

Memorials of GCVI

June 15, 2022

Minnie Deng

DOB: -----

Hometown: Guelph, ON

School: Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute

The oldest high school in Guelph, Ontario, was founded in 1854. Located in the downtown portion of the city, Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute (more commonly known as GCVI) holds 1700 students every year as of 2022. As a recent graduate of this school, I am proud to present the ways in which the school honours and remembers the effort, sacrifice, and emotion of both students and alumni of international conflict through our memorials.. This essay explores the historical contexts, significance, and current meanings of the numerous war memorials of GCVI.

The first memorial stands outside the school at the corner of Paisley and Yorkshire: the “arch”. Fully installed in fall of 2018, the arch commemorates 100 years since the end of the Great War. Its placement ensures that both commuters entering the school via the front parking lot or through the front “Steps”, walkers from downtown, and the bus-goers arriving from the bus stops on Paisley Street alike will see or even walk under the “arch”. Although the main purpose of the “arch” is to celebrate GCVI’s history as a whole, it does not fail to include GCVI’s military history. This history is represented in both the red poppies in its design, as well as the left plaque on the front side of the arch. The school’s military history is a proud and mournful constant of its identity. And as all of the GCVI community and the surrounding Guelph neighbourhood pass by this memorial, they are reminded of the school’s military contributions; “lest we forget”, as engraved in the memorial.

Continuing on by heading inside the building is where one will find the vast majority of GCVI’s memorials. The hallway on the main floor parallel to the front parking lot and doors is named Valour Hall. Anyone passing through this hallway will notice that the inner wall opposite to the classrooms holds a number of plaques, parchment scrolls, and paintings.

Passersby will also note not to step on the large poppy painted onto the floor. Each plaque and parchment scroll pays respect to the GCVI alumni soldiers who served in different wars.

Probably the memorial in Valour Hall which is most thought about is the installation named “Lest We Forget”¹, although most in the GCVI community simply call it “the poppy”. First placed in 2016, then restored in 2019 due to a crack in the travertine, the placement of the poppy on the floor of a high school is a unique spot for a memorial. An important tradition of at GCVI is to step around the poppy to show respect for those who gave their lives in war. This action promotes active remembrance and thoughtfulness in our daily lives.

All other memorials in Valour Hall are placed on the wall. The oldest of these is a framed parchment scroll inscribed with the ex-GCVI students who volunteered for service in the Boer War (1899-1902). There are seven total names presented. Although the war occurred in South Africa, Canadian soldiers were called upon to aid the British Uitlanders against the Boers². This aid was entirely voluntary, and the courage of the seven GCVI alumni volunteers is recognized with this memorial.

The second framed parchment scroll presents a list of 30 names of ex-GCVI students who volunteered for service in the Great War (1914-1918). Similar to participation in the Boer War, Canadians initially were not required to enrol; the list of volunteers in this memorial are therefore presented with recognition for their courage for voluntarily serving in the Great War. Although the service of many more GCVI pupils was received later in the war due to the introduction of conscription in 1917, the purpose of this memorial is to commend

¹ W. Darroch, "John McCrae," GCVI, last modified December 2015, accessed June 14, 2022, <https://www.ugdsb.ca/gcvi/about-us/alumni-association/reflections-and-memories/war-time-for-gcvi/john-mccrae/>.

² John M. Bassett, *John McCrae* (Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984), 14.

the courage of volunteers. The accuracy of this memorial, however, may be debated as Lt. John McCrae, who volunteered with the First Contingent in October 1914³, is not listed in this memorial.

Directly above this parchment scroll hangs the engraved bronze plaque which honours students and ex-students of GCVI who gave their lives in the Great War. A total of 36 names are engraved in this plaque.

The next plaque honours an individual: Lt. Col. John McCrae M.D., who was not only a Canadian, but also an alumni of GCVI. His poem, "In Flanders Fields", became the most popular poem of the Great War, and is the reason why poppies are used to symbolize remembrance today. John McCrae also wrote many other poems throughout his life and throughout his service, one of which is featured on this plaque alongside McCrae's many other achievements in education and in the military. On the same wall, McCrae's name is also listed in the previously mentioned Boer War memorial of volunteers and the Great War memorial for those who died in service. The section of wall to the right also features a portrait painting of John McCrae by artist Robert W. McCorkindale⁴, hanging alone above a variety of painted poppies.

