

OPERATION KEEPSAKE COMMEMORATING AFGHANISTAN

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The deaths of 158 Canadian Forces members, one diplomat, a reporter and a defence contractor, as well as the unreported injuries of several hundred soldiers, have become the benchmark against which many will measure Canada's involvement in the war in Afghanistan.

Canadians have always been proud of and interested in their military and military history, although, like an old friend or an established marriage, the relationship had for many years been taken for granted. The portrayal of our military as a benign force of peacekeepers who patrolled a green line or monitored ceasefire arrangements made it easy to forget that our troops had fought hard against determined enemies and gained the respect of our Allies during both world wars as well as the war in Korea. Even during the 1990s when overseas military commitments had Canadians serving in such diverse regions as the former Yugoslavia and Somalia, their hard work was quickly overshadowed by the deplorable actions of a few individuals.



It was the NATO-led war in Afghanistan that awakened Canada's appreciation of its military. The reporting of combat action, IED explosions, reconstruction projects and, sadly, combat deaths, had begun to reignite Canadians' interest in their military, and they quickly learned that Canada possessed a modern, professional and highly trained military force that could conduct military operations in the harsh arena of Afghanistan.

In turn, this awakening brought forth public support for the Canadian military to a level that had not been seen since the Second World War. Not everyone may have supported the mission, but they certainly supported the men and women who had been assigned to serve overseas. Their tokens of support ranged from the traditional letters and cards to school children's cut-out artwork, handmade quilts, sports memorabilia, and even signed flags and banners.

During both world wars and the Korean War, and well into the late 1960s, Canadian military casualties were buried near where they fell, which meant that most of the graves were overseas. From the 1970s to the 1990s, military casualties were sent home, usually with little public knowledge or fanfare, only to be mentioned in passing on 11 November. That changed with Afghanistan. Increased awareness of domestic police and fire-service loss made the public more attuned to the price paid by those who put their lives on the line protecting our communities. That in turn spilled over into the military when, in April 2002, fallen Canadians started returning home from Afghanistan. Sights of not only government and military dignitaries, but also the grieving families, meeting the planes on the tarmac prompted an emotional response from the Canadian public, who could now empathize with the families of the fallen.

Source: Combat Camera



Source: Unknown

The move from Kabul to Kandahar and the increased combat tempo resulted in more casualties. With the newly erected Canadian memorial to the fallen in Kandahar being used as a backdrop for the televised casualty reports, and with images of Canadian military personnel visiting the memorial to pay their respects and leave personal mementos to their comrades, the way in which the military and the nation would commemorate its casualties from this theatre of operations was changing.

The change began when the Canadian military started to send families of the fallen to Afghanistan in order to experience some of the conditions in which their loved ones served and, perhaps more importantly, to help them to achieve “closure” with their loss. Those family members were regularly photographed and televised visiting the Kandahar memorial. Again, it was those images of mothers and fathers weeping at the memorial that helped a Canadian public sitting safely at home watching the nightly news form an emotional attachment with the military and their families.

Even the military was not immune to public displays of grief over the loss of friends and comrades. The military has long been considered a stoic institution of men who never let their emotions show, and images of soldiers openly weeping at repatriation ramp ceremonies revealed to the public that these men and women of the Canadian Forces were more than just soldiers—they were everyday Canadians.

Just as in past conflicts, Canadian soldiers wanted to build their own monuments to commemorate the lives being sacrificed in Afghanistan. Some of those memorials are known to the public and others are not. Few received any media attention. All were in far-off corners of southern Afghanistan and, like similar Canadian markers in places such as Cyprus and Bosnia, they will not all come home and will not be seen by the public. For the most part the only record of them will be long-forgotten photographs in a scrapbook or on a hard drive, or the memories of those who served. The challenge was, how do we share these mementos and memorials with Canadians in order to preserve these unique memories of Afghanistan?

Operation KEEPSAKE was founded at Canadian Expeditionary Command Headquarters (CEFCOM) in late 2009 by WO Ed Storey,



Source: Unknown



Source: Unknown

CEFCOM War Diarist; Irene Lythall, CEFCOM Visits and Protocol Officer; and Ann McMahon, CEFCOM Directives for International Operations (CDIOs) editor; in order to preserve some of the commemorative material from Afghanistan. Lieutenant-General Lessard, Commander CEFCOM, fully supported the Op KEEPSAKE proposal to repatriate as many mementos as possible from the Southwest Asia theatre, and the plan expanded in November 2010 to overseeing the dismantling and return of memorials when the Canadian staging base in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Camp Mirage, was closed.

