

# A Brief History of All Sappers Memorial in Chilliwack BC

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Since the move of the Canadian Forces School of Military Engineering from Canadian Forces Base Chilliwack to CFB Galetown in 1998, almost a generation of new Sappers has not had the opportunity to view the All Sappers Memorial in Chilliwack. This memorial is our primary memorial and we are posting this history during Remembrance Week 2021 as a reminder of this important part of the history and heritage of the Canadian Military Engineers.

## A Training Base Is Born In British Columbia in 1942

Canada undertook significant military and civilian preparations to defend the west coast of North America after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. At that time, Chilliwack, BC was primarily a farming community with a population of 11,500. In early 1942, the federal government began purchasing farms in the area in order to create Camp Chilliwack for training Canadian soldiers. On 24 April 1942, 1200 troops arrived in Vedder Crossing to construct what was to become Camp Chilliwack with Lieutenant Colonel S.J. Davies, MC as its first commanding officer.



Camp Chilliwack May 1942

## Lieutenant Colonel C.N. Mitchell, VC, MC



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C.N. Mitchell, VC, MC

Lieutenant Colonel C.N. Mitchell, VC, MC succeeded Lieutenant Colonel S.J. Davies as Commander of Camp Chilliwack (1944 - 1946). Lt-Col Mitchell is the only Canadian Military Engineer to receive the Victoria Cross. He received this highest honour for conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during the World War I Battle of Canal du Nord.

Colson Norman Mitchell began his military career on 10 November 1914 when he enlisted for WW I in the Canadian Army. Sapper Mitchell proceeded overseas in June 1915 with the Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps. His superiors noticed his natural leadership ability, maturity and intelligence and he was quickly promoted to the rank of Sergeant. In April 1916, Mitchell was rewarded with a commission to Lieutenant and was subsequently posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunneling Company, Canadian Engineers.

For his numerous acts of bravery during the countermining of the German positions at “The Bluff” mining shaft in France, Lieutenant Mitchell received the Military Cross (MC) in 1916. In 1918, he received the British Empire’s highest award for gallantry, the Victoria Cross (VC), for saving vital bridges at the Escaut Canal near Cambrai, France from demolition during the Allied advance. Lt. Mitchell was honourably discharged from the Army after World War I and returned to civilian life in 1919.

On the outbreak of World War II, he enlisted as a Major with the Royal Canadian Engineers and was appointed a Company Commander in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, RCE. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1941 and assumed command of the RCE training camp at Minley, England. When that camp closed, he returned to Canada and served as Commandant of A6 Canadian Engineer Training Centre (A6-CETC) and Camp Chilliwack from 1944 to 1946.

Mitchell’s legacies in the Chilliwack area include the transition of Camp Chilliwack into a peacetime military training base and the construction of the Permanent Married Quarters that were named “Mitchell Gardens” in his honour. Perhaps the most significant legacy left behind from his brief posting at Camp Chilliwack is the All Sappers’ Memorial Park and Cenotaph.

Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell retired from his full and varied military career at the end of his Camp Chilliwack command and returned to civilian life. He passed away in 1978 at Mount Royal, Quebec at the age of 89.

## An Idea Was Born

As World War II was nearing its end in 1945, Lt. Col. C.N. Mitchell received a suggestion that a monument or plaque be crafted to honour the Canadian Sappers who had given their lives to protect our freedom. Inspired to improve on this idea, Mitchell set plans in motion for a much grander memorial - a Cenotaph and Park that would honour all Commonwealth Sappers. Mitchell directed Major Williams to design this cenotaph and tasked Major Davies to select and prepare a site for a Memorial Park. The chosen was near the main entrance to Camp Chilliwack and geologist Major N.B. Gillies and his team set out to find a suitable quarry site nearby.



Quarry site at Harrison Lake

## “Operation GRANITE”

A quarrying camp was set up at the north end of Harrison Lake, approximately 22 miles from Camp Chilliwack where there was a deposit of Monzonite. This stone looks similar to granite, except that it has little or no quartz and is found in volcanic regions around the world. After three months of quarrying in the cold, wet winter weather, a 42-ton solid piece of Monzonite and numerous other smaller pieces were loaded onto a modified Valentine Tank chassis under the guidance of Major T.A.V. Tremblay of Bridging Wing. This prime mover was then loaded onto a pontoon raft and ferried downriver. Within a few miles of the offloading point, the raft ran aground on a gravel bar and nearly capsized. If not for the determination of Lt. Col. Mitchell and Major Davies in acquiring a powerful tugboat from Vancouver, the raft and its precious cargo would have been lost.



