

WLU Centre shares the story of Canada's Military History

by Andrea Hall

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"Until the 1980s I was a social and labour historian," reflected Terry Copp, Professor Emeritus and Director of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS). "What transformed me into a military historian was meeting veterans."

Copp was initially inspired by Robert Vogel, a military historian friend who worked at McGill. After talking about how they would love to work together, they decided to write a book about Canadians in the Scheldt area of Northern Belgium in World War II.

"I thought I was just doing this for one year, a special project," remembered Copp. "I had no idea I would become a military historian." He soon began teaching World War II and Canadian military history at Laurier.

His work expanded in 1991 when he, together with associate Marc Kilgour, applied for funding from the Department of National Defence as part of the Military and Strategic Studies programme, now known as the Security and Defence Forum, which allowed for the creation of the LCMSDS. Immediately Copp started thinking about ways to increase their outreach.

"Much of what we do is geared to sharing the story of Canada's military with the public," said Mike Bechthold, Communications Director of LCMSDS, and the first employee hired by the Centre back when it began. "The 20th century wars have shaped who we are as a nation...a generation of Canadians went off to fight for what we have today. It's important we don't forget those sacrifices."

One of the first initiatives of the Centre was the publication of a journal, Canadian Military History, of which Bechthold is the Managing Editor. It is a journal in a magazine format so it's accessible to a variety of readers outside the academic circle.

"It gave an opportunity for young people who may have wanted to write military history but had nowhere to publish it," explained Copp. The journal initially started as a twice a year publication but has grown to a quarterly.

Another project of the Centre is the annual Military History Colloquium. It began as a small, local conference but has since achieved international recognition. There are 11 Centres funded by the Department of National Defence at universities across Canada, but Copp believes Laurier has a better space and bigger program than most. It is also the only one in Ontario west of Toronto, so it frequently works with Western, Waterloo and Windsor universities.

In addition to his work at the LCMSDS, Copp is on the board for the Canadian Battlefields Foundation, which runs tours to the battlefields of Europe. Bechthold was part of the first tour in 1995. Seven years later the LCMSDS began the Cleghorn tour, for Laurier students. It also now runs tours for high school teachers, as well as a tour to Italy for graduate students with the University of New Brunswick.

"They're a way of making the experience of veterans live on," said Copp. He recalled how the original tours used to take veterans along, or meet them in Europe. Unfortunately however there are few veterans left now, so that opportunity does not often occur. For that reason Copp believes the tours are all the more important.

"It's one thing to study these things, if it's memory or operations or tactics, but it's another thing to go to these battlefields." Copp estimates that between 300-400 people have participated in the

battlefield tours. "I guess I personally think the most important thing we've done is to energize young people who may not have had an interest in Canadian history."

The Centre has much to offer the general public. It is a publishing house, so in addition to Canadian Military History it has published numerous books pertaining to a number of topics in Canadian history that can be ordered through the Centre. It also stages a public lecture series that currently runs every other Wednesday.

In addition the LCMSDS has accumulated a number of documents, photos and maps that are available for the public to come in and view. Although they are mostly used for research by graduate, and occasionally undergraduate students, Copp recounted that recently a man came in looking for maps to figure out where his uncle was killed, and within minutes Copp was able to help him pinpoint the location.

Copp believes that the World Wars are two of the most important chapters in Canadian history, and he used to fear their significance was being lost on younger generations. He no longer feels that way.

"I think the strength of the [Centre] today is all the young people. That's what keeps me coming in."

The Centre is located at 232 King St N, Waterloo ON. If you would like to receive email updates from the centre please contact Mike Bechthold at mbechthold@wlu.ca. Visit their website at www.wlu.ca/lcmsds.

Terry Copp, right, is the Director of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies.
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