

The founding of the *N*ational Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces



by Robert White



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The National Cemetery of Canada and a National Historic Site

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Owned by The Beechwood Cemetery Foundation and operated by The Beechwood Cemetery Company

Cover photo: The National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces (Richard Lawrence Photography)



Photo by Richard Lawrence

The Cross of Sacrifice in the Veterans' Section at Beechwood.

Beechwood became the home of Canada's National Military Cemetery almost by chance, all starting with my "cold call" to historian Jack Granatstein, who at that time was the head of the Canadian War Museum. Here's how it happened.

In the mid 1990's there was a great deal of speculation that the new Canadian War Museum building would be located on the Rockcliffe Air Base site. Since it appeared that the War Museum and Beechwood would become next-door neighbours, I telephoned Mr. Granatstein to arrange a meeting between the Beechwood Board of Directors and the War Museum¹. The objective was to discuss possible networking opportunities with the Museum, such as perhaps creating a ceremonial route between the Museum and the Cemetery, since Beechwood already had a large Department of Veterans Affairs section, with over 1,200 graves including the graves of Second World War Generals Charles Foulkes and Henry Crerar. In addition, Sir Robert Borden and

General A.G.L. McNaughton are buried at Beechwood.

I remember the meeting as if it took place yesterday. It was held in Mr. Granatstein's beautiful, historic office in the old War Museum building on Sussex Drive, which housed, among other significant artefacts, the huge desk used by Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia and Defence during the First World War. Jack indicated that the future location of the new War Museum was very much up in the air, but that the War Museum would welcome networking with Beechwood². He also mentioned, almost in passing towards the end of the meeting, that Chief of Defence Staff Maurice Baril was very much committed to creating a National Military Cemetery in Ottawa and that DND wanted it to be located at the Rockcliffe site.

Jack suggested that if we were interested in learning more about DND's plans for a National Military Cemetery, we could contact Commodore Glenn Davidson³ who was heading up this file. So the next day

¹At that time there were only four Beechwood Directors: Dr. J. David Roger, President; Grete Hale, Vice President; John French and me. Tim Graham, Beechwood's general manager and secretary/treasurer,

also attended the meeting.

²The formal Memorandum of Cooperation and Understanding between the War Museum and Beechwood was signed on June 2, 2000.

I picked up the phone and cold called Commodore Davidson. My “sales pitch” to him was that if DND were to build a National Military Cemetery on the Rockcliffe Air Base site, Beechwood would be more than willing to operate the Cemetery on behalf of DND for a fee, since Beechwood would be next door to the new Cemetery and we have a great deal of expertise in operating all aspects of a cemetery. My thought was that Beechwood would be able to generate sufficient revenue from operating the military cemetery on a contract basis to help offset some of the costs of operating our own Cemetery.

During our first meeting, Commodore Davidson summarized General Baril’s view that DND had the responsibility of providing a dignified final resting place for Forces members, particularly those killed in the line of duty, and that that responsibility was not currently being met. He explained, however, that the Rockcliffe

property was being transferred to Lands Canada, and therefore DND no longer had direct control over this site. He further indicated that DND did not have sufficient funds in its budget to purchase land for a cemetery and, therefore, General Baril’s dream of creating a National Military Cemetery might, unfortunately, have to be put on hold.

Subsequently, I reported the outcome of my meeting with Glenn to the other members of Beechwood’s Board and requested authority from the Board to pursue this matter further. In a nutshell, I felt the obstacles facing DND could be overcome very easily through a partnership between Beechwood and DND since Beechwood had plenty of vacant land that we would be willing to grant to the Canadian Forces provided that the Forces would fund the landscape development and allow Beechwood to charge a reasonable fee for each burial⁴. I was very keen on pursuing this matter for a



Photo by Frank Scheme

Remembrance Day at the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces, with members of the RCMP also participating.

³At that time Glenn Davidson was Director General of Naval Personnel. In 2000 he was promoted to Rear-Admiral and Chief of Staff Human Resources for the Canadian Forces. From 2002 to 2004 he commanded Maritime Forces Atlantic. In 2004 he was promoted to Vice-Admiral and appointed Canadian Military Representative to the NATO Military Committee in Permanent Session at NATO headquarters Brussels. In 2008 he was appointed Canada’s Ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic.

⁴Beechwood was created by a Special Act of the Ontario Legislature

in 1873 and operates as a not-for-profit organization. Beechwood’s Mission (which has recently been updated to reflect its designation at the National Cemetery of Canada) is as follows: “Beechwood, the National Cemetery of Canada and a not-for-profit organization, will be governed efficiently and effectively in the spirit of public service for our community and our nation. Beechwood will ensure that, in perpetuity, it will be operated and maintained in the highest order in memory, honour and respect of those who have left this world before us.”



Photo by Frank Scheme

Above: A member of the Royal Canadian Air Force stands sentry at the 2010 Remembrance Day service at the National Military Cemetery at Beechwood.

Right: A piper at a funeral service in the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces.



Photo by Richard Lawrence

number of reasons. First, I believed Beechwood could gain additional revenue that would help in our day-to-day efforts of maintaining the Cemetery. More importantly, however, was my belief that if Beechwood was to become the home of the National Military Cemetery both its beauty and historical significance would be not only protected but would also be enhanced for generations to come. In addition, Beechwood would be contributing to Canadian heritage and it would become an institution of increasing national importance with the passage of time.

The Beechwood Board was unanimous in encouraging me to pursue this initiative further with DND. Dr. David Roger, Beechwood's President, was particularly enthusiastic in his encouragement since he had served as a Canadian Forces Medical Officer in World War II. During the War he was stationed in England, France and Holland and was present at military burials of Canadian Forces casualties in all three countries.

