs of Canadian Forces Units.





Over the course of the last 20 years, the National Military Cemetery has become a focal point for commemorations in Ottawa.

The retired Colours of Canada's Army, Navy and Air Force are mounted at ceiling level. Following tradition, these Colours will remain honourably suspended and untouched until, with the passing of time, they completely disintegrate. The Hall features a beautiful memorial stained-glass window, called "Hope in a Broken World," which was donated by the Canadian Military Chaplains' Association.

When Beechwood began upgrading its maintenance facilities in the 2010's, it also helped build the Memorial Cross Building, which provides office and training space for the National Military Cemetery Staff and Honour Guards who provide services at each military funeral service and burial. We will share more about this greater history in a future article.

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More importantly, the National Military Cemetery has become hallowed ground in Canada for military burials for all Canadian Armed Forces Members, Veterans and their families. Over the years the cemetery has grown from a couple of dozen headstones, to nearly 4000 headstones.

Ultimately, Beechwood feels that the National Military Cemetery has met the goal that was set out two decades ago – to provide a dignified final resting place for Canadian Forces members.

As we reflect on the last twenty years, we also look forward to the next phases and new developments in our cemetery. It's a great comfort to know that for generations to come, the National Military Cemetery will serve all Members and Veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces. Lest We Forget.

Please note some of the quotes have been taken from Robert White's, [The History of the National Military Cemetery](#), 2011, Beechwood Cemetery Foundation. Mr. White is currently Director Emeritus of the Beechwood Board.