Ferrying across the Fraser River

## Design and Construction of the Monument

Designed by Major Williams, the four-sided and chamfered Cenotaph shaft stood 16 feet high on a square stone base. Experienced stonemasons S/Sgt Crowe, Cpl Bloomfield, Cpl Thatcher and Spr Forster worked tirelessly over nine months to cut and shape the final monument. Four large bronze swords, symbolic of courage and the military, were to be mounted on each face.



Stonemasons at work



Erecting the monument

Assembling the base and the final erection of the column was not without its challenges but, eventually, all was successful and the results were both monumental and inspiring. Large bronze grenades bearing the motto 'UBIQUE' were cast and mounted at each of the four corners as symbols of sappers' worldwide actions.

## All Sappers' Memorial Park

Mr. Booth, a well-known landscape gardener of New Westminster and father to Sapper Booth, generously gave his time, trees and shrubs to landscaping the park around the Cenotaph.

### Dedication

The All Sappers' Memorial Park and Cenotaph is dedicated to the memory of all Sappers of the Commonwealth who paid the supreme sacrifice in the service of their country. On 14 July 1946, the Governor General of Canada, His Excellency, Viscount Alexander of Tunis, K.G., G.C.B., G.C.M.G., C.S.I., DB.O., M.C., LL.D., A.D.C., unveiled the finished monument in a dedication ceremony attended by several thousand sappers, civilians and community members.

Annual ceremonies continue to be held here in remembrance of those who gave their lives. From start to finish, it was a monument designed and crafted by Sappers for All Sappers "Everywhere" UBIQUE.



Dedication 14 July 1946

## Honouring the Afghanistan War Fallen

The engraving "AFGHANISTAN 2001- 2014" was added to the south face in 2015 to honour our fallen Sappers of this war.

### Restoration in 2009

After the closure of Canadian Forces Base Chilliwack in 1998, the Department of National Defence retained ownership of All Sappers Memorial Park and the Cenotaph and the site continued as the focus of local memorial activities. Sappers had concerns, however, about DND's ability to maintain the Cenotaph in a condition that would ensure that it properly honoured the sacrifices of all Canadian and British Commonwealth Sappers. Canada Lands Company had the responsibility of disposing of the CFB Chilliwack properties and wished, at the same time, to preserve the military heritage of the area. The CFB Chilliwack Historical Society, a strong and constant defender and advocate for our Military Engineering heritage, advised Canada Lands Company of its concerns over the long-term viability of the Memorial Park. Canada Lands' most supportive response included a proposal to not disturb the cenotaph, to increase the land area, to beautify the grounds, and to respect the soil where ashes have been spread.

Canada Lands Company worked closely with CFB Chilliwack Historical Society and Retired Sappers to revitalise and refurbish the All Sappers Memorial site and return her to her former glory. Mr. Greg Smalberg was selected as the designer. Among his high-profile works, he was renowned for his work at the Vimy Monument in France. The objective of the project was to vastly improve the focus on the Cenotaph through a major re-design and comprehensive re-landscaping of the

surrounding park. Ground was broken in June 2009 with the intention to have the restored memorial ready for rededication for Remembrance Week 2009.



### Rededication of the Cenotaph on 7 November 2009

The construction company GEMCO was given this trust of restoration. They stripped away the concealing hedge, elevated the centre island, beautified the landscape, inserted soft lighting and signage, redirected sidewalks into the site and added numerous seats to invite visitors to sit and reflect. GEMCO delivered the project on time and with the high-quality of workmanship that ensured the glory and integrity of the All Sappers Memorial well into the future.

Relatives of Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell participated at the rededication of All Sappers Memorial on 7 November 2009. Mrs. Frances Bailie (Mitchell's daughter) and her son Philip Beck and Mitchell's great-grandson, Liam Gleeson in his cadet uniform, did Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell proudly. Mrs. Bailie's speech held the spectators spellbound. The silence was maintained as the family laid a wreath in memory of their renowned relative.

All Sappers Memorial Park is now part of the system of parks owned and maintained the City of Chilliwack and continues to honour our Fallen Sappers - EVERYWHERE.