

▶ OUT OF THE PAST & INTO THE FUTURE: Bricks and mortar museums must go digital to remain relevant

by Bob Gordon

FOUNDED IN THE late 19th century, the 48th Highlanders of Canada are sailing into the 21st century on a digital wave. The 48th Highlanders Museum (www.48highlanders.com) first opened in 1957 at the Old Comrades Memorial Hall, on 519 Church Street in Toronto, Ontario. In 1997, the museum moved to St. Andrew's Church on King Street, also in Toronto, and was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on June 29. The church played an integral role in the regiment's founding in 1891, and its annual Church Parade still concludes there.

The museum's impressive collection includes a World War II-era necktie with a bullet hole through the knot, the bugle that announced the 1918 Armistice to the battalion, and the uniform of the bugler, Bugle Major Warring Tooze. According to former Honorary Colonel George Beal, "the battalion was in a rest area and many of the soldiers did not know what the call meant. He was dismayed when they lined up at the cookhouse with mess tins expecting an early meal."

The 15th Battalion (48th Highlanders) Canadian Expeditionary Force's (CEF) Vimy Cross, a temporary wooden marker erected in the immediate wake of the battle — eventually replaced with permanent resting places under the auspices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission — is also prominently displayed. "To our knowledge there are only three original crosses remaining in Canada, ours being one. It was sent to us, and two other regiments the same, when the new Vimy Memorial was built and opened in 1936. The rest were destroyed," Beal notes.

The museum also includes an archival collection of photographs and documents recording the regiment's history. Currently, this collection, as it pertains to the Regiment's service in World War I (as 15th Battalion, CEF) — is being digitized. Eventually, the digital archive will include photographs, links to publicly available documents such as the unit's War Diaries, held at the Library and Archive of Canada, and personal letters and diaries available only in the unit's archive. Researchers, writers, and students will



have access to this unique, regimental resource from anywhere in the world.

It is a bold step out of the past and into the future. It represents high tech regimental history: The 15th Battalion Memorial Project's digitization of parts of the museum's collection constitutes fulfillment of an integral element of the museum's mission statement: "Further the museum exists to develop programs that broaden, and deepen the appreciation and understanding of the 48th Highlanders, stimulate interest in and maintain the relevance of the Regiment's past for future generations."

Reaching future generations — even the present generation — means that bricks and mortar museums must go digital. Together the 48th Highlanders Museum and the 15th Battalion Memorial Project (www.15thbattalioncef.ca) exemplify that trend. Their cooperation is a model for other units hoping to preserve their history and make it accessible into the digital era. Its importance cannot be overemphasized. ✦

NOTE: The author would like to thank BGen (ret'd) Greg Young and the unit's former Honorary Colonel, Geordie Beal, for generously sharing their time and knowledge.

The photograph above is from a series of images taken on August 19, 1917 as the 15th Battalion was coming out of the line following the Battle of Hill 70. (48th HIGHLANDERS MUSEUM AND 15th BATTALION CEF MEMORIAL PROJECT)