

# Marvels Lost

*By Don Edwards*

Years ago in my youth; growing up in the city of Kitchener, I live in an apartment that sided on a small street and bordered on to the City Hall. It was a magnificent building and tribute to the architecture and craftsman that created it. From its huge grey granite pliers that supported it's portico to the domed clock that rested atop. Above that flew the Canadian flag in all its glory.



Adorned with trees and bushes that I spent hours playing under to the stairs I run up and down. The very stairs that some 30 years before Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King stood and gave a speech.

In the summer, endless tour buses came to see its majesty and in the winter Christmas lights were beyond any decoration one could imagine.

In front were a floral gardens arduously maintained and the envy of any landscaper. But most importantly in the middle of this colourful array, stood the cenotaph, a testimony to our fallen. The parade and ceremony on Remembrance Day was long and so hugely attended that the main street of downtown was closed for the multitude. Wreaths flooded the concrete circle and added to the essence of the surrounding gardens. And I had a front row seat to the pageantry and splendour.

Truly it was an awesome place and an accolade to a simple city. An icon that would stand the vastness of time. Or so I thought!

One year, while I was away, I was totally unaware that the city leaders had plan for the demise of such a beloved piece of heritage. I returned to witness this part of my being turned to rubble. Even in my child years I could not understand why anyone would do such a thing to such a rarity but knew the city had lost a portion of its uniqueness. A block of its soul so to speak!

I won't go into the whys or the backroom dealings that went on to bring about this travesty nor the underhandedness perpetuated on the citizens of Kitchener. Nor the fact that our once magnificent cenotaph, once surrounded by a magnificent gardens, was allocated to some obscure street corner. To do so would negate the reason for this article.

I now move to a place where I moved to some years later, the city of Oshawa.

I was unaware, until a short time ago, the rich military history that this region held. It wasn't until joining the Legion that I became aware of the many such treasures that were embedded here.

The diversity of unique veteran's organizations is by far greater then I have seen in any one place. Camp X created by our name sake, Sir William Stephenson, with its park and the museum dedicated to those efforts. The museum operated by the Ontario Regiment displaying vehicles and memorabilia of soldiers trained and deployed from here. The aerodrome that trained pilots

for the war effort. And Camp 30, the POW camp located in Bowmanville, of which this article is leading too.

Several years ago I was astounded to hear of the demise of old aerodromes and their fate given to the wrecking ball. Yes, they were allowed to fall into a pathetic and unsafe state, the only fliers remaining were the pigeons that called it home. This in itself was distressing, a testimony to the lack of foresight by the powers that be.

The participation of local flying clubs in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was key to the training of about 73,000 Canadians during the Second War and the eventual success of the Allied Forces. The buildings constructed in 1941 opened an airport and accommodated the #20 Elementary Flight Training School, represents only one of Oshawa's participation in the aspect of the war effort. Spies from Camp X also received their jump training at this very location.



We did manage to prevent the appropriation of the land that housed barracks and buildings of the era. Now occupied by 420 Wing R.C.A.F. Association, building #10 is one of the original buildings dating to the first activity in the winter of 1940-1941. Part of a grouping of original buildings that survive on site, notably building #11 and the canteen.

Still it was a blow to see the colossal hangers, and other buildings, in which so many young pilots of the time had past through, turned into a vast nothing. One could almost hear the engines of trainers being tuned and fired up. You could almost imagine the ghosts of those who served and now long gone.

But now we face another loss!

In the town of Bowmanville, sits a cluster of buildings which have a little-known history. They were used to house German prisoners of war during the Second World War.

Early on in the war, it became evident to the British that they had to establish a detention centre for German prisoners of war, especially officers.



They needed to find a location that would be safe, still in a Commonwealth country, but as far from Britain as possible. Camp 30 satisfied all these criteria. The British could not afford to take their captured German officers back to Britain for, in the event that Germany were to be successful in invading Britain, the German Officers would then have been released immediately and put back into battle from within Britain. Therefore, they sent their captured German officers to Canada where, ironically, they ended up incarcerated only thirty minutes from Camp X.

These 18 buildings were known as Camp 30 and they once held many top Nazi officers, including reportedly, a U-Boat commander so important that Hitler sent a submarine up the St. Lawrence River to try to rescue him

And while that attempt failed, the inmates of Camp 30 had their own plan. Apparently, they spent 9 months using tin cans to dig a 90-metre underground passage to escape into a cornfield. The daring plan was reminiscent of the allied Great Escape, popularized in the 1963 movie, but the Canadians knew about it and managed to thwart the escape except for one man who made it as far as New Brunswick. His rendezvous was also thwarted. They stored the dirt removed from the tunnel in the attic of one building but the plan fell apart when the floor of the attic collapsed under the weight. The piles of dirt are, oddly still there after 65 years.

Local historians say 880 prisoners passed through the camp which held such luxuries as a theatre, concert stage and indoor pool.

The camp has been the centre of much debate recently. The camp has been sold to a developer who is looking for permission to demolish the old buildings. The Kaitlin Group, which owns the property, has written to council saying the buildings are a safety and liability concern because of ongoing trespass and vandalism.

While the historians and others are struggling to save the buildings, the property is currently unoccupied and the owner wants to develop new homes on the site. Much the same song that threatened Oshawa's Air Park mentioned a few paragraphs back.

A suspicious fire at the former Training School for Boys has destroyed one historic building. The buildings have been vacant since an Islamic school moved out of them late last year.

Fire fighters responded immediately and arrived at the scene to find the fire had spread throughout the classroom building. Fire fighters put the blaze out but the inside was completely gutted and only a shell of the building remains.



Fire fighters searched the other buildings on the property and found smoke coming out of the pool/gymnasium building. That second fire was put out before much damage was done.

The Municipality has been looking for heritage protection for the site. Clarington Council was hoping for financial support from the federal government to preserve this piece of Canada's military history.

In the meantime, the historic camp is slated for demolition sometime this spring.

Another example of the complacency and the lack of vision by those we entrust to preserve our heritage and history. Or worse, an effort to forget a time we fail to remember.

## References

Camp 30 Word of Honour Lynn Philip Hodgson/Alan Paul Longfield ISBN # 0-9687062-8-2  
Inside Camp X Lynn Philip Hodgson ISBN # 10:0889627142