

NETWORK

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Searching
FOR VETERANS

Last Post Fund volunteer Ted Usher continues the hunt for unmarked graves

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Searching FOR VETERANS

Last Post Fund volunteer Ted Usher continues the hunt for unmarked graves

By Lisa Johnston

Since 2021, Comox Valley resident Ted Usher has committed countless hours of his time searching for unmarked veterans' graves all over the province of British Columbia. Through his work, he has helped uncover over 130 graves, providing honour to those who served for Canada.

Funded by Veterans Affairs Canada under the umbrella of the Last Post Fund, the Unmarked Grave Program provides a permanent military marker for all eligible veterans who have not previously received funeral and burial funding.

"I've known about the work of the Last Post Fund for two decades as my brother, Ken, worked for the organization for 20 years," says Maj. (Ret'd) Ted Usher. "After my wife and I moved to the Comox Valley following my retirement from the City of Port Coquitlam in 2019, and previous retirement from the New Westminster Police in 2004, I was looking for something to do and Ken encouraged me to get involved as a volunteer with the Last Post Fund's Unmarked Grave Program."

The work was right up Usher's alley. Combined with his extensive military background spanning over 30 years, and investigative skills honed through his lengthy career as a police officer in New Westminster, he also had the time necessary to research each veteran's final resting place.

Usher began his search in the Comox Valley and was fortunate to receive a selection of books from the local genealogical society which contained the names of everyone buried at both the Cumberland and Courtenay cemeteries, including inscriptions on the headstones. Using the books as a guide, he then began checking sites such as Ancestry and various databases to confirm service records.

"Basically, I look for veterans who have no headstones," explains Usher, who is also an active volunteer with the Comox Air Force Museum and with the local army cadet corps. "For every name listed without a headstone, I have to confirm whether or not they were a veteran first. If they were, I then go online to Ancestry, Archives Canada and the provincial archives to dig out as much information on the person as I



Ted Usher organized a private fundraising campaign to get a new headstone commissioned for Private Edwin Harbottle.

can, which may include visiting the cemetery or contacting the local cemetery office. Once I compile that information, I then submit the application to the Last Post Fund."

Today, Usher serves as research coordinator, working with nine volunteer researchers across the province to continue the search for veterans. Along with Alberta, British Columbia is one of the most active regions, submitting hundreds of applications every year to the Unmarked Grave Program.

At the same time, Usher is also searching for Indigenous veterans for the Last Post Fund's Indigenous Veterans Burial Program, a new initiative started in 2019 to provide grave markers to Indigenous veterans lying in unmarked graves while also adding traditional names to existing military markers. Over 18,000 Indigenous veterans served in the First World War, Second World War, Korean War, Afghanistan and other peacekeeping missions, many of whom are now buried in B.C.

All the hard work and dedication has not gone unnoticed. On January 18, 2024, the B.C. chapter of the Last Post Fund was invited to attend a ceremony at Victoria’s Government House, where representatives were presented with a B.C. Reconciliation Award. Hosted by Lt.-Gov. Janet Austin, the award program recognizes individuals, groups and organizations who demonstrate exceptional leadership, integrity, respect and commitment to furthering the calls to action outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

“It was quite an honour,” says Usher, who attended the event with Maj. (Ret’d) Gino Simeoni, president of the B.C. branch of the Last Post Fund, and fellow Abbotsford researcher Glenn Smith. “We are pleased to be able to help remember these veterans. Whether they served overseas or not, they signed up and committed themselves to going to war. We should never forget that and one way we can honour them is by ensuring they have a headstone which indicates they were a veteran.”

Funding for both programs provides for the installation of 600 to 700 headstones per year across Canada. At any given time, there are over 1,000 applications waiting to be processed. If a non-military headstone is already erected at the burial site, no funding from the program is allowed. Unfortunately, this also applies to headstones in disrepair, which led Usher to organize a private funding campaign for one veteran resting in Cumberland Cemetery.

“I came across a headstone belonging to a Mr. Edwin Harbottle that was so hard to read that I took it upon myself to get a new one commissioned,” says Usher. “I started a fundraising campaign and with the help of the local Royal Canadian Legion branches, we were able to honour this gentleman with a new headstone. As most of the work we do is with First World War

veterans, as their service records are easier to find, this will continue to be an issue as time wears down these stones.”

This is exactly what has happened in Ocean Falls, a remote B.C. town that is only accessible via boat or floatplane. However, this time the project wasn’t instigated by Usher but by a BC Ferries crew.

“A couple of months ago, we were contacted by a fellow who is the chief steward of the Northern Sea Wolf ferry that runs up north. He and some of his crew wanted to do something to help veterans and as we didn’t have a researcher in the area, we asked them to visit the cemetery in Ocean Falls to check on some graves. In the summer months, the ferry stops overnight, which allowed the crew to investigate, and last year, they found several headstones that had completely disintegrated because of the weather and salt air. When I told them that it would take two years to process the application, they raised funds through BC Ferries to replace the headstones. The crew will bring the headstones on board their vessel this summer for installation and I’ve been in contact with a person who says they’ll cut the grass and maintain the cemetery better than it has been in the past.”

For Usher, volunteering has long been in his DNA, even prior to retiring and moving to the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island. He enjoys the satisfaction of helping others, including veterans who he believes should never be forgotten.

“It’s important for me to continue doing this work,” concludes Usher. “When I am out walking in a cemetery, it gives me great pleasure to stop and read about a veteran and where they served. It is rewarding to no longer see a bare spot and I feel quite close to these servicemen as I have spent hours researching their history.” **N**





OACFP

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF CEMETERY
AND FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS

ASSOCIATION UPDATE

**OACFP's Focus – Strength by Association
Strong Communities**

By John Perrotta, OACFP President,
Board of Directors




John Perrotta

Did you know that our organization was founded in 1913 as the Ontario Association of Cemeteries? I find it hard to wrap my head around the changes our predecessors have gone through in both society and in our sector.

