

‘Celebration of freedom and democracy’ ? Aurora, King, Stouffville unveil Korean War monument



The words were penned more than 70 years ago, but were as evocative as ever for Terri O'Connor.

A member of the Richmond Hill branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, O'Connor knew the words by heart as she approached the podium at the Aurora branch over the weekend; they were penned by her father on May 29, 1951, just prior to a battle.

‘There's blood on the hills of Korea,’ he wrote. ‘It's the blood of the brave and true/We're the 25th Brigade and we're bound together/under the banner of the Red, White and Blue.’

‘Forward they marched into Battle/with faces unsmiling and stern/they knew as they charged into the hillside/there were some who would never return/Some thought of their wives and their mothers/some thought of their sweethearts so fair/Some as they stumbled were reverently whispering in prayer. There is blood on the hills of Korea/it's the gift of the freedom they love/may their names live in glory forever/and their souls rest in heaven above.’

The very next day, O'Connor's father's blood was spilled on the hills he helped memorialize and on Saturday afternoon his daughter helped commemorate a new monument for the men and women from Aurora, King, and Whitchurch-Stouffville who stepped up to serve during the Korean War, often known as Canada's ‘forgotten’ conflict.

More than 70 years in the making, the new memorial, located at the Aurora Cenotaph and Peace Park on Yonge Street, was unveiled amid a deluge of rain and wind gusts which was somewhat poetic in light of the conditions servicemen and women endured in the theatre of war.

Due to the blustery conditions, however, a service of unveiling at the Cenotaph, by monument designer Alex Theaker and Jeremy Hood of the Aurora Museum & Archives, was split into two elements, with dignitaries set to speak on site instead delivering their messages in the dry comfort of the Aurora Legion.

‘On June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea starting the Korean War. Fighting continued for over three years until July 17, 1953, when the Armistice agreement was signed. 2023 marks 70 years since the signing of the agreement and I am so proud that we were able to unveil this memorial to mark the anniversary,’ said Mayor Tom Mrakas, welcoming a host of dignitaries, including Newmarket-Aurora MPP Tony Van Bynen, Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce, Minister of Seniors Raymond Cho, area MPPs, the Mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville, and Council members from all three municipalities.

‘We know of at least 11 Aurorans who left home to serve in the Korean War with many more from neighbouring communities,’ Mayor Mrakas continued. ‘In 1951, Albert Armitage, one young Auroran who served in Korean wrote a letter home to his family and described the battlefield. ‘It is very cold over here. Lots of snow and frost beside the noise. Our boys are holding up under the strain wonderfully well. It sure makes a fellow wonder sometimes what is happening next. Some days it is like a quiet day in the hills at home and the next minute everything seems to bust to pieces. One year over here is worse than six in the last war.’ It is truly

hard to comprehend what these young men went to as they courageously served their country. Many of them just in their early 20s. Thankfully, all 11 Aurorans returned home safely but sadly 516 Canadians would lose their lives in the fighting and more than 1,200 were wounded. Our Korean War memorial will provide a space for reflection and commemoration of those who served from Aurora, King and Stouffville, as well as honour the more than 22,000 Canadians who bravely fought.

With the memorial made possible through support from Veterans Affairs Canada, MP Van Bynen said it was an "honour" to be present for the occasion.

"We meet today to pay homage to some of Canada's greatest heroes: those who gallantly served our nation generations ago, those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country and those who continue to serve today," he said. "I am so grateful to see our community dedicate this solemn, sacred place to the citizens to understand and to remember the tremendous achievements and sacrifices of Aurora residents and those of neighbouring communities through the Korean War.

"Today the Korean War is now recognized as [one of] the most important chapters in Canadian history. Though remembrance can be in our hearts and in our minds at any place and at any time, having such a monument in our communities ensures that our veterans are never being forgotten. Community organizations and community members like you understand the importance of honouring those who have served in uniform in the past and in the present."

In his remarks, Minister Lecce noted the "solidarity" of the three municipalities, the Province and the Federal Government in making the memorial possible.

"Nearly 27,000 who volunteered in the service and advancement of democracy and freedom cannot be understated as a demonstration of what courage looks like," he said. "We honour those who serve. We remember the hundreds who did not return and we thank those on land, sea and air that gave so much of themselves to advance a values system that continues to carry forward today in freedom, for human rights and the rule of law.

"Here in this community, in York Region, and frankly across our Province through curriculum and education, we want the next generation of Ontario students to never forget the sacrifices. I want to thank all of you for being present and for ensuring the Torch of Remembrance carries forward for those who served so courageously in Korea in the pursuit of democracy over communism. There are great parallels today, both fighting for freedom in Ukraine, Taiwan, Iran and so many places and these values must endure in our hearts and as a nation."

One person who strongly carries the "Torch of Remembrance" is the Korean-born Minister Cho who recalled as a young boy he "grew up with tanks in the street, soldiers marching by my house, and B29 Bomber airplanes flying overhead."

"It's something that sticks with you," he said. "Today, standing here at this ceremony I want to tell you that I will be forever grateful to the 516 young Canadians who gave their lives to protect South Korea from the invasion in the North. If they did not sacrifice, I would not be able to speak to you here in Canada today. Today is a day to celebrate the freedom and democracy that we have here."

By Brock Weir
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