
CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

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A Sensory Ethnography

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As the visitor approaches the Canadian War Museum in Vimy Place, he is faced with a sobering experience. The museum's monochromatic, ridged concrete walls eerily resemble a trench or a military bunker. The lack of vegetation is reminiscent of a bleak, war-torn terrain razed by artillery fire and pestilence. Upon entering the museum, the visitor is plunged into a dank, dimly lit space. After purchasing a ticket, he ventures further and attempts to find his way toward the first gallery. The hushes of visitors resonate throughout the space as they, too, try to make sense of their surroundings.

The disoriented ambiance intensifies as the visitor enters the first gallery, "Wars on Our Soil: earliest times to 1885", where he is introduced to the concept of war in the aboriginal and European contexts. Towards the end of the exhibit, the visitor reaches the Battle for Canada, and is quite literally caught in the crossfire as he experiences the 1759 Battle of the Plains of Abraham through his senses. The visitor is lured between two screens onto which the battle is reenacted from both the British and French perspectives. Cannons blast and muskets fire incessantly as fierce battles cries rise up amidst a thick cloud of smoke. Seconds later, hundreds of men lie dead on both sides of the battlefield, leaving the visitor with a unique perspective of the sensoria experienced during one of the most decisive battles in Canadian history.

The visitor's senses are amplified upon entering the second gallery, "For Crown and Country: the South African and First World Wars." He passes by a First World War His Majesty's Canadian Ship [HMCS] Rainbow Shipwheel, a massive brass and wood

steering wheel that navigated a 1910 cruiser through turbulent waters. Soon thereafter, he encounters a display of First World War trench weapons where clubs, breastplates and shields are displayed to show the lengths to which soldiers resorted in the trenches. Moments later, the visitor reaches the Poison Gas exhibit, which attempts to recreate the same horrifying sensoria that the Triple Entente experienced during the German Empire's first use of poison chlorine gas during the Second Battle of Ypres on April 22, 1915. Two gas masks are displayed, one of which is a pH helmet, a chemically treated white hood with holes for the eyes and mouth. Next to it, a small-box respirator is displayed, its tube leading down into a metal box. The visitor is invited to peer into a slot in the wall. After pressing a button, his vision becomes obstructed as a translucent gas cloud gradually swirls around his eyes. After slowly intensifying, he is suddenly cloaked in a yellowish-green opaque cloud. Although the visitor does not suffer from lung failure, blindness, or skin blistering like Canadian soldiers did on the Western front, he can almost imagine hearing the slow hiss of poison fill the air, the pungent smell and taste of chlorine, and the sensation of gas particles blistering his skin. The interactive Poison Gas exhibit thus assaults the visitor's senses.

The visitor continues to navigate his way through the second gallery and eventually encounters a reconstructed, life-sized trench system. Upon passing through the dark and ominous entrance, the visitor immediately notices that the trench's ersatz walls are composed of bags of sand, mud, and barbed wire. Artillery fire drowns out soldiers' voices as the visitor tries to make his way, cautiously, through the claustrophobic maze. Suddenly, a machine gun rips through the air, followed by screams of agony. The visitor rounds the first bend of the trench and sees a shovel caked with mud and a rusty helmet perched on a post. "Keep your heads down boys," a voice warns overhead, "it's going to be a long night." A sniper takes cover behind a trench wall while a terrified soldier curls up into a hole to drown out the sensoria of war. Soon, the light drizzle of rain turns into a fierce thunderstorm, making it difficult to distinguish between lightening and gunfire in the black sky.

The second gallery's reconstruction of Passchendaele is no less sensational. Here, the larger-than-life horrors of attrition, or total war, assault the senses and reveal the plight of the First World War. Unburied corpses, massive mud craters, thick fog, and filmy bog stretch far into the distance. Blue and grey ceiling lights illuminate a panoramic sepia photograph of a barren landscape to fool the visitor's eyes into believing that he

is standing on a First World War battleground. In an attempt to stay afloat the bog, the visitor walks on duckboards and sees tree stumps, muddy footprints, a half-buried machine gun, and a drowned soldier. Cold air tingles his skin, his vision is strained by the ruined landscape, and eerily quiet vibrations taunt his ears. The visitor scurries out of the gallery and passes by a copy of the Treaty of Versailles, his senses assaulted.

The visitor soon finds himself in the museum's third gallery, "Forged in Fire." In this Second World War gallery, he first encounters an authentic 1943 Enigma Encryption Machine type M4 and is invited to experiment with its dials and rotors in a game called "Breaking the Code." In this activity, the visitor helps decode Enigma messages, written in Morse code, by selecting the corresponding letter on the computer keyboard and watching as a different letter appears on screen, a letter that the British would have selected as its counterpart. The visitor soon realizes that an F might really be a blank space and that a T could be an O; in another word, however, another T could be an N. The interactive nature of this exhibit allows the visitor to decipher scrambled Nazi messages, which changed the fate of the Battle of the Atlantic by making it easier to detect Nazi U-boats before they could sink the very convoys that sustained the Allied war effort. Nearby, authentic video footage of the Royal Canadian Navy's slow convoys and escorts, obscured by fog and turbulent waters, is projected onto three angled screens to show the difficulties of the journey from Halifax to Great Britain.