My verbal offer that Beechwood was willing to give the Canadian Forces exclusive rights to about five acres of our land was the start of a wonderful relationship

between our two institutions. A great deal of work needed to be done, however, before this dream could become a reality. First, Commodore Davidson needed to get "buy in" through his chain of command for this rather novel proposed arrangement. Having checked a number of potential options in the Ottawa area, it became clear to him that Beechwood offered a unique combination of perfect location, established facilities and expertise, available space ready for development and a motivated Board that was dedicated to preserving and enhancing Canadian heritage. A key step was having General Baril tour the proposed site, which was in the centre of Beechwood, adjacent to the existing Veterans section. General Baril was immediately impressed with the site. Indeed, one of his remarks upon his initial visit was, "We have been offered the high ground of the Cemetery, in sight of our Parliament, next to veterans of previous wars and among the thousands of Canadians buried in Beechwood. This is exactly what we want."

Over the next several weeks and months a number of meetings were held between Beechwood and



Photo by Frank Scheme

H. Clifford Chadderton, Chief Executive Officer of The War Amps, standing by the central monument in the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces.

Commodore Davidson with the aim of finding ways to satisfy the needs and requirements of both parties. As it became more and more evident that the Canadian Forces was genuinely committed to moving forward with this project, on April 4, 2000 the Beechwood Board held a special board meeting to authorize making a formal proposal to DND. The three-page letter, which was signed by Dr. Roger and addressed to General Baril, provided a relatively detailed outline of how the arrangement might work. In its closing paragraph the letter stated:

"The Board makes this proposal in a spirit of public service, and with the interests of our Nation, our Canadian heritage and our Canadian Armed Forces in mind. We trust that it will be received in the same spirit, and that we may look forward to working together to realize this most important and worthy objective."

On July 14, 2000 DND (Vice-Admiral Gary Garnett on behalf of General Baril) responded to Beechwood's letter as follows:

"I am very pleased to advise the Board of Directors that the Minister of National Defence has indicated his support for the establishment of a National Military Cemetery for the Canadian Forces at Beechwood. We hope to see Treasury

Board approval of the necessary funding over the summer and should be in a position to finalize the arrangement with you and make a public announcement shortly thereafter.

On behalf of all the members of the Canadian Forces may I extend our most sincere thanks and appreciation for the spirit of public service and co-operation that you have brought to this initiative."

Following this exchange of letters, work began in earnest on many fronts. Glenn Davidson and I, working as a team, finalized the legal arrangements between the two parties and drafted the Memorandum of Understanding. It was agreed that the basic landscaping design concept would resemble that used in the Commonwealth Cemeteries around the world "to convey a sense of simplicity, dignity and peace," with uniform headstones and ordered plantings along the lines of stone. There would be a central monument on the highest point of the land. The site of the monument and flags would offer a striking visual and symbolic link to the established Veterans section in Beechwood, thus connecting the heritage of the past and the Canadian Forces of today and the future. Glenn designed the central monument himself, aided by the graphic talents of his assistant Andre Dupuis. The monument was

inspired by the design of the First World War Passchendaele memorial in Flanders. Glenn also authored the inscription, which was approved by General Baril, and which reads as follows:

**TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF
CANADA'S ARMED FORCES WHO HAVE
SERVED THEIR NATION WITH
DISTINCTION IN WAR AND IN PEACE.**

Over the same period of time, Tim Graham, Beechwood's General Manager, directed all of the business aspects relating to getting the National Military Cemetery up and running at Beechwood. The actual construction of the new five-acre section in accordance with the agreed upon landscape design was a major challenge since it involved eliminating a road that had previously been built and moving a great deal of earth. Other functions included contracting for the central monument, surveying the land for plots, setting specifications for the individual monuments and ensuring that Beechwood had the required staff in place to meet DND's needs. On DND's side, there were also numerous tasks to be completed including finalizing the funding authorization through Treasury Board, writing appropriate policies and procedures and developing the communications program. Thus, many individuals played a significant role in getting this project off the ground.

On October 19, 2000 Treasury Board approved the establishment of the National Military Cemetery at Beechwood and authorized funding based upon the estimates that had been developed earlier in the year.

The formal Memorandum of Understanding between DND and Beechwood, which is a very simple five-page document, was signed at National Defence Headquarters on March 2, 2001. Three days later the Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Art Eggleton, formally announced the creation of the National Military Cemetery.

Finally, on June 28, 2001, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson officiated at the opening of National Military Cemetery. Minister Eggleton and General Baril participated in the dedication ceremony.

The ceremony was held on a beautiful, sunny Ottawa morning. It featured a 21 gun salute fired from within the Cemetery, the full Ceremonial Guard parading in scarlet tunics and a fly-past by a flight of CF-18 fighter jets in lost-man formation. The ceremony was covered live by the major Canadian television networks. Peter Mansbridge anchored the CBC television national coverage and it is very fitting that Jack Granatstein provided the colour commentary.

None of this would ever have happened without General Baril's vision and commitment to the project and Glenn Davidson's "leap of faith" in enthusiastically



The Governor General's Foot Guard at the Dedication Ceremony for the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces.



The fly-past by CF-18 fighter jets in lost-man formation at the Dedication Ceremony of the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces, June 28 2001.

embracing the idea of DND entering into a partnership with Beechwood. General Baril's last official act as Chief of Defence Staff was participating in the opening ceremony at the National Military Cemetery before his change of command with General Raymond Henault that afternoon.

Ten years later the National Military Cemetery has become an increasingly important part of Canadian heritage. There are now 2,120 monuments standing on this beautiful site in the centre of Beechwood Cemetery,

and about 300 new monuments are added each year. The public is welcome to visit this site every day of the year. In addition, a Remembrance Ceremony of increasing size and significance is held every November 11th.