To the right again of John McCrae's portrait is a painting by the artist Lance Russwurm. Titled "Rommel Under Attack", it pictures a black car pursued by two fighter aircraft⁵. The framed edition hanging at our school is signed by both the artist as well as Charley Fox D.F.C. & Bar, the Canadian pilot who strafed the black car, fatally wounding

³ John F. Prescott, *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*, rev. ed. (Guelph, Ont.: Guelph Historical Society, 2003), 76-80.

⁴ Darroch, "John McCrae," GCVI.

⁵ Lance Russwurm, *Rommel Under Attack*, painting.

Feldmarschall “Desert Fox” Rommel. Although other French and American pilots have claimed credit for this action, a 2004 study by Michel Lavigne concluded from data logs that Charley Fox was, in fact, the pilot who strafed Rommel⁶. Like every other name in Valour Hall, Flight Lieutenant Charley Fox was an alumni of GCVI⁷.

The biggest plaque on the wall is the plaque which honours soldiers who gave their lives in the Second World War. There are 102 names on this plaque, each belonging to either a GCVI alumni or someone who was a GCVI student at the time.

On that plaque, amongst those who died in service in the Second World War, is Cpt. John Kenneth MacAlister. His story was so striking that his own plaque was designated to him, adjacent to John McCrae’s plaque. MacAlister was also a GCVI alumni, and his story is as follows⁸: after graduating from GCVI, he became a graduate of the law school of the University of Toronto. In 1937, he was one out of the two Canadian Rhodes Scholars, a prestigious award presented by the New College of Oxford awarding a fully paid masters degree⁹. When the Second World War started he, alongside other scholars of Britain, were recruited into the British Intelligence Corps. MacAlister worked as a spy for the British, and ended up being captured and hanged in a Nazi Concentration camp on September 14, 1944¹⁰. MacAlister, along with 15 other Allied spies, were tortured for months then hanged with

⁶ "Charley Fox, the Canadian pilot who stopped Rommel in Normandy," Charley Fox, accessed June 13, 2022, <https://charleyfox.com/>.

⁷ Acta Nostra, "GCVI Yearbook," 1945, in *Guelph: Military History*, comp. GCVI Library Learning Commons

⁸ *In Memory of Captain John Kenneth MacAlister*, plaque, GCVI Valour Hall, Guelph, ON Canada.

⁹ Kerry Mullen, GCVI History teacher, interview by the author, GCVI, Guelph, ON Canada, June 10, 2022.

¹⁰ Andrew Bruce, "Friends turn memories into scholarships," *The Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, ON), May 8, 1995.

piano wire¹¹ - a painful and slow death. Not only that, the Nazis cruelly took their bodies and skinned them to create “souvenir lampshades for the SS”¹².

Stories like MacAlister’s convey the truths about war: pain, suffering, and the torment and atrocities inflicted upon survivors and the dead alike. Remembrance is to respect the sacrifices made, because while politics may start wars, soldiers consistently fight to end them. Furthermore, not only do memorials preserve the sufferings of the soldier, they capture the hurt of all the others affected by conflict. A common lesson can be learned from all memorials: conflict and war should be avoided, lest more people endure its agonies.

It is very fitting for these lessons to be accessible in a learning environment. Yearly, about 400 Grade 10 students take the mandatory history course. With some exceptions in the past two years due to lockdowns and restrictions, all students are taken down to Valour Hall to learn about these memorials. GCVI ensures that all students, regardless of academic auspiciousness, receive exposure to these alumni, their stories and their sacrifice. The memorials in Valour Hall play a significant role in communicating the various lessons to be passed on through generations.

In addition to mandatory education, GCVI also offers students a chance to participate more directly in remembering soldiers. The Juno Beach Centre offers every Grade 10 history student a chance to donate a total of \$500 to engrave and install a brick through their Commemorative Brick Program¹³, as coordinated by the teachers. Each brick is engraved with a name of an ex-student of GCVI who died in service in the Second World War. So far,

¹¹ Carl Nelson, "Dying in the Dark," *The Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, ON), May 8, 1995

¹² "Newspaper article from Britain" via Andrew Bruce, "Friends turn memories into scholarships," *The Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, ON), May 8, 1995.