The visitor soon finds himself on the Home Front, a reconstructed streetscape. He hears the clanking and drilling of steam-powered machines in a munitions factory. Wool army coats and steel helmets invite visitors to touch and try them on. Down the street, the front window of a bank displays authentic victory loans, war bonds, and rationing stamps. An advertisement for War Savings Certificates plasters the bank's door and satirically villainizes Hitler who is being squeezed by a soldier and a worker in a metal V, symbolic for victory. Next to the bank is a Canadian grocery store. Its window displays contemporary household staples such as Gold Soap, Aylmer's canned tomatoes, and Burns' tenderized cooked ham. A notice asks civilians to respect ration regulations and to not hoard food and supplies by buying only half of a pound of sugar per week per person, one half of one's usual tea purchase, and three quarters of one's typical coffee purchase. Nearby, the visitor engages with rationing on an interactive level by guessing whether materials such as glass bottles, aluminum saucepans, and rubber caps are recyclable and salvageable for the war effort.

The sensory experiences of war are further heightened when the visitor is invited to touch authentic Second World War relics. Through the sense of touch, the visitor learns why heavy wool jackets were worn during the frigid Ardennes offensive in France as well as why lighter beige jackets were worn during the North African campaign due to the sweltering heat and the need for camouflage. The visitor also interacts with soldiers' supplies such as a comb, a shaving razor, a sewing kit, and a brass button polisher. He is also encouraged to open a small tin box to smell Second World War ration cookies, a sweet and stale aroma.

Nearby, the visitor is plunged into a simulation of Operation Overlord, the largest amphibious landing in military history, also known as D-Day. Here, the visitor steps aboard a metal landing craft and hears voices screaming as the craft creaks and clanks. Suddenly, a giant screen illuminates before his eyes and he realizes that he is about to land on Juno Beach, the Canadian beachhead off the Normand coast. Planes soar overhead as waves crash aggressively against the sides of the landing pod. He can see soldiers perched on the vessel in front of him and follows them out of the boat when the doors swing open. Machine guns spew bullets and barbed wire lines the beach. Tanks and armored patrol cars begin to surround surrendering Wehrmacht soldiers.

Several strides later, the visitor is in Ortona, Italy. He makes his way through a life-sized house, whose terracotta roof has been blown off, allowing beams of light to stream through the ceiling. Large chunks of wall tiles have been stripped, and rubble and debris are piled in massive heaps on the floor. A Canadian soldier crouches next to a crater, bullet holes puncturing the walls around him. Periods of intense gunfire and shouts lurch the visitor in unfamiliar territory. After rounding an archway, the visitor comes face to face with a Nazi soldier whose gun is pointed directly at him. He hurriedly leaves the battle site, anxious to escape the plethora of sensoria around him. Suddenly, he arrives in front of Hitler's parade car, a black, armored Mercedes Benz limousine that was captured by American soldiers in April 1945. Its shattered and cracked windows, bullet holes, and sheer, ominous size bombard the visitor with countless sensoria. As the visitor nears the end of the third gallery, he comes across a bloodied Nazi flag that was taken from the body of a German officer by a Canadian soldier in Calais in 1944. He leaves the gallery with a renewed sense of the horrors of the Second World War.

The visitor enters a seemingly somber atmosphere in the fourth and final gallery, "A Violent Peace: The Cold War, Peacekeeping & Recent Conflicts." He passes by an audio recording of Sir Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain Speech" which, he learns, catalyzed deteriorating relations between East and West. Soon thereafter, the visitor finds himself in the Cold War Situation Room and Command Center, a reconstructed North Atlantic Treaty Organization command center. The center's towering screens, modern chairs, and impressive computer systems create a most convincing atmosphere. Upon sitting down at one of the exhibit's four stations, the visitor is given control over the fate of the world. He presses buttons to access top-secret information, including the signatories of the 1955 Warsaw Pact or distinguishing between Soviet satellite states, neutral states, and NATO powers on a map in an interactive activity called "Balance of Power." The visitor can also simulate two Cold War scenarios. First, he can retrace the trajectory of twentieth century history and re-experience the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Polish Solidarity movement of the 1980s. A second scenario traces the arc of a Third World War in which casualties accumulate exponentially; in this scenario, Hanover is reduced to rubble, convoys depart from Halifax, and the Dalai Lama desperately calls for peace. The interactive nature of these exhibits allows the visitor to experience history, both actual and counterfactual, through the senses.

Upon exiting the fourth gallery, the visitor encounters a towering reconstruction of the Berlin Wall. Neon graffiti and crumbling infrastructure symbolize the collective misery of the people behind the Iron Curtain. The visitor touches the wall and comes to the startling realization that totalitarianism was not a force greater than the will of the people it attempted to control. The visitor leaves the exhibit with a renewed perspective of Canadian military history. After stopping at a final station where museumgoers can write letters to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, he is inclined to reconsider the great cost at which Canada became internationally renowned and respected as a peacekeeping nation. He reconsiders it through the senses.