VIMM Newsletter
Fall 2026 Vancouver Island Military Museum

# Decoding Nanaimo's Diefenbunker

By Brian McFadden

During the Cold War in the late 1950s, there was a heightened sense that a world-wide nuclear holocaust was imminent. Tensions between the Soviet Union and the western democracies, led by the United States and NATO, had reached a critical point.

In Canada, the Government of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker launched a programme of civil defence to prepare the nation in the event of a national emergency. Beginning as a top-secret building operation under the code name *Emergency Army Signals Establishment (EASE)*, construction began on underground bunkers (eventually nicknamed Diefenbunkers) over a period of 18 months between 1959 and 1961. The government recognized it could not guarantee safety for the entire population in the event of a nuclear attack - the best it could offer was the prospect of *"the continuity of a democratic government."* Most of these facilities were often built in great secrecy at rural locations outside of major cities across Canada. Vancouver and Victoria were considered primary nuclear targets, so building a bunker in Nanaimo kept it at a safe distance while still allowing it to serve the province.



The new Diefenbunker display

There were seven bunkers built across the country beginning with the *Central Emergency Communication Headquarters (CECHQ)* in the town of Carp, Ontario, which was the largest bunker and command centre, designed to withstand a near-miss from a nuclear explosion. These facilities housed the Prime Minister, Governor General, cabinet ministers, and support staff, as well as military personnel and emergency services. Each underground facility had entrances through massive blast doors at the surface as well as extensive air filters and positive air pressure to prevent radiation infiltration. Underground storage was built for food, fuel, fresh water, and other supplies for the facilities which could support several hundred people for up to four weeks.



Artifacts from the Cold War.

The other Diefenbunkers were built on existing army bases in Nanaimo BC, Penhold AB, Shilo MB, Borden ON, Valcartier QB, and Debert NS. These designated Regional Emergency Communications Headquarters (RECHQ) were smaller establishments and part of a secret national network designed to ensure vital communications from coast to coast in the event of a nuclear attack. The facilities were staffed 24 hours a day by military and civilian personnel and played an important role in military telecommunications. During 32 years of operations, the buildings were prepared to go into lock-down at a moment's notice.

*Continues on page 2.*

## Decoding Nanaimo's Diefenbunker continued.

# Nanaimo, the Capital of British Columbia?

On 3 May 1960, Nanaimo briefly became the provincial capital of British Colombia. Premier W.A.C. Bennett, along with provincial secretary Wesley Black and 100 key provincial public servants demonstrated how Nanaimo would become the seat of government. After receiving an *"air raid imminent warning"* from Ottawa, deputy provincial secretary L.J. Wallace had a 17-car convoy organized and speeding towards Nanaimo, with most deputy ministers on board. Several senior government officials had already flown north from Victoria harbour before the theoretical nuclear explosion. During the cold war the threat of a nuclear attack was real; newspapers and radio stations carried regular instructions on what to do in the event of an attack. *"Duck and Cover"* drills were the order of the day and became part of a normal school routine.

Fortunately, Canada did not come under nuclear attack during the Cold War, so the Diefenbunkers were not used for their intended purpose, they did, however, operate continuously on military bases between 1962 and 1994.



Prime Minister John Diefenbaker.



The Sandwick Cairn war memorial, Courtney BC.

## Vancouver Island Remembers

***Duncan, Charles Andrew U.B.C, B.A, 1916. Lieutenant 46th Battalion.***
Only son of Mr. and the late Mrs. Eric Duncan. Born in Comox District, B. C, March 18, 1895. Attended Sandwick Public School and Cumberland High School, which he entered with the second highest marks in the province; McGill University College in Vancouver, 1912-15; U.B.C, 1915-16. He enlisted in March 1916 and went to France with the 46th Battalion serving at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele and being twice wounded. He received his commission in September 1918. Lieutenant Duncan was killed at Canal du Nord on September 28, 1918, while leading his platoon into action.

***Duncan, Robert George M.B.C. Arts, 1912-14. Corporal, 102nd Battalion.***
Son of Mr. and Mrs. William Duncan. Born at Sandwick, B. C, August 22, 1894. Attended Courtenay public school and Cumberland high school; McGill University College, 1912-1914. He enlisted with the 102nd Battalion, North British Columbians, in January 1916 and served with them until his death. He was mortally wounded on September 27, 1918, and died the following day. He had been promoted to Sergeant and was awarded the Military Medal shortly before his death.

Their names are engraved on the Sandwick Cairn war memorial, which was dedicated by the Governor General, Lord Byng of Vimy, on November 12, 1922.

# Vice President's Message

by Greg Devenish



The Vancouver Island Military Museum overlooking Nanaimo Harbour

The museum has had a very busy summer. The number of visitors to the museum is up and new exhibits have opened. The largest and most significant new display is *The Decoding of the Diefenbaker Bunker*. A new display illustrates the story of the building of Hawker Hurricanes in Canada and their role in WWII. It pays tribute to four Canadians, including three Canadian pilots who flew hurricanes in the Battle of Britain - Paul Pitcher, Willie McKnight and John Kent. Elsie MacGill, "*Queen of the Hurricanes*," the first female aeronautical engineer in Canada, was responsible for the production of 1400 Hurricanes in Thunder Bay. There is also a new display honouring the 40,000 Canadians that served in Bosnia and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The last display recounts the story of Fern Blodgett Sunde from Cobourg Ontario who served in the Merchant Marine.

