

Making Bricks Without Straws

The Development of the Korean War Exhibit at the Canadian War Museum

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Introduction

Established a scant half century ago, the Canadian War Museum has a mandate to document, examine and present our national military heritage to the people of Canada, about 200,000 of whom grace its halls annually. If the Museum is to be anything more than a mere collection of trophies or a veterans' touchstone, this story must be interestingly told with historical balance, accuracy and dignity. It is hoped that the following brief account of a recent exhibit will illustrate how this goal is sought and, occasionally, accomplished.



The lack of a Korea Gallery in the national military museum was not an intentional slight against those 25,000 Canadians who served in the United Nations police action. The exhibit "philosophy" prior to the 1980s tended to focus on commanders and technology of the world wars, at the expense of later events like peacekeeping and the Cold War. Allusions to Korea were found in art shows and weapons displays, but a didactic exhibit on the Canadian experience in Korea had to wait until forty years after the conflict.

Opposite:

Top - Images of Korea provide a backdrop for presentation of the colour film "Korea Brigade" in the completed gallery.

Bottom - Two mannequins of Chinese soldiers in authentic, but reproduction, uniforms work on their Soviet-made DShK 38 12.7 mm machine gun. A reproduction of Ted Zuber's painting "Silent Night" forms the background.

(Photos by William B. Kent, Canadian War Museum)

The primary reason for building the Korea Gallery was to fulfil the Museum's mandate and complete the chronological storyline of Canada's military experience. The guiding precepts were to present an attractive, historically-balanced exhibit that would also link the existing Second World War Gallery with the proposed permanent exhibit, "Canada's Peacekeepers" (opening in June 1996.)

The timing of the project was fortuitous in that it immediately preceded government cutbacks which reduced the staff by nearly 30 per cent.

Planning

Planning for the exhibit began with an Approach Paper prepared by the Museum's Research section (a group which soon disappeared from the Museum's Organisation Chart.) This 90-page document provided an overview of historical events, as well as appendices on unit movements, casualties, honours & awards, etc. In addition to highlighting key personalities and events, it included a selection of photos and potential graphics.

Guided by the Approach Paper, interviews with veterans and by the contents of the Museum's extensive Library, the Exhibit Planner prepared a framework of major themes, potential artifacts, graphics and possible display techniques. Percentages of floor space were assigned to particular subjects while specific educational themes were targeted for dioramas, models and so on. Until this point in the operation, the work undertaken was of a largely theoretical nature,



divorced from the mundane reality of budget and resources. The next step produced an unwelcome surprise (albeit providing an attractive title for this article!) The curators' search for appropriate artifacts to illustrate the pre-determined themes, etc. elicited the sad fact that the National Collection held hardly *any* material from Korea.

It is an unfortunate fact that while the Canadian War Museum has nearly a million different artifacts, including General Wolfe's baby shoes and rows of RCAF mess kit, most of the material dates from the two world wars. There may be a public perception that mementoes from Korea, the Cold War and Peacekeeping are somehow "unworthy" to stand beside relics of Vimy or Ortona, with the result that donations from this period are extremely rare. It might also be a case of reticence on the part of veterans of Canada's "Forgotten War" to bother when their war is missing from the Museum's exhibits.

The sobering realisation that the "bricks" of the exhibit could not be built with the binding "straw" of related artifacts led to an immediate re-assessment of its content. The important didactic themes of Korea remained, but the manner in which they were to be told would have to be re-examined. The following options were considered:

Reproductions - While generally anathema to museums, they provide the dual advantage of being more durable than originals, *and* being capable of "customizing" for a particular project. Usually cheaper than originals, they can illustrate the look of an original, but they cannot duplicate its message nor, usually, inspire the visitor to the same degree. The over-riding factor, of course, is that people come to a national museum to see genuine national treasures, not modern duplicates.

Audio-visual - The contemporary museum visitor already expects exhibits to be more than static cases under subdued lighting, so this option was certainly more ethically palatable. The selection

Opposite: *The flaps are pulled open on a typical Canadian army medical tent of the Korean War. The display case at the front, sitting atop a standard issue army barracks box of the period, contains a range of standard medical implements used during the war.*

(Photo by William B. Kent, Canadian War Museum)

available, however, was severely limited and largely unilingual. Translations, dubbing, etc. are expensive and detract from the immediacy of the original soundtrack.

Graphics - Pictures may be worth a thousand words, but are seldom sufficiently detailed to teach a complete lesson to the uninitiated. The National Archives of Canada holds a marvellous selection of black & white photographs but many are outrageously posed ("Follow me, men!") or of interest only to specialists in material history. ("Say, isn't that a Mark III?")