From changes in technology to social norms to the makeup of our multicultural society, every year and decade requires our sector to respond and, dare I say it, pivot.


To outsiders, our sector may seem staid or perhaps stuck. After all, the difficult realities of death and death care haven't changed. But what has changed – and will always change –



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More than this, let's not forget the invaluable open spaces many of our members caretake: Ontario's cemeteries. Now, more than ever, they provide a vital connection to our past and our histories. They provide a place of desperately needed quiet and solitude in our busy world. I personally observe this every day in our Hamilton cemeteries, where people come to seek out green spaces for better mental health in our busy, densifying communities.

are the values, expectations and social norms for grieving. OACFP members move with the times because they are an integral part of their communities. We are there in the towns, neighbourhoods and virtual communities we serve.

More than this, let's not forget the invaluable open spaces many of our members caretake: Ontario's cemeteries. Now, more than ever, they provide a vital connection to our past and our histories. They provide a place of desperately needed quiet and solitude in our busy world. I personally observe this every day in our Hamilton cemeteries, where people come to seek out green spaces for better mental health in our busy, densifying communities.

I know this is all true, as do you. But not everyone has the luxury to stop and think about us in this way. For me, this is why our association exists – to ensure that those who need to understand it, do.

A Strong Sector

Just as our members have changed over the years, so has our association. We have a lengthy tradition of responsiveness. For instance, in 2003, significant legislative changes led to the expansion of our scope as a trade organization, which means we are focused on the organizations and businesses of the whole sector. This inclusiveness has become one of OACFP's hallmarks, the importance and significance of which was reaffirmed with our new value proposition strategy. It drives the pace of our evolution as a trade association. We must move with Ontarians' needs to grieve, which can sound today more like: "online," "personalized" and "environmental."

To this end, here are just a few of the things OACFP is doing to help all our members be stronger. Together, we are:

- Starting a new environmental sustainability committee. Approved by the board in July 2023, this committee will advise the board on new environmental protection and enhancement opportunities, advise on stakeholder and legislative matters,

and seek a balance between social, environmental and economic aspects of our sector.

- Developing a bilingual mental health training program. This initially free, research-based program will enhance location and line managers' skills in supporting the mental health and wellness of staff (registration details for this June event will be available in early March. Program details can be found on the OACFP event calendar).

- Empowering individual professionals to keep learning. We support member organizations by offering training, specialized sector education and CE credits for licensure or by just being a valued resource that really understands day-to-day challenges; we know individuals make the organizations and that we all need support.

Navigating Rapid Change: OACFP Membership in Action

But there is more for us to do. OACFP's members face unprecedented workforce issues such as recruitment, retention and succession planning challenges. Anticipating potential legislative changes, navigating crematorium emissions regulations and understanding the implications of Priority of Persons legislation add further complexities and are just a few of the issues OACFP is committed to address head-on, providing support and guidance to our members.

OACFP is not just an association; it is a community committed to progress. We encourage members to participate in our activities. Reach out to Darren Denomme, our dedicated executive director, to express your interest and be part of the positive change.

I invite you to stay engaged, comment, volunteer, support and discuss issues with us. There is much to do, but I know we can do it together: for your community, your business and your association.

Drop me a line any time. [N](#)



Ken Munday



ASSOCIATION UPDATE

By Ken Munday, WCCA President

Information sharing and networking are two important benefits of any association. When we have built strong relationships within the profession, our first thought is to reach out to our colleagues. Unfortunately, there are times when they are unable to help for one reason or another. When this happens, the next call should be to your association. Unfortunately, we often don't even think about the association. Instead, we wait for our colleagues to come through when they have time.

I recently met with someone who had contacted a few colleagues and was waiting to hear back on some questions. I asked if they had also reached out to the Western Canada Cemetery Association (WCCA), and they said they had not. When I hear of someone searching for information from other cemeteries, it always surprises me when they haven't communicated with WCCA. Which means it's time to remind everyone of the additional benefits of the association.

WCCA has an ever-growing variety of member cemeteries and suppliers. We have municipal, corporate for-profit, not-for-profit board-run, and small to large cemeteries of different religions. This allows the association to help cemeteries of every type connect with other cemeteries that might be experiencing issues specific to that type and size of operation.

In addition to this, we strive to keep current with new trends and happenings within the profession and share this information with our membership through email, conferences, our Facebook page and our newsletter. Further educational content is offered via supplier webinars and during our annual conference.

We also created a tri-provincial PowerPoint program for owners and operators of smaller cemetery facilities and provide access

We will continue to look for additional benefits we may be able to offer our members. If anyone has any suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact our WCCA administrator, Lorraine Piller, at administration@westerncemetery.com. In the meantime, we look forward to seeing everyone in Winnipeg!

and insights into cemetery legislation, regulations, bylaws and safety procedures.

Working towards strengthening the partnership between cemeteries and funeral homes is the latest benefit we are striving to provide not only to WCCA members, but to the death-care profession as a whole. The Funeral Service Association of Canada (FSAC), Manitoba Funeral Service Association (MFSA) and Canadian Funeral Trade Association (CFTA) all share in this desire. This has led to our respective associations working together in partnership to present the upcoming FSAC Summit in Winnipeg this June 11 and 12. More information on the FSAC Summit will be coming soon!

We will continue to look for additional benefits we may be able to offer our members. If anyone has any suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact our WCCA administrator, Lorraine Piller, at administration@westerncemetery.com. In the meantime, we look forward to seeing everyone in Winnipeg! **N**

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