The Camp Mirage mementos were easy to collect as for the most part they were items of little intrinsic value and were not accounted for. Having a person dedicated to collecting that material eased the burden on camp personnel, who would have been given the arduous task of either collecting and packing the items or having them disposed of. Gathering all of the mementos, which ranged from camp signage to unit plaques and photographs to banners, flags, and artwork with sports and entertainment memorabilia, and having it shipped back to Canada, potentially allowed for the material to be better assessed and catalogued once on Canadian soil.

Perhaps the best-known memento was the “sign post” with its unique collection of handmade signs which pointed to various locations in Canada. The post could not be saved, but all of the signage was carefully packaged and returned to Canada.

The Camp Mirage memorial proved more challenging than the mementos. National Defence policy on the repatriation of memorials was rooted in regulations written after the First World War. In a nutshell, memorials were to be left in situ and, if they were to be returned, the cost would be borne by the unit that constructed the memorial. Clearly those regulations were outdated by 2010 and, in the case of the Camp Mirage memorial and eventually the one in Kandahar, these memorials were the work of successive battle group rotations and commemorated theatre losses, not just selected unit or regimental casualties.

Each of these Southwest Asia theatre memorials evoked an intense emotional response in both serving military personnel, as they represented friends and colleagues, and the families of the fallen, many of whom had actually visited the two memorials in person. Leaving them behind was not an option, and the Camp Mirage memorial was carefully dismantled and packaged by WO Storey for shipment back to Canada.

The Camp Mirage memorial was relatively small, occupying a site not much bigger than your average Canadian living room. It consisted of a central four-sided flat-topped pyramid-like cairn and two side “wings.” Each was about a metre tall, and all were constructed of polished black granite attached to a centre core of cast concrete. Facing the memorial, the left-hand wing contained a bronze casting of the bas-relief *Fallen*, created by Canadian artist Silvia Pecota, as its central motif, and on each of the elements were placed



cast bronze plaques, one for each fatality. Each plaque contained a unit insignia as well as name, rank, initials, unit and date of death. In Camp Mirage, the cairn was placed outdoors on a concrete platform surrounded by a perimeter of grass and stone tiles, built into the base of the memorial. On the top of the pyramid was recessed lighting, which gave the site a dramatic look at night.

With the Canadian mission in Kandahar set to end in July 2011, an Op KEEPSAKE team from CEFHQ consisting of Capt Melissa Manley, WO Ed Storey and Irene Lythall was sent into theatre in April in order to collect mementos and assess some of the memorials in that region for potential repatriation.

Again, as was done at Camp Mirage, every memento that could be collected was sent home. At the end of five weeks, this collection process netted enough material to fill a sea container. Establishing a rapport with the memento donors is essential and helps in locating other pieces for recovery. Besides the usual photographs, plaques, banners, camp signage and flags were such diverse items as a large fiberglass hockey mask, several Silvia Pecota framed prints, a hand-built motorcycle, the hockey scoreboard from the ball hockey rink and a custom-made barbecue. Every piece had a story to tell, and each was catalogued and securely packed for the trip home.

The Kandahar memorial was the largest item to be assessed and had grown as casualty numbers increased and Canada's military commitment got larger. What had started out as a central rock memorial brought down from Kabul with another Silvia Pecota bas-relief bronze casting in front was enlarged by being flanked with two walls of polished white marble, which held the polished etched black marble plaques listing each Canadian fatality. Over several years it was continuously upgraded with several walls, columns and extended wings designed to resemble an open-air vault. The fallen were commemorated on black marble plaques with

an etched photograph of each person as well as a unit badge and all of the details pertaining to the member and the date of death. The early plaques contained multiple names, but that soon changed to one name per plaque. The plaques were attached to the memorial wall by a wooden frame. By 2010 the memorial had been enlarged so that it could hold the plaques of the American soldiers killed while under command of Task Force Kandahar. This memorial also had built-in lighting which created a dramatic evening effect. At 17 metres long and 5 metres wide, this memorial would prove to be a challenge to dismantle and return to Canada.

Many people made a point of leaving personal mementos on the Kandahar memorial. These diverse items included poppies, letters, photographs, insignia and stuffed toys. All were deeply emotional. Over the years, all of those items had been meticulously saved and catalogued in boxes held by the camp sergeant-major.



Source: Unknown

The two boxes were handed over to the Op KEEPSAKE team in April 2011 for safekeeping, and all additional material was collected later in the year when the memorial was dismantled. This collection of material is unique to the war in Afghanistan, and a proper scholarly and informed decision should be made on how this material is preserved and displayed.

