

Aurora, King and Whitchurch-Stouffville commemorate 100th anniversary of Cenotaph



They do not answer.

Such was the reply on Friday afternoon as Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas, Stouffville Mayor Iain Lovatt, and King Township Councillor Avia Eek read the names of men from each municipality who paid the ultimate sacrifice for King & Country in the First World War.

Residents from Aurora, King, and Whitchurch-Stouffville gathered at the Aurora Peace Park on October 3 to rededicate the Cenotaph, 100 years to the day that the three communities came together to dedicate it the first time, a time when the names carved into the stone were still very much in raw, living memory.

Each name forever memorialized on the Cenotaph was read out under golden autumn sunlight on Friday as dignitaries from all levels of government, community organizations, and more, laid wreaths at the landmark as a selection of the same hymns and prayers read out at the same spot a century earlier, were renewed by church leaders representing the three municipalities.

The ceremony was followed by a reception at the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, where Mayor Mrakas said the Cenotaph remained a 'lasting reminder' of the sacrifices made by the 71 men whose names, etched on the stone, still stand a century on in mute testimony to the sacrifices made in war.

'It is almost impossible to fathom what was asked of them,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'Most were in their early- and mid-twenties, some as young as 18. Called into battle to serve their country during the First World War, they answered with courage and bravery well beyond their years, in unimaginable and horrific conditions. And that really is at the heart of this 100th anniversary, to say their names out loud as we did earlier at the Peace Park and to forever honour the sacrifices that they made. We also remember their families, friends and neighbours who grieved their loss.'

'The reality is that a century ago our communities were all quite small and undoubtedly every resident was touched by the tragedy of losing these young men. The weight of that loss was carried collectively, leaving a mark on our towns that could never be forgotten. But the story of sacrifice did not end with those 71 young men. It has continued through many conflicts since. That's why we must never forget the sacrifices and contributions of all veterans who have served this country, from Korea to Afghanistan and so many other places around the globe. As much as today is about honouring those who served, it is also about celebrating the story of how this memorial came to be and the people in our communities who made sure those sacrifices would never be forgotten.'

The vision for the Cenotaph, one of the largest in Ontario, began to take shape in the early 1920s when community leaders Sir William Mulock and Herbert Fleury joined forces with a committee to create a memorial where the three communities could come and grieve together.

“Our communities all have a proud military history, one we honour deeply, and we are just as proud of our tradition, of the memorialization, and of the enduring pursuit of peace that binds us together,” Mayor Mrakas continued. “Today, as we rededicate the War Memorial on its 100th anniversary, we come together in reflection to reaffirm our commitment to remember those who served, their enduring dedication, and their great sacrifice to achieve peace. As all of us leave here today, let us carry forward their memory in the way we live together, in peace, unity, and shared purpose.”

Reflections were also offered by Newmarket-Aurora MP Sandra Cobena, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Costas Menegakis, MPP Michael Parsa and Councillor Eek, and Councillor Hugo Kroon of Stouffville.

“For a century, this monument has stood as a living memory of sacrifice,” said Cobena. “Each name carved tells a story of courage and devotion of young men and women who left their families behind so that we can enjoy the freedom that we have today. Tonight, we remember not only those who served, but also the families and communities that carried their loss. The peace and democracy we cherish came at a great cost. Let us ensure their legacy lives on in our remembrance, gratitude and action.”

Following remarks from MP Menegakis, who shared a letter of recognition from Opposition Leader Pierre Poilievre, MPP Parsa said the monument continues to be at the “heart of the community” as a gathering spot to remember.

“As we stand here today, we recognize not only the courage of the individuals who served and who answered the call to service, but also the resilience of families and communities they fought to protect,” he said. “Their legacy lives on in the peace and freedom that we all cherish today and all of us must do everything we can so that the younger generation understands the weight of the sacrifices and the importance of carrying forward the spirit of service.”

“Today's anniversary reminds us that peace is worth defending and this is an opportunity to honour those who stood up to defend it.”

It was also a time to reflect on a century of collaboration between Aurora, King, and Whitchurch-Stouffville not only in the creation of the monument whose milestone was commemorated last week, but in the development of the commemoration itself, which has been a joint effort between the towns, the Aurora Museum & Archives, the Aurora Historical Society, and more. Above and beyond Friday's ceremony, these efforts have included masonry restoration, correcting the spelling of a soldier's name, and, ongoing, a street banner program, an on-site exhibition, and much more. The addition of a memorial to Indigenous soldiers will cap the commemorations next year.

“As we commemorate 100 years of remembrance, we also recognize the collaborative efforts that have preserved and enhanced this memorial for future generations,” said Councillor Eek. “The addition of commemorative banners and plans for an Indigenous Veterans Memorial reflect our shared commitment to inclusive remembrance. Thank you to the Aurora Legion, our municipal partners, and all of those who contributed to this centennial celebration. Let this rededication reaffirm our promise to honour the fallen, support our veterans, and ensure that the legacy of service is never forgotten.”

Last word, in a full circle moment, went to Bill Fleury, whose great uncle, Herbert, was key in the Cenotaph's development.

“Herbert Fleury had a long career as a manufacturer, mayor, and even horticulturalist in Aurora,” said Bill. “I am certain he would greatly appreciate today's commemoration. It mirrors the remarkable community efforts by people in Aurora, King, and Stouffville, who in their grief after World War I insisted on building one of the first, and I would think, I think one of the most impressive war memorials in Ontario.”

Photos, such as those now on street banners in the three towns commemorating the men memorialized on the monument, “are a

human touch that remind us of the individual sacrifice of these men and the losses their families and friends suffered.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter