and transport

Down but not out

Sergeant Daniel J. MacDonald of Prince Edward Island served with the Cape Breton Highlanders in Italy during the Second World War. He was badly wounded during fighting at the Tavoli River on December 21, 1944, losing his left arm and leg when a German shell exploded nearby. MacDonald would not let these injuries derail the rest of his life, however, and he returned home to PEI where he farmed, got married and raised seven children.

MacDonald's experience in the Second World War would become etched in the memories of many veterans who would serve in the Korean War. But for Sergeant MacDonald, it was the beginning of a career in federal politics.

MacDonald served as a Liberal MP for Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia from 1962 to 1965 before being appointed to the Senate in 1966. He served as Minister of Veterans Affairs from 1974 to 1993, and as Minister of Veterans Affairs and Minister of State for the Status of Women from 1993 to 1997.

His appointment as Minister of Veterans Affairs was significant because it was the first time a veteran had served in this role. MacDonald's work in the ministry was characterized by his commitment to ensuring that veterans received the support they needed.

In 1995, MacDonald was appointed Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces. He served in this role until 1999.

MacDonald left a legacy of honour and respect for Canadian veterans, and his contributions to the support of veterans were recognized in 2001 with the naming of the Frank J. MacDonald Centre for Veterans Policy and Leadership at Carleton University.

MacDonald passed away on November 26, 2019, at the age of 86. He was survived by his wife, the Honourable, Senator Margaret S. MacDonald, and their two children.

We will remember him. We will remember them all.

Vice-Admiral Mark Norman, CMM, CD, Governor General of Canada from 2000 to 2004, said of MacDonald, "He was a champion of the rights and interests of our veterans and a tireless advocate for their well-being and the well-being of all Canadians."

Sergeant MacDonald left a lasting legacy in the support of veterans and in the political arena. His contributions will be remembered for years to come.
Looking Back on Afghanistan

Our country’s best-known military effort in recent years was Canada’s mission in Afghanistan. More than 40,000 Canadian Armed Forces members served in Afghanistan, making it our largest deployment of troops since the Second World War.

While combat operations and working in a very hostile environment were a major part of what our men and women in uniform did, there were important contributions that were part of the picture. Many Veterans also remember with pride the humanitarian, infrastructure development and nation-building projects that Canada undertook in Afghanistan. Efforts like constructing a major dam, road-building, helping girls access schooling and training the Afghan police and military forces were important elements of Canada’s overall mission.

Service in Afghanistan was often very dangerous and some 138 Canadian Armed Forces members lost their lives in theatre. Being in stressful situations and facing constant risk, many of our Veterans in Afghanistan told us that when they harm their comrades, can take a heavy psychological toll. The wounds of military service are not always visible and a difficult legacy for many Veterans of the Afghanistan mission. There has been post-traumatic stress disorder and other occupational stress injuries.

March 2019 marked the 15th anniversary of the end of Canada’s mission in Afghanistan and this milestone was commemorated with a ceremony at the National War Memorial in Ottawa. We remember all those who served and those who gave their lives in the cause of peace and freedom.

Clearing the Scheldt

The year 1944 was pivotal in the Second World War as it saw the beginning of the liberation of Western Europe after more than four years of harsh German occupation. Following victory in the Battle of Normandy in France that summer, the Allies pushed north and east in pursuit of the retreating enemy forces. The Allies had to capture a number of key ports to keep their troops supplied with what they needed. The major Belgian port of Antwerp was under German occupation September but there was a problem; it was 80 kilometres from the open sea and ships had to navigate the West Scheldt estuary to reach the docks—a watery pass that passed through parts of Belgium and the Netherlands still held by the Germans. The vital task of clearing its shores would largely fall to the First Canadian Army.

Much of the Battle of the Scheldt that autumn took place over flat and flooded terrain, which was a nightmare for the advancing Canadians. The heavy mud that stuck to soldiers and machines, the many dikes and canals that had to be crossed, and a battle-hardened enemy made the campaign a nightmare. Indeed, some of the toughest fighting of the entire Second World War took place there but the Allies persevered. The final portion of the Scheldt was liberated by early November and shipping to Antwerp began flowing later that month.

