

The Unknown Soldier

110,088 Canadians have lost their lives in war. The bodies of 19,514 from the First World War, including 19 local men, and 8,011 from the Second World War, including to local men, have no known graves.

Sailors traditionally were buried at sea while often the bodies of airmen were lost when their aircraft exploded. Artillery shell fire shells often disintegrated the bodies of soldiers or destroyed their battlefield graves. More than 80 years after the Great War ended, bodies still are being recovered from the battlefields. In 2006 the remains of a Canadian soldier killed in August 1918 were found in France by workers expanding a road. He was buried in a military cemetery near Vimy Ridge.

Headstones contain the rank and name of the sailor, soldier, or airman as well as other information such as his age. Rudyard Kipling selected the expression 'A Soldier Known Unto God' which is placed on the headstone of those whose bodies were recovered but could not be identified.

The names of Canadian sailors, soldiers, and aircrew who were killed in the two world wars but whose bodies were never recovered or could not be identified are engraved on memorials to the missing. The Vimy Ridge Memorial in France lists the largest: 11,285 men killed in France during the Great War, including 12 from Gananoque. The names of 6,940 Canadians, including seven local men who died in Belgium, are engraved on the MENIN GATE MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING at the entrance to the city of Ypres.

The 'Unknown Warrior' represents the many war dead who have no known grave. Just after the end of the Great War, the bodies of six unidentified British soldiers were recovered from battlefields in France and Belgium, and a blindfolded senior officer selected one of the bodies. On 11 November 1920 he was buried in the Tomb Of The Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, London. Enclosed with the body were a Great War trench helmet, soil from Belgian and French battlefields, and a crusader sword to symbolize sacrifice.

In May 1999 the body of a soldier, identified only as "A Canadian Soldier Known Unto God", was recovered from a military cemetery near Vimy, France, and buried near the National War Memorial in Ottawa. Bill Beswetherick wrote in the Kingston Whig Standard 1 June 2000:

"On Sunday [28 May 2000], a large crowd observed as the casket containing the Unknown Soldier, draped in the Canadian flag he never knew, was carried from the Hall of Honour in the Parliament Buildings and placed on a horse-drawn gun carriage. A Canadian Forces honour guard preceded the Unknown Soldier on the slow march to the National War Memorial. Dignitaries such as the Governor General and the Prime Minister walked behind the gun carriage, followed by hundreds of veterans. Except for the sound of guns, which fired once every minute, the entire procession passed in complete silence until the veterans arrived. Then the crowd began to clap its appreciation for their sacrifices. In the distance the clapping sounded like rippling water. Many in the crowd wept openly.

The fact the Unknown Soldier had been so badly mutilated that he could not be identified points out the horror of war. He lies in his tomb as he was recovered from his grave, still wearing his gas mask

and boots. Only these items and small pieces of cloth, the blanket, he was buried in, remained. Coffins were not used in battlefield burials.

In 1995 the Netherlands welcomed Canadian veterans who had liberated their country 50 years ago. One of the banners in the parade for the veterans read; 'Dying for freedom is not the worst thing that can happen. Being forgotten is.'

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier will ensure we do not forget".