

The Barrie Cenotaph:
The Monument, and its Modern Implications

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July 15, 2020

At the very heart of Barrie, Ontario's downtown, amidst increasing development, one old symbol reminds each of us daily of the cost of the lives we've made here. The Barrie Cenotaph, located in Memorial Square, Meridian Place, stands in the place of dozens of Simcoe County soldiers and workers who gave their lives over decades to the missions of Canada's Military. Valour's ideology of courage cannot be denied in these personelle, many of whom braved the soils of Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele and Sanctuary Wood. Later soldiers fought on European Soil in the Second World War, and a few Simcoe residents served during the Korean War and on missions in Afghanistan. Another Valour trait key to the Cenotaph's history is responsibility, in this case, our community's responsibility to these fallen soldiers to ensure their sacrifice is commemorated, the reality of their situation taught and their records and legacies preserved physically and in the minds of residents. Finally, Valour's ideal of thoughtfulness is on full display in the physical characteristics of the monument itself. It's location, design and nature as Barrie's cultural centre are all artistic choices meant to honour the fallen through intentional, beautiful tribute. These three qualities are traits we as citizens should seek to practice, and the Cenotaph serves as a solemn but proud reminder of the values Barrie was founded upon, as well as who upheld those same values.

Of the soldiers listed on the Cenotaph, many were involved in the battle of Vimy Ridge, a conflict that fills the Canadian imagination with immense pride. While Vimy may have been mytholized in the minds of Canadians, it was still a serious military triumph. The famous conflict took place in April of 1917, when a carefully plotted military staged an attack on the residing German forces. Canadian casualties exceeded 10,000, but after only four days, Canadian soldiers had taken the territory. Now, though their remains lay in France, soil from Vimy brought back to lay near the Cenotaph allows a piece of the fallen soldiers to return home. Battlefields like this one were hellish. Soldiers stared down a line of gunfire, wove

through thick mud and filthy trenches, black skies above them. To triumph amidst these conditions required great conviction, and even greater courage. When one looks at the Cenotaph, they see loss, the tragedy of war, but they also reflect on the bravery exhibited by these warriors. Inscribed on the back of the Cenotaph's main pillar are a list of some of the battles fought by Canadian forces, and behind each name, each field or cliff resides a story of courage.

As a result of the courage and sacrifice of these soldiers, we have a responsibility to honour them properly. In Barrie's case, we chose to erect the Cenotaph. The word "cenotaph" comes from the Greek words "kenos", meaning "empty", and "taphos", meaning tomb.¹ It is a monument to the dead, when the dead rest elsewhere. In the case of the majority of fallen soldiers represented on Barrie's Cenotaph, their remains never returned home, and so the tomb in the centre of town lays empty. Wanting to ensure more than the names of these soldiers were remembered, local historians' works were used to compile a digital database naming every Simcoe County soldier who fell in battle. This database included their full name, military rank, the war in which they served, the date of their passing as well as the location where their remains lay.² In this way, the people of Barrie took responsibility for the individual legacies of these soldiers, and ensured there existed a more detailed record of their lives. This can be seen around the city as well. Beside more than three-quarters of the soldiers' names there is an image of a poppy, meaning, a city street has been named after that soldier. It's overwhelming just how many poppys there are, how the streets themselves have been lined by tribute. Now, while this database was built from the records of Barrie historians, it was actually conceptualized as a digital resource by Nantyr Shores High School

¹ "Cenotaph." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed July 10, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cenotaph>.

² "We Remember." Honouring the Military. Barrie.ca. Accessed July 11, 2020. <https://www.barrie.ca/Culture/Heritage/Pages/Honouring-the-Military.aspx>.

teacher Mr. Craig Froese, who while planning a school trip abroad to the Vimy Memorial, assigned each of his students to research a soldier listed on the Cenotaph. This grew into a community project, and students' findings were used to produce the archive, now found on the city of Barrie's website. This community dedication to ensuring the records of these soldiers' lives remain accessible and detailed demonstrates the people's acceptance of the the responsibility carried by living in the town the fallen once called home.

Initially the Cenotaph was constructed to honour Simcoe County's soldiers who fell during the First World War. The Cenotaph is unique in that it lists 1919 as the end year of the war, rather than 1918. This is because while many consider the end of the First World War to have come with the formal surrender of German forces on November 11, 1918, the team behind the statue instead decided to designate June 28, 1919, the date of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles as the complete end of the war. As a result, the monument was dedicated on that same day in 1922.³

The Cenotaph was constructed by the Toronto-based McIntosh Marble and Granite Company, who were responsible for the construction of various other Canadian cenotaphs. It was chosen from a variety of local submissions, and features a statue of a male figure dressed in uniform. His helmet is removed as he places a floral wreath upon a crucifix grave, representing a fallen comrade. His expression is solemn as he looks down from his pedestal, stone eyes filled with grief, personifying the community and nation's sense of devastating loss.

The figure itself was made from local Barrie granite, while the pedestal he stands upon was carved from granite sourced from Stanstead Quebec, like many other similar cenotaphs.

³ Ramsay, J. "Barrie Cenotaph's War Ended in 1919." Simcoe.com, November 11, 2010. <https://www.simcoe.com/news-story/1991805-barrie-cenotaph-s-war-ended-in-1919/>.

