

The Soldiers' Tower: A Symbol of Sacrifice and Scholarship

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In the heart of downtown Toronto lies the Soldiers' Tower, honoring University of Toronto students, staff, and alumnus who died serving the armed forces of Canada in World War I and II. With its impressive 43.5-metre height, it is Canada's second-largest war memorial and is one of the focal points of the campus¹. Each of its facets details the rich historical significance behind its construction, from the telltale stained-glass windows to the two Memorial Screens bearing the names of 1,185 U of T scholars who sacrificed their lives in war.² Throughout World War I (1914-1918) and II (1939-1945), U of T students and alumnus displayed numerous acts of courage and cooperation to aid the war efforts in innovative ways. The Memorial Room commemorates and highlights both men and women for their valour. For almost a century, the Soldiers' Tower has served as the site of annual Remembrance Day ceremonies, revealing the thoughtfulness and careful traditions surrounding the monument.³ Overall, the Soldiers' Tower serves as a humble reminder of the sacrifices made by the scholars of the past to protect the freedoms many Canadians enjoy as of present.

When the Great War was declared on August 4, 1914, Canada's military was sizeably unprepared with only 3,000 Permanent Force Active Militia and 55,000 Non-Permanent Active Militia. The 5,651 staff and students at the University of Toronto (U of T) honorably joined the 630,000 who enlisted throughout 1914-1918. Although the school only had 3,844 students from 1914-15, many responded enthusiastically to the call for volunteers and the campus was active

¹ "The Tragic History behind Soldiers' Tower at the University of Toronto," The Globe and Mail, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://youtu.be/-Pq8Tzt8NWg>.

² "University of Toronto St. George Campus; The Soldiers' Tower." Architectural Conservancy Ontario, January 31, 2022, <https://acotoronto.ca/building.php?ID=2574>.

³ Gordon MacKinnon, "The Story of the University of Toronto Soldiers' Tower," (2010), <https://live-uta.pantheonsite.io/sites/default/files/inline-files/Soldiers'%20Tower%20History%20by%20Gord%20MacKinnon%20May%2010%202010.pdf>.

with military activity.⁴ Due to their educational qualifications, numerous scholars filled high ranks in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). Their talents in medicine and innovation improved the overall health and efficiency of Canada's military forces. For instance, U of T established the Connaught Laboratory to produce anti-toxins for diseases such as tetanus and diphtheria.⁵ Other U of T graduates became staff at hospitals based in Greece and England. A noteworthy group were militia dentists who opened a dental clinic at an enlistment camp. By treating dental defects like cavities and extractions, their skills allowed many more soldiers to pass health requirements and enlist.⁶ This act of thoughtfulness went a long way in improving the health of Canadian soldiers who went on to fight for Canada's freedom. Through indirect methods, these scholars generated long-term impacts.

Furthermore, U of T exemplified responsibility by creating training facilities and recruiting soldiers. In November 1914, Professor W.R. Lang created and led the U of T Contingent of the Canadian Officers Training Corps (COTC).⁷ The COTC was created to train university students to become junior infantry officers to serve in the Great War. The first COTC training camp was held during May 1915, with 1,800 men enrolled in training by December. Students dedicated much of their time and education to assist in the war, with extra-curricular activities such as bayonet training held across campus. To allow time for military training, no classes were held after 4:00 PM.⁸ From December 1916 to December 1918, U of T cooperated with the British Royal Flying Corps (RFC) by providing residences, classroom space and drill

⁴ MacKinnon, "The Story," 1

⁵ Robert D. Defries, "The War Work of the Connaught and Antitoxin Laboratories, University of Toronto," *Varsity Magazine Supplement*, (1918), 94–96.

⁶ James W. Shosenberg, "The War Years Remembering Dr. Edmund Grant", *Ontario Dentist*, (1992), 32–33.