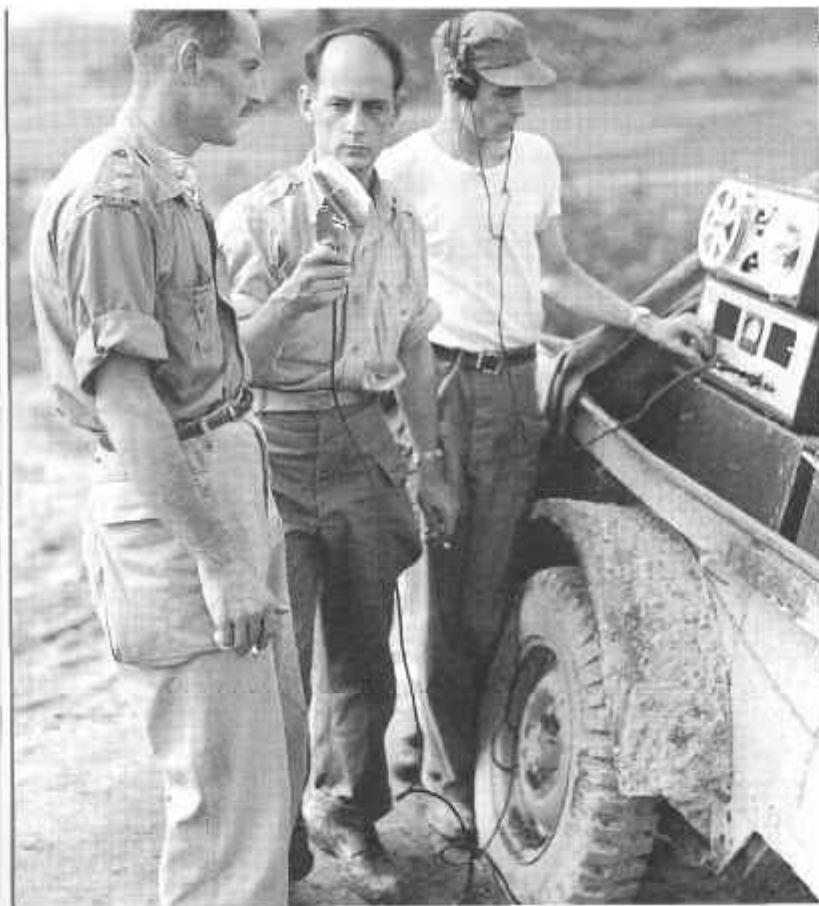
Models - These are ideal for presenting a particular device or event, but usually require an extended construction period *and* a large purse.

Dioramas - A reproduction of a hill-top position or a Chinese POW camp could impart a "feeling" for the subject, but by its very scale, would detract from existing design features.

After much discussion, the usual Canadian solution of compromise was reached, and *all* of the above options were chosen, to varying degrees. While arguments could be made for several different exhibit frameworks, it was decided to choose a thematic, as opposed to a strictly chronological or services-based (RCN, Army, RCAF) approach. A completely revised Exhibit Outline was prepared and included the following:

- a) Size and sequence of exhibit themes (per cent of space allotted).
- b) Final bilingual text.
- c) Complete list of artifacts and their location.
- d) Graphics and their location, related artifacts, etc.
- e) Description of dioramas, mannequins, etc.
- f) Suggested designs, colour schemes, etc.
- g) Conservation requirements.

The paucity of genuine artifacts was partially remedied by deciding to rely on a collection of 14 paintings, executed after the war by Edward F. Zuber, who had served in Korea with The Royal Canadian Regiment until wounded in 1952. Their subject mirrored the main theme of the exhibit,



Left: CBC reporter René Levêsqe interviews Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Dextraze with "portable" recording equipment of the time. (NAC C-79007)

Above: Orders Group. Major G.A. Flint briefs officers and NCOs of 2PPCLI on 11 March 1951. Beside him stands Sergeant Tommy Prince MM. (NAC PA-128875)

which focused on the infantry's role, and provided a foundation on which the exhibit could be built.

Reproduction Chinese uniforms were made to clothe the crew of a Soviet machine gun in a life-size diorama, while a 1/35 scale model of the Battle of Kap'yong was commissioned. Life-size photo blow-ups were ordered and provided an appropriate "look" to the exhibit, complementing the experiential floor & wall treatment which reproduced an aircraft fuselage, ship's bulkhead, and other environments.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the revised plan, after the Zuber collection, was its reliance on audio-visual support. One of the Museum's commissionaires, Mr. Bob Avon, agreed to be interviewed (in both official languages!) on a variety of topics. His reminiscences of service with the "Van Doos" in Korea marked a milestone in the institution's exhibit technique, in that visitors could now hear a participant's account in his own words. CBC Radio provided an interview with Lieutenant Colonel J.A. Dextraze by a young reporter named René Levêsqe, while telephone handsets dotted the art display offering a commentary on the paintings. A colour film entitled "Korea Brigade" depicted the training, equipment and experience

of the Canadian contingent, while the rather "gee whiz" narration spoke volumes for the attitudes of the time.

In a final search of the warehouse, Korea-related artifacts were culled from the National Collection to provide 3-dimensional support to the now numerous photographs. Despite the best efforts of the staff, only a single artifact could be found that had *actually* been in Korea during the conflict - a shell splinter which had landed on a Canadian destroyer!

With the Exhibit Outline complete, tenders were invited for a "turn-key" permanent exhibit which would include design & construction of the exhibit within seven months, at a maximum cost of \$150,000. Five companies submitted designs, ranging from the traditional to the bizarre, and the contract was eventually given to GLOBALMIC Inc. an Ottawa-based exhibit technology firm which succeeded in completing the project under budget.