Carina Nilsson, General Manager, has focused on securing grants and the museum received funding through the Federal Young Canada Works Program. That funding allowed the museum to hire Amanda Flores in the role as Collections Assistant. She will begin the process of cataloguing the museum's collections. Caitlin Wareing-Oksanen, Education and Public Program Co-originator, has been busy organizing the young explorers summer program for students – see page five for details. Caitlin also put together guided and exhibition support materials for young people to discover items on display. Young people are welcome to pick up a pencil and booklet at the front desk and search the museum to identify various items.

The museum held its annual BBQ for the volunteers at the Lantzville Legion in early August. This gives the executive board of the museum a chance to thank the volunteers, who have grown in numbers, for all their time and effort doing tours of the museum. The feedback from visitors has been very positive about the knowledge and hospitality of the VIMM volunteers. Our signed guest book is ringing endorsement of our volunteers with remarks such as, *"Great Tour," Great Experience," "Helpful Staff,"* and *"...the staff was so professional and kind."* Fall is upon us, and we are getting ready to host our Open House on Remembrance Day. This is the busiest day of the year for the museum.



## Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame.

Contact us for further information and prices.

**250-753-3814**

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# Home Front – Media, Youth and Aviation

By Heather Neil

After World War I, Canadian media glorified aviation heroes, inspiring youth and fostering a national fascination with flight. Canadian pilots such as Billy Bishop, Raymond Collishaw, and William Barker became celebrated figures due to their aerial victories and daring exploits. Flight then had as much hi-tech glamour as space travel would a half century later. In 1927, when Charles Lindbergh became the first solo pilot to cross the Atlantic Ocean non-stop, the North American youth could not get enough stories or publications about flight. Suddenly there were movies and periodicals about WWI aces, barnstorming, bush pilots, and stunt flying.

In 1928, an American children's comic strip hero first appeared called *"Tailspin Tommy"* chronicling the adventures of a young boy who dreamed of flight. It was the brain child of Hal Forrest, a WW1 flying vet, and was carried by notable Canadian publications such as the *Toronto Daily Star*, the weekend *Star Weekly*, and the pioneer of the comic book: *"Famous Funnies"*. *Tailspin Tommy* would be widely available in Canada by Whitman Publishing as "Little Big Books". Later this, and other far more serious print media, contributed to inspiring young would-be Canadian aviators. Ultimately newspapers and newly established radio stations advocated for modern aerial infrastructure. The RCAF evolved from individual volunteer efforts into a professional organization. Eventually the government formed *Trans-Canada Air Lines* in 1937.



Tailspin Tommy inspired the Wong brothers and thousands of other Canadians.

A cultural perception of the daring, skilled pilot that defined the early days of the bush flying and military service across Canada seemed to resonate. The interwar period, often called the Golden Age of Flight, saw a rapid rise of local flying schools, model aircraft clubs, and aeronautical education programs across the country.

Take for example, the Wong brothers of Nanaimo BC. Robert and Tommy Wong were pioneering Chinese Canadian aviators born in Nanaimo, respectively 1917 and 1922. Growing up in Vancouver, they were obsessed with aviation and heavily influenced by childhood model building and media such as Modern Mechanics and Inventions. In the spring of 1935, Modern Mechanics and Inventions published plans for the Pietenpol Sky Scout. Robert and Tommy were soon underway. This was not just a home-built aircraft – it was an apartment built, at least until the plane's wings and fuselage proved too much for the family's Chinatown home. When word of the brothers' endeavour spread, Boeing Canada offered them factory space to finish building the plane. George Sinclair, then an engineer with the company, helped to supervise the project and later attested that Robert's workmanship was "the best". Completing the Scout was really a family affair. While Robert and Tommy cut wood and began assembly, their mother and her friends, and their sister stitched the fabric to the fuselage. The plane passed inspection in July 1936 and was registered as CF-BAA. Some ten years later, in 1945, the brothers would open Central Airways at Toronto Island Airport, near the present-day site of Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport. By 1950 Central Airways had become one of the biggest flight schools and charter businesses in Toronto. Influenced, perhaps, by that long ago romance of aviation, Robert and Tommy Wong were responsible for training over 8000 Canadian pilots before closing Central Airways in 1989.


Robert and Tommy Wong are in the Canadian Aviation Hall of Fame.

Post World War I media played a crucial role in shaping public perception of flight by celebrating our heroic pilots, and inspiring youth to pursue flying. Through newspapers, books, and new opportunities, aviation became both a symbol of national achievement, and a compelling career path for the next generation of Canadians.

# LEARNING AND FUN AT THE MUSEUM

This summer, Caitlin Wareing-Oksanen, our Education and Public Programs Co-ordinator, developed a number of guided learning programs for children and youth. These include guided tours and hands-on workshops, interactive games and challenges, and printed materials such as brochures, handouts, activity sheets, and worksheets. These have been translated into materials that will be reused during seasonal programming and tours, as well as bookable guided learning programs for schools