

# Canadian War Museum — off to a Good Start

The Canadian War Museum was born on May 8, 2005, after a difficult gestation of decades, and it is indeed a beautiful baby. It's certain to someday be interesting when it grows up and learns to speak.

After a two-hour tour of Ottawa's newest landmark, I was leaving one exhibition hall when I saw an old friend on the wall. His name is Frank Cauley, an air force veteran with fascinating war stories to tell. The big black and white graphite sketch hanging on that big wall is one of 14 works by Ottawa artist Elaine Goble.

How many tens of thousands of visitors will walk by Mr. Cauley without realizing they're missing a great story? They'll see a picture of a man as he is now, and assume the younger man in uniform in the background is him as he was in wartime. But wait a minute. Why the tiny life raft?

Like many other works and displays in the museum, they tease visitors, yet the museum makes no use of available technology to tell them more. Perhaps as time passes it will learn to speak. Visitors may be able to access headsets that will, with a touch of the right buttons, give them the brief story behind what they're looking at.

The same feeling of a story missed was felt earlier in the tour when a large replica of a Canadian war grave marker was dimly lit to set the right mood. It bears the name of George Lawrence Price and was familiar to me because for years I kept a photo of that marker on my office wall. Any time you think you're having a bad day, think of Private Price. As the information board points out in both official languages, he was the last Canadian killed in WWI, shot almost as an afterthought, two minutes before the war officially ended at 11 a.m. that November 11. He was 26.

What isn't mentioned is that Price was a conscript. Drafted. He didn't want to be there. He was one of about 25,000 Canadian conscripts rounded up and shipped Overseas near the end of the war.

Would it be too difficult to add that information to the museum experience?



*Elaine Goble specializes in graphite portraits such as this one of Frank Cauley, entitled "Bay of Biscay." She drew her first war picture in 1995 – a portrait of six veterans at a Remembrance Day service. Realizing that her daughter had no understanding of conflict and its extraordinary and sometimes devastating effects on human life and experience, she undertook to explore, in portraiture, the consequences of war for survivors – the people who still live in ordinary communities across Canada. Many of these drawings are now hanging in the new War Museum (below).*



Or would it risk raising more questions from the curious, like: Who was the first Canadian killed in the First World War? The answer is Malcolm Cann, 18, a stoker on *HMS Good Hope*, killed Nov. 1, 1914.

That could lead to trivia questions, like: *What did they have in common?* Answer: *They were both from Yarmouth, N.S.* And there, in a nutshell, is what's missing. *Trivia.* People love trivia. Compare the bank accounts of historians and museum curators, with those of the inventors of Trivial Pursuit.

Back to Frank Cauley. If there were to be a voice telling the story, it could be his.



*Frank Cauley (above) can still tell us a story or two about his wartime experiences.*

He's still an active and vital man, and with the technology available, why are we not digitally preserving some of these old warriors? Frank could tell of when the bomber he was in crashed into the sea. He couldn't swim and was trained to stay close to another man who was a powerful swimmer. The swimmer died. Cauley survived because a life raft floated to him while he was still in the wreckage. Then he spent two days adrift in the Bay of Biscay.

Or maybe he'd tell about how his life was saved by chewing gum. When his Sunderland Flying Boat had its hull holed by fire from a submarine, it couldn't land. Water pressure would tear it apart. The crew each chewed five pieces of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum, wadded up the holes, and landed safely.

Not far from Frank Cauley are other familiar faces. There's Mendel Good, retired Ottawa tailor, and his wife Valerie. What brought them together was that each survived the horrors of a concentration camp. Artist Goble's faces fairly scream to tell their stories, and the silence is unsettling.

Pierre Leduc of the museum says when the museum is fully operational there will be about 135 "sound stations" throughout the building. "For example, you'll be able to hear Matthew Halton reporting from Ortona." But those faces that seem to want to tell their stories won't speak. There will be an expanded written explanation for why they're there.

The new museum is off to a good start in that it shows us much more than the old one. Now it needs to *tell* us. It needs to get wired. It needs more nerds and fewer academics. **F**



*Dave Brown retired in 2003 after a 38-year career as an Ottawa columnist. Many of his 10,000 columns were individual war memories. He won the Canadian Legion Media Award in 1997.*