While every exhibit has its surprises, the Korea Gallery followed its design and construction schedules quite closely, albeit raising a number of new issues. Weapons security assumed hitherto unknown importance with the approach of new

federal legislation on restricted weapons. New motion detectors were installed for enhanced security, while a sensor activated the soundtrack for a display on the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. The realisation that the project was *actually* proceeding brought increased interest from friends and supporters, with a corresponding increase in donations. For example, after having been interviewed, our "Van Doo" veteran loaned us material relating to his wounding in Korea, including the ominous telegram sent to his parents. Thus a "face" was added to the voice. Another member of the Friends of the Canadian War Museum volunteered to assist us in the construction of a PPCLI dug-out, to make sure that we got it right. Another Museum Friend single-handedly assembled appropriate props for our medical display. In an atmosphere of enhanced cultural awareness, it was a pleasant surprise to learn that two of the photographs chosen for enlargement depicted Indian and Métis members of the PPCLI.

Opening

The opening of the exhibit on 20 April 1994 was a departure from the usual modest reception, in allowing more than 400 guests to watch a film and a parade, in addition to enjoying Korean cuisine. Military and civilian representatives of several countries who fought beside Canada in Korea attended and added an international flavour to the festivities. Special provisions were made for official participation by the Korea Veterans' Association of Canada and this group were vocal in their praise of, and gratitude for, the long-awaited exhibit. The official speeches began, appropriately, with General Ramsey Withers reiterating on behalf of the Board of Trustees, that "all good things are worth waiting for..." and the general consensus was that it was well worth the wait.

Controversy attends almost every effort and it would be unfair to pretend that this exhibit didn't have its share. One of the most famous images from Korea was a photograph featuring a dazed young soldier standing before a sand-bagged dug-out, and this image was used on the poster printed by the Museum to promote the exhibit. The actual identity of the young warrior

was not important and the picture was chosen simply because it conveyed *something* of the suffering of war. A Korean veteran from Ontario came forward and explained that *he* was the subject of the photograph, and accepted an invitation to attend the exhibit opening where, as a mark of the institution's esteem, he was presented with a framed copy of the poster.

Within a matter of weeks, another Korean veteran from the United States wrote to say that *he* was the true subject of the photograph and resented the recognition that the Museum had granted this impostor! Attempts to appease both gentleman, and their various supporters (all of whom were taxpayers!) were of no avail and the Museum had to endure a storm of righteous indignation until the matter died a natural death, although further research eventually revealed the true identity of the soldier.

Another minefield was negotiated when veterans who were featured in archival photos demanded to know why the images had been cropped, thereby excluding them from the finished image. One must be charitable in attributing complaints to a plea for historical accuracy, rather than to personal vanity (mustn't one?)

Exhibit development is not a finite process and, as expected, donations of Korea-related artifacts began to appear shortly after the opening, prompting a number of small upgrades to the new exhibit. For example, a telephone enquiry from one veteran elicited the offer of the Battle Dress jacket which he had worn at Kap'yong and which was "just hanging in the closet." An RCR officer dropped off a box of assorted memorabilia, and his map of a position known as the Bowling Alley was displayed beside a couple of Zuber works depicting the same location.

Visitor reaction to various artifacts was observed and the scale diorama of Kap'yong, built as a stop-gap solution to the paucity of artifacts, was removed to allow display of the jacket which had *actually* been worn at the battle. The expensive soundtrack for the medical "tent" proved unsuccessful on its own and was given focus with the installation of a selection of medical instruments of the period.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be asked if the exhibit is a success. From the institutional standpoint it certainly meets the requirement of providing the basic information on Canada's involvement in Korea, in addition to linking the Second World War Gallery with the "Canada's Peacekeepers" exhibit. From the public's perspective, it is rated as one of the most colourful, interactive exhibits in the building, with more audio-visual technology than any other current exhibit. Korean veterans are, for the most part, satisfied that there is finally some recognition for their war, although not every unit is accorded the same recognition.

It is from the artifact standpoint, however, that the project draws the most criticism. While the planning, design, construction, etc. match or exceed that already in place throughout the museum, the actual content falls short of initial expectations. Nothing can replace real artifacts and the fact that a mere three items on display were actually *in* Korea leaves the Museum, in one sense, shortchanging the visitor. The lesson to be learned from this experience is simple, though not always achievable. Exhibits cannot rely solely on secondary/supporting material and must include genuine artifacts if they are to bear the hallmark of authenticity.



Welcome Party by E.F. Zuber (CWM CN 90026)

In reality, however, this purist approach is not always practical and would preclude exhibits on any subject for which surviving artifacts did not exist; a patently untenable argument. A balance of philosophies must be struck, with the expectation that artifacts will, eventually, be forthcoming to support existing didactic material. This, in retrospect, is the saving factor in the Canadian War Museum's Korea Gallery. A successful presentation of Canada's role in Korea is already in place and simply requires a few more genuine items to make it complete. With the generosity and patience of the Canadian public, the Museum is close to attaining this goal.

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