Predating the Kandahar memorial is a stone inuksuk that had been erected by Canadians early in the Afghan campaign. The memorial inuksuk is now located inside the perimeter of the Kandahar Airfield's boardwalk area, which is the social hub of the base. The inuksuk was constructed out of eight rock slabs gathered from the area around the airport and a nearby village. The inuksuk itself is oriented so that it "points" in the direction of Edmonton, the home station of the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (3 PPCLI). The platform surrounding the inuksuk bears plaques on all four sides dedicated to the memory of Canadian, American and other coalition soldiers killed in the fighting in Afghanistan.

The memorial inuksuk was built by members of the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group, specifically members of "A" Company, 3 PPCLI, the battalion's pioneer platoon, and military engineers in response to the four Canadian fatalities at Tarnak Farm on 17 April 2002. The inuksuk and the surrounding memorial construction were dedicated on 16 July 2002, in the waning days of the initial Canadian presence at the Kandahar military base. Due to its international appeal and continued usage for memorial services, it was not repatriated when Canada departed the base.

Also found on the Kandahar base were two totem poles. Both were carved of Afghan pine from Herat, Afghanistan, which is near the country's western border with Iran, by a combat engineer, MWO Gary Crosby. One was situated beside the Kandahar memorial and the other, a fully painted version, was mounted in front of

“Canada House,” the social centre for the Canadians on base. Uniquely Canadian and very distinctive, the three-metre-high totem in front of Canada House was recovered for repatriation in May 2011, and the other one was recovered in November.

Memorials could be found in many of the smaller forward operating bases manned by Canadians in Panjwai province, with perhaps the most well documented being that at Ma’sum Ghar. Located on a hillside and overlooking the camp was a large 17-metre-long Canada flag mural made of small red and white coloured stones. Positioned along the bottom of the flag were the 59 handmade markers to the fallen containing 63 names. These unique large painted stones lined the bottom of the flag, each one symbolizing the loss of one or more Canadians in combat. Many were faded and weathered while others were still sadly crisp and clean, reflecting their newness. Scattered among some of the markers were small personal mementos and plastic poppies. Situated at the bottom left-hand corner of the flag was a large wooden cross.


Unfortunately none of these markers could be repatriated to Canada. As they were made from local stones and as some were so badly weathered that they could not be read or moved, all that could be done was photograph them for preservation. In accordance with the wishes of the military members of the Task Force and with the support of the Commander CEFCOM, on 24 August 2012, a ceremony was conducted by the Task Force Kandahar military chaplain, Major Grahame Thompson, in which each marker stone was solemnly laid in a “common grave” at the base of the cross and in effect returned to the soil of Afghanistan, symbolizing the soil on which the Canadians fought and some had given their lives. Ma’sum Ghar was transferred over to US control, and the Americans have pledged to look after and maintain the site in the absence of the Canadians.

Pre-fabricated concrete blast walls can be found everywhere in NATO Afghanistan bases; they come in three sizes and are known as Jersey or Texas barriers. These barriers provide a natural “canvas” for memorial artwork.

Located just outside of the Canadian “transient barracks” in Kandahar were a couple of barriers on which some of the family members who had visited the base had recorded their sentiments. Written in felt tip marker on the bare concrete and exposed to the elements, these musings reveal the intense emotions experienced by those who were fortunate enough to visit the base.

Small memorials on concrete barriers could be found on some of the bases. The soldier-inspired artwork on those memorials usually consisted of a list of the names of the fallen from the base. Occasionally the artwork would be more ornate with figures and background scenes. Unfortunately due to their size, weight and location, the recovery and shipment of any of those memorials was not an option, and all were left in theatre.

There were also smaller memorials painted on the sides of walls or engraved into floors. Again due to their location within buildings, these unique soldier-inspired memorials could not be returned to Canada and were left in situ.

Over 10 years of military action in Afghanistan has renewed Canadians’ interest in their military; it has also brought home the human cost of this combat mission. Commemoration now involves more than just graves in far-off lands; with Canada’s fallen having all returned home, there is a strong sentimental and emotional attachment to the memorials that were in theatre. The major memorials and many hundreds of mementos have been repatriated, and now the torch has been passed to us to ensure that those items are suitably displayed so that the legacy of Afghanistan will not be forgotten. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Warrant Officer Ed Storey has served for 34 years in the Canadian Armed Forces. Trained as a cartographer and a terrain analyst in the Canadian Military Engineers, he served in the former Yugoslavia, Central America, and Central Africa. While working at CEFCOM HQ as the war diarist, WO Storey deployed four times to Afghanistan to collect historical material over a period of three months. In 2010 he was also part of the Camp Mirage close-out team. For his work in Southwest Asia, WO Storey was presented with the Commander CEFCOM Commendation. His final posting was to the CJOC before retiring from military service in July 2013.



Source: Unknown