More than 6,000 Canadian soldiers were killed in the Battle of the Scheldt. The memory of the terrible fighting there would haunt many of our Veterans for years to come. This fall marks the 75th anniversary of this important campaign and the memory lives on.

A lifetime of service

This year marks the 120th anniversary of the beginning of the South African War in October 1889. Many Canadians served during the conflict, including Eugène Fiset. Born in Rimouski, Quebec, in 1874, he entered the 89 Regiment at the young age of 16. He studied medicine at Laval University, graduating in time to volunteer as the regimental surgeon for the Royal Canadian Regiment which sailed to South Africa in 1899.

Fiset would see plenty of action overseas treading to the sick and wounded. He did not shy away from getting in the heat of the action. During the opening day of the Battle of Paardeberg on February 18, 1900, Fiset braved heavy enemy fire to treat wounded soldiers and help bring in the badly wounded. Eighty Canadians died that day and 60 more were wounded. For his selfless actions during the conflict, Fiset was awarded the Queen’s Medal with four bars and later received the Distinguished Service Order.

After returning home, First’s service to Canada continued. He rose through the ranks, eventually becoming a major-general during the First World War. Among honours for his distinguished service, Fiset was knighted by King George V in 1917. After retiring from the military, Fiset became a respected politician, sitting in the House of Commons from 1924 to 1939, before serving as Lieutenant Governor of Quebec from 1939 to 1950.

A large contingent of Canadians served in Cyprus until 1993, spending countless hours clearing the Green Line and diffusing conflicts between the two sides. While we no longer have a large force based there, Canada’s military commitment continues today with Operation Suroye. More than 25,000 of our men and women in uniforms have deployed to Cyprus over the years, with 28 losing their lives.

Canadian peacekeepers in Cyprus

One of Canada’s best-known peace support efforts has been on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, a country split by years of war. In the beginning of the liberation of Western Europe after more than four years of harsh German occupation. Following victory in the Battle of Normandy in France that summer, the Allies pushed north and east in pursuit of the retreating enemy forces. The Allies had to capture a number of key ports to keep their troops supplied with what they needed. The major Belgian port of Antwerp was under German occupation September but there was a problem; it was 80 kilometres from the open sea and ships had to navigate the West Scheldt estuary to reach the docks—a watery pass that passed through parts of Belgium and the Netherlands still held by the Germans. The vital task of clearing its shores would largely fall to the First Canadian Army.

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Canadian served with great courage during the Second World War. Three of the bravest of the brave were awarded the Victoria Cross (VC)—the highest award for military valor.

Pilot Officer Andrew Mynarski of Manitoba was a crew member in a Lancaster bomber that was attacked over occupied France on June 12-13, 1944. The pilot ordered his crew to parachute from the burning plane but Mynarski saw that the tail gunner, Pat Brophy, was trapped. He tried to free him but could not and Brophy told him to save himself. Reluctantly, Mynarski allowed his friend and jumped from the plane, his clothes on fire. Somehow Brophy survived the crash of the bomber but the severely burned Mynarski died. He had given his life to help another and was posthumously awarded the VC.

Corporal Satgunanathan in uniform. Shangary’s sense of adventure led her to Canada when she was a teenager. She witnessed many wounds of war and experienced the harsh reality of war, as she was declared a Person of National Historic Significance in 2007. She paved the way for many women, inspiring them and showing that any goal is attainable through hard work and determination.

Major David Currie

Sergeant Ernest “Smokey” Smith loved a good fight. He got a chance to demonstrate this in German-occupied Italy on October 21-22, 1944, when his position came under heavy fire during an enemy attack. Using whatever weapons he could lay his hands on in the thick of the battle, Smith singlehandedly destroyed a German tank, took out attacking soldiers, helped a wounded friend to safety, and then returned to guard the road until reinforcements arrived. His persistence and devotion to duty earned him the VC.

Shangary’s family immigrated to Canada when she was a teenager. Settling in Toronto, it was a new beginning. Shangary’s sense of adventure led her to join the Canadian Army Reserves. Years later, she served in a military hospital in Afghanistan with the Canadian Armed Forces. She witnessed many wounds of war and experienced the harsh reality that not everyone can be saved.

Shangary has retired from the military but serving in uniform was rewarding for her because she gained new knowledge about our country’s history and the sacrifices that had been made to keep Canada free. Joining the Canadian Armed Forces also gave Shangary the opportunity to give back to her adoptive nation and thank those who had served before her.

Canada’s “fightingest ship”

HMCS Haida docked in Hamilton. Tens of thousands of Canadian women answered the call to work in factories during the Second World War at a time when women in the Canadian military were not yet permitted to serve in combat roles. They contributed to the war effort by keeping our country’s industrial production growing and freeing up more men to fight overseas. However, not all women pitched in quite the way Elsie MacGill did!

Elsie MacGill was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1905. She was remarkable in many ways, becoming the first woman to earn an electrical engineering degree in Canada and later was the first female aircraft designer in the world. She is best known for her work during the Second World War as the Chief Aeronautical Engineer supervising the production of the much-needed Hawker Hurricane fighter airplanes at a factory in Fort William, Ontario. Her efforts earned MacGill the nickname “Queen of the Hurricanes.”

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Paying it forward

Corporal Sampson meeting Tuyishime in Rwanda.

Sammy Sampson greeting his old friend Tuyishime at the Giaya airport in 2014.

Did you know?

The First World War erupted 105 years ago on August 4, 1914. More than 650,000 Canadians would serve in the war, which ended in victory when an armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.

Canada’s impressive achievements helped our country earn new respect on the international stage but the price was steep, with more than 66,000 of our men and women in uniform losing their lives.

Canada Remembers Times

Three faces of freedom

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The sky is no limit

Lincoln Alexander was born on January 21, 1922, in Toronto, Ontario. He grew up during an era when being a person of colour meant often facing great discrimination. A determined young man, he decided to join the Royal Canadian Air Force when he was 20 years old, one of only a few dozen Black Canadians who would be accepted in our country’s air force during the Second World War. Corporal Alexander trained as a wireless operator in Ontario and Quebec, before serving at a British Commonwealth Air Training Plan base in Manitoba.

After the war, Alexander studied history and law at university. He would be a trailblazer in many ways, being inspired to spread their wings and search for “Invictus.” Perhaps you have heard of Chris Hadfield. He has written children’s books, recorded music videos in space, sung songs streamed from outer space, operated the Canadarm, and performed a spacewalk. He returned to Earth to stay in 2013, boots on the ground after a high-flying career.

Lincoln Alexander was also born on January 21, 1922, in Toronto, Ontario. His vessel was sunk twice” did not apply to Percy Kelly. While he was captain of the SS Lady Drake, his vessel was again sunk by a U-boat on May 3, 1942, killing 12 people. The 256 survivors were picked up two days later. Again, Captain Kelly was key in keeping everyone calm. For his courage, he was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In two sinkings, he had helped save more than 1,500 Canadians who served in the Merchant Navy during the war.

The old saying “lightning never strikes twice” did not apply to Percy Kelly. When his vessel was sunk by a U-boat, Captain Kelly was mainly in keeping everyone calm. For his courage, he was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In two sinkings, he had helped save more than 1,500 Canadians who served in the Merchant Navy during the war.

During the Second World War, some 12,000 Canadians sailed with the Merchant Navy, risking their lives to transport supplies for the war effort. Extreme weather and accidents were a constant threat but enemy action is what caused the most losses. German submarines, called U-boats, were very active in the Atlantic Ocean. On January 19, 1942, the Canadian transport vessel SS Lady Hawke, carrying passengers and cargo, was hit by torpedoes and sank within 30 minutes, claiming 250 lives. Only one lifeboat was able to escape, with some 75 people. It took five days, but the survivors were finally rescued. Many explained that they survived because Chief Officer Percy Kelly was able to keep them calm and took time of distributing the scarce food rations.

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Lincoln Alexander during his time as Lieutenant Governor of Ontario.

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