Etched into each of the four faces of the pedestal are the names of various Simcoe County soldiers who fell during the First World War. They are divided by their home regions, the communities of Barrie, Innisfil and Vespra, all under the Simcoe County umbrella.

Underneath them are carved emblems significant to the soldiers. These include the insignias of Canada's Military Engineers Branch, Royal Canadian Medical Services, Artillery Branch and Air Operations Branch.⁴ There are also two numbers, 157 and 177. These are the numbers of two Simcoe County-based battalions raised by the Grey and Simcoe Foresters. This group, a Canadian artillery regiment combining groups based in the Owen Sound and Barrie regions, holds a storied history dating back to their formation in September of 1866. They were active in both world wars and are still operating to this day, maintaining a small museum near the Barrie cenotaph.⁵

More recently, two new slabs were added to the Cenotaph, commemorating fallen Simcoe County soldiers from the Second World War, Korean War and peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan. Beyond this, other Canadians serving in conflict are commemorated elsewhere, for example, along the Downtown Barrie waterfront trail one may pass through Military Heritage Park. There one will find, among many other plaques and symbolic gardens, another granite monument commemorating all Canadian Victoria Cross recipients, including those who fought in conflicts such as the Boer Wars.

In 2017, Memorial Square was reimagined as a significant part of the Downtown revitalization process, and thus, the Cenotaph entered a new chapter. The monument would be reworked into the centerpiece of a new outdoor hub, displaying numerous aspects of the

⁴ Government of Canada. "Gallery of Canadian Forces Badges." Canada.ca, November 25, 2019. <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/defence/caf/military-identity-system/canadian-forces-badges.html>.

⁵ "Historical Photos." The Grey & Simcoe Foresters - Historical Photos. Accessed July 13, 2020. <http://www.thegreyandsimcoeforesters.org/jsite/index.php/museum-history-and-heritage/historical-photos>.

region's culture within the new community space. A large walking platform was constructed and a new base built for the statue, both stabilizing and preserving it, as well as allowing it to stand even taller. This new Memorial Square measures ten times larger than its predecessor, and is more visible and well maintained than ever before.

The Cenotaph in Memorial Square has been placed in a location of prominence, symbolically located at the heart of Barrie's Downtown. It is framed by the bustling city buildings with our beloved Lake Simcoe as it's backdrop. Great care and attention have been employed in the design of Memorial Square, as the space is creatively filled with countless allusions to our city's history and culture. At each corner of the square there is a red maple tree planted, each representing one of the four divisions of the Canadian Corps, all of whom united in battle for the first time at Vimy Ridge. Often in the evenings, each tree is lit in one of the colours of these divisions, these being red, green, grey and blue, using covered bulbs placed underneath each plant.⁶ To the side, an urn containing soil from Vimy is encased in stone, and decorated with a maple leaf. This urn was placed in its casing during the unveiling of the new Memorial Square in June of 2018. It was brought to the square by a procession of veterans, current military personnel, Canadian dignitaries and local figures during the opening ceremonies.⁷ Beyond the Cenotaph, one can descend the stairs to reach the amphitheater, a public space used in many community events. Inlaid in these steps, also the amphitheater tiered seats, are dozens of bronze poppies, another reminder of the grim cost of our community's comfort and safety. Other aspects of the region's history can be found on these steps. Up the stairs, a bronze pathway represents a portion of the Nine Mile Portage, a key trade and travel route used by the Huron and Ouendat peoples. An inscription on the square's platform shows

⁶ "The New Meridian Place & Memorial Square." Meridian Place, 2018. <https://meridianplace.downtownbarrie.ca/the-place/>.

⁷ The Maple Leaf. "The Long Journey Home: Sacred Soil from Vimy Ridge Repatriated in Ontario." The Maple Leaf, July 11, 2018. <https://ml-fd.caf-fac.ca/en/2018/07/15977>.

where the old Fred Grant street ran, commemorating the esteemed Barrie historian's legacy. Recently, beaver statues, painted by local artists detail key aspects of Barrie's current culture, pulling images from our bustling theatre scene, our robust and historical downtown and our waterfront, though the most beautiful element is the large rendering of the Spirit Catcher statue painted on the beaver's back, a large iron thunderbird overlooking Lake Simcoe. All of these elements come together to produce an artistic tribute to the city of Barrie, and the surrounding Simcoe County area. Through the redesign of Memorial Square, the Valour ideal of thoughtfulness is exemplified. Every inch of the space has been carefully considered so as to produce a worthy tribute, built to last.⁸

Overall, the Barrie Cenotaph plays a key role in our community. It is an essential portion of our city's history, and serves as a prominent reminder of the legacy of those we've lost. We recall the courage of the soldiers who, far from home, braved the chaos of the battlefield. We as a community are reminded of our responsibility to tell their stories, to make their sacrifice visible within our everyday lives. Finally, we think critically, we are thoughtful about how we present our tributes. Artists, historians, builders, politicians and more, each of us play a role in dedicating space to the act of remembrance, of demonstrating our culture and sharing our history. This is the legacy the Barrie Cenotaph thrusts upon us each day as we drive through the downtown. As we look out towards Lake Simcoe, at the names of our fallen ancestors, we are asked to consider what their sacrifice means for us.

⁸ Downtown Barrie Business Improvement Association. "THE NEW MERIDIAN PLACE & MEMORIAL SQUARE," 2018. <https://meridianplace.downtownbarrie.ca/the-place/>.