

Cenotaph restoration work will correct a century-old error

2025 marks the 100th anniversary of Aurora's iconic Cenotaph and, amid plans to restore it to its former glory, some century-old corrections are on the table.

Amid the work will be the correction of a misspelled name, the removal of an improper medal attribution, along with efforts to improve illumination and accessibility on site.

Since the Cenotaph's inception, Major Wilfred Ferrier Petermann, who paid the ultimate sacrifice on September 26, 1916, aged just 28, has been listed as a recipient of the Military Cross (M.C.) Medal. While Petermann had the distinction of being Mentioned in Dispatches in recognition of his service, there is no record of him receiving the M.C.

"None of [his] official records denote that he was awarded a Military Cross," reads a report presented to last week's meeting of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee. "Medals won by a soldier or officer are typically noted on several documents in their record, including the Record of Service, Casualty Form, and the Medals & Decorations forms. The awarding of the medal (with a London Gazette entry date) would be noted in the dated columns on the former two documents, and the medals' postnominals would be applied to the soldier's name on at least the three named forms.

"Wilfred Petermann's official gravestone at the Albert Communal Cemetery Extension in France, as designed and produced by the Commonwealth War Graves commission, does not include any postnominals. These memorial stones were placed between 1921 and 1927 and used internal military data for names, ranks and honours awarded. [The Cemetery] catalogue includes some details about Petermann, and no mention is made of the medal. Military Cross medals were only very rarely awarded posthumously, and then only for actions that were recommended before the recipient's death. M.C.s were also unavailable to Temporary Majors, Petermann's rank at the time of his death, until at least 1917."

Petermann is also remembered on the Cenotaph in Cobalt, ON, with no mention of the Medal.

According to the report, the first association of Petermann with the M.C. came from a 1917 article in the Aurora Banner, a statement that was reiterated in the paper the following week.

"Two months later, March 9, 1917, a letter sent to Petermann's mother, from Colonel M.D. Graham, Assistant Military Secretary, is printed in the Aurora Banner. The colonel uses the M.C. postnominal and is the only semi-official source that seems to do so."

"The list of names proposed to be included on the planned Aurora War Memorial was generated at a February 1923 meeting of the War Memorial Association and recorded in their minutes. The list was published regularly in the Aurora Banner, with a request for corrections beginning December 19, 1924. The initial list does not yet include any postnominals, but the final list published June 12, 1925, has them added, including Petermann's erroneous M.C."

Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum and Archives, who is leading the Cenotaph Centennial file, said the error with Petermann was first noted when the museum was developing its "On The Spot" self-guided tours.

"It is a really challenging thing to remove something from the Memorial but we want the Memorial to be accurate and with the evidence that we have been able to find that shows the individual didn't actually receive the Military Cross ? it is the right thing to do to remove it so anyone who is visiting the memorial will see the correct honorifics of the individual," she said.

She added it was "hard to know" how the error made its way into the finished product.

"Sometimes you repeat incorrect information and it just happens. Petermann has an interesting story overall. His life history is quite interesting what happened before the war, during the war and afterward from those who are left behind. A mistake was made and it

was repeated until it eventually kind of ended up being formalized on the memorial," she said.

Another correction will be fixing the spelling of Private Fred Luxon, who has been memorialized as "Luxton" over the last century.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week approved moving ahead with the proposed changes, a decision which will likely be ratified at the March 25 Council meeting.

"This is a good opportunity for staff to be checking the names on the gravestones to make sure that we have acknowledged and respected everyone there," said Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner last week.

The March 3 Committee meeting was also an opportunity for lawmakers to get an update on efforts underway to formally correct the spelling of the local street named in Luxon's honour, a change which Council approved last year.

"Staff is preparing to move forward in sending out notice to the residents to advise them that the street sign will be changed and that could happen in a matter of weeks," said Director of Planning Marco Ramunno. "We will, as part of replacing the sign, send a notice out to the residents advising them of the change and the reasons for the change."

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese voiced his thanks to local historian Christopher Watts for bringing Town Hall's attention to these issues, in particular "the diligence and research into this to make sure it is corrected."

By Brock Weir