⁷ MacKinnon, "The Story," 2

⁸ Robert Spencer, "Military Training in an Academic Environment The University of Toronto Officers Training Corps, 1914-1968", *Canadian Military History*, no. 4 (2009), 14–16, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1609&context=cmh>

grounds for aviators. The 67th Depot Battery, Cadet Wing, and School of Military Aeronautics provided basic training to recruits. Many artillery officers were students in engineering or mechanics; some of them became gunners and further trained in England to join Canadian Field Artillery batteries in Belgium and France.⁹ Evidently, the students' knowledge within the classroom proved to be an asset on the battleground. Their contribution and sacrifice exemplify the responsibility to serve and assist in the war.

To the community's devastation, 628 U of T staff and students did not return after the First World War.¹⁰ In their memory, the president of the university, Sir Robert Falconer, raised the idea of building the Soldiers' Tower in 1918. Partnered with the U of T Alumni Association, they managed to raise \$397,141 to fund the build. It was officially dedicated on June 5, 1924 with its cornerstone placed by the Duke of Devonshire. Its location was specifically chosen to symbolize the union between the new and the old, as it is located between Hart House (the most recent project at the time) and University College. This location helped make students feel a part of the University and gave them a sense of pride, as Hart House was used as a space for students to prepare for trench warfare.¹¹

On the tower's exterior, a Memorial Screen features the names of the lives lost in the Great War. An inscription contains the poem "In Flander's Fields" by John McCrae, a U of T alumni who served in WWI. The motif appears again on the Memorial Window, a stained-glass artwork whose middle panels depict the poem's message. McCrae's poem symbolizes the sacrifice of the dead in addition to the will of the living to press on.¹² Because of this strong

⁹ Gerry L'Aventure, "67th (Varsity) Battery Gives Scholarship For Commander", *The Graduate*, (1983), 25.

¹⁰ University of Toronto, "The Soldiers' Tower".

¹¹ University of Toronto, "Unlocking the Past: Hart House Through Trying Times.", (2020, November 11), <https://harthouse.ca/blog/unlocking-the-past-hart-house-through-trying-times>

¹² "John McCrae," Veterans Affairs Canada, (2022, June 14), <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/people-and-stories/john-mccrae>

message, the poem has become an integral part of Remembrance Day ceremonies around the world. Hence, through its exterior, the Soldiers' Tower unites the sacrifices of U of T scholars with the valiant effort of those who contributed to Canada's freedom.

In addition to its gleaming exterior, the Soldiers' Tower houses a Memorial Room filled with mementoes of the wartime service from students, alumni, and faculty.¹³ The *University of Toronto Roll of Service 1914-1918* details the biographies and names of over 6000 university members who enlisted or died during WWI. Professor G. Oswald Smith began the record-keeping in 1916 and describes U of T's contribution in the 646 pages of this work.¹⁴ Additionally, a stone carving on the wall is dedicated toward 51 individual U of T members who lost their lives during 1914-1918. Other medals, portraits and flags provide a glimpse into the past. Currently, the Memorial Room can be accessed by the public, with a chair lift added in 2008 to provide access for people with mobility challenges.¹⁵ Overall, the Memorial Room illustrates the contribution of the university community in defence of Canada's freedom.

In the Second World War, the contributions of over 10,000 U of T scholars demonstrated resilience, innovation, and cooperation. In September 1939, an eager 1,800 students and graduates joined the previously enrolled 7,202 in response to the Second World War. The COTC students' courage and drive created a "very military atmosphere"¹⁶ which continued to inspire almost all undergraduates on campus. Moreover, U of T's scientists developed innovations which were integral to the fight against German forces. For example, the proximity fuse allowed shells to destroy enemy aircraft without hitting them, proving effective against German rockets.

¹³ Michael Chahley, "Soldiers' Tower," *The Varsity*, (2013, November 11), <https://thevarsity.ca/2013/11/11/soldiers-tower/>

¹⁴ MacKinnon, "The Story", 2

¹⁵ MacKinnon, "The Story", 13

¹⁶ "The University C.O.T.C." *University of Toronto Monthly*, 3, (1940), 64.

Researchers developed the first decompression suits in Canada, including Wilbur Franks, who created the first-ever anti-gravity flying suit. And to treat pneumonia and wound infections, the Connaught laboratories produced penicillin on a large scale.¹⁷

After WWII, many other monuments were added to the site of the Soldiers' Tower. Firstly, the names of 557 U of T scholars were inscribed under the Memorial Arch within the base of the tower. A Memorial Book for 1939-1945 was included in the Memorial Room, listing those who perished during the Second World War.¹⁸ The Garden of Remembrance was planted next to the Memorial Screen and paid tribute to John Macalister and Frank Pickersgill, who were U of T alumni executed by the Nazi SS in 1944. As a part of the Canadian Intelligence Corps, the two men showed immense courage while working with the French Resistance. Their sacrifice, among other U of T alumni, is commemorated by the very design of the Soldiers' Tower.

Throughout both world wars, the women at U of T had an integral role as well. The university supported women's involvement during these times by establishing the University Women's Hospital Supply Association in 1918. Effectively, they raised \$121,000 in donations and produced 350,000 articles of hospital linens. Women at U of T joined women across Canada in supporting war efforts at home and abroad. In 1941, various training centres were built on campus to help women train to serve, such as the U of T Women's Service Training Detachment and a centre for the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service.¹⁹ Despite many men having to leave to serve, the university provided women an opportunity to flourish. Their compassion and resilience are symbolized by the nurse on the Memorial Window of the Soldiers' Tower.

¹⁷ Dan Petrescu, "Connaught Laboratories and wartime production of Canadian penicillin", Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, (2020), <https://newsroom.royalcollege.ca/connaught-laboratories-and-wartime-production-of-canadian-penicillin/>

¹⁸ University of Toronto, "The Soldiers' Tower".

¹⁹ "W.S.T.D.", University of Toronto Monthly, (1940), 3.

The Soldiers' Tower's features remain highly symbolic and thoughtful in modern times, serving as an "ever-present reminder of [Canadians'] sublime heroism and sublime martyrdom"²⁰. Many traditions are still upheld to honor and provide remembrance of the soldiers' contributions in the two World Wars. For instance, the surplus in funds raised to erect the tower are still used to establish scholarships in memory of the fallen. But most significantly, a Remembrance service has been held annually on November 11 for almost a century (since 1924)²¹. With its 51 bronze bells, the carillon atop the tower rings out audible reminders of the university community's sacrifices. Three faith leaders represent the diverse beliefs held by the U of T student body in pursuit of a common belief: to spread outreach and remembrance of those who have fallen. Through this ceremony and its very presence, the Soldiers' Tower plays an imperative role in maintaining the cultural significance of the World Wars. Although the number of Canadians who served in our country's wars have diminished, the remembrance of the fallen remains ever relevant through the presence of Canadian war memorials. In recent years, wreaths are laid within the memorial screen by many of the 1200-1400 people that attend the ceremony at the Soldiers' Tower each year.²² The Alumni Association's original goal of erecting a "beautiful and impressive" memorial still serves as a "monument to those who fell, an inspiration to all succeeding generations of students". The Soldiers' Tower helps explain the detailed history of the University of Toronto's involvement in both World Wars. The U of T alumni have exemplified the link between scholarship, innovation, and cooperation in times of need. Their story reveals the impact of the Toronto community, and the very presence of the Soldiers' Tower serves to remind us of the past efforts which protected the freedom we cherish today.

²⁰ Eric McGeer, *Varsity's Soldiers: The University of Toronto Contingent of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps, 1914-1968*, (University of Toronto Press: 2019), 122.

²¹ "The Tragic History", 2014

²² MacKinnon, "The Story", 14

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