¹³ Juno Beach Centre, accessed June 14, 2022, <https://www.junobeach.org/commemorative-brick-program/>.

GCVI Grade 10 history classes through the years have bought bricks for just over half of the 102 soldiers who gave their life in the Second World War.

The locality of the memorials adds an element of closeness. The memorials of GCVI connect past students with current ones, and keeps the memory of them alive. Every name presented in any GCVI memorial attended the same school as every one of us. Lt. Col. John McCrae also walked under the preserved stone arch which now frames the entrance to our auditorium. The dents in the limestone stairs of the “old building”, built in 1923, was equally eroded by us as any person on the Honour Roll plaque of the Second World War. Their stories are our to remember and pass on. A memorial is a cooperative effort not restricted by generation.

A common modern perspective on Canadian war memorials, especially as an immigrant, is the erasure of non-white and minority struggles. It is easy and reasonable to harbour resentment for the history of colonizer countries due to the adverse, wide-spread, long-term, and impactful consequences of colonization. Furthermore, even the history surrounding the events of the memorials can be a reason for resentment. For example, a Guelph town meeting following the Great War consisted of arguments between white men that it was unfair for Canadian soldiers to serve for \$1.10/hour, yet “aliens” on the homefront made more working in manufacturing¹⁴. Indeed, it is important to consider elements of xenophobia in history and be critical of it. However, these aspects do not erase the honourable actions of soldiers in serving their country. Therefore, although not every soldier may have been morally pure, that does not negate their courage nor their suffering, which are the aspects that memorials represent.

¹⁴ Butts, *Wartime: The First World War in a Canadian Town*

Overall, the role of war memorials in the 21st century is to remember the stories and honour those who came before us. The entirety of the human race knows many tragedies which pale in comparison to war. To honour the memory of those who have been affected by war, we may become more empathetic towards those who currently are affected by similar conflicts. The memorials at GCVI promote this kind of thoughtfulness every day in the hundreds of students and staff roaming through the century-old halls. As John McCrae wrote, to have “faith with [those] who die”¹⁵ is to continue their effort in achieving peace. May we carry “the torch, from failing hands”¹⁶ to strive for a more peaceful world.

¹⁵ John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields*, 1915, poem.

¹⁶ McCrae, *In Flanders Fields*.

Bibliography

- Acta Nostra. "GCVI Yearbook." 1926. In *GCVI Acta Nostra Archives*, compiled by GCVI Library Learning Commons.
- Acta Nostra. "GCVI Yearbook." 1945. In *Guelph: Military History*, compiled by GCVI Library Learning Commons.
- Bassett, John M. *John McCrae*. Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984.
- Bruce, Andrew. "Friends turn memories into scholarships." *The Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, ON), May 8, 1995.
- Butts, Ed. *Wartime: The First World War in a Canadian Town*. Toronto, ON: James Lorimer et Company Ltd., Publishers, 2017.
- "Charley Fox, the Canadian pilot who stopped Rommel in Normandy." Charley Fox. Accessed June 13, 2022. <https://charleyfox.com/>.
- Darroch, W. "John McCrae." GCVI. Last modified December 2015. Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://www.ugdsb.ca/gcvi/about-us/alumni-association/reflections-and-memories/war-time-for-gcvi/john-mccrae/>.
- In Memory of Captain John Kenneth MacAlister*. Plaque. GCVI Valour Hall, Guelph, ON Canada.
- Johnson, Leo A. *History of Guelph, 1827-1927*. Guelph, Ont.: Guelph Historical Society, 1977.
- Juno Beach Centre. Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://www.junobeach.org/commemorative-brick-program/>.
- McCrae, John. *In Flanders Fields*. 1915. Poem.
- Mullen, Kerry. Interview by the author. GCVI, Guelph, ON Canada. June 10, 2022.
- Nelson, Carl. "Dying in the Dark." *The Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, ON), May 8, 1995.
- Prescott, John F. *In Flanders Fields: The Story of John McCrae*. Rev. ed. Guelph, Ont.: Guelph Historical Society, 2003.
- Russwurm, Lance. *Rommel Under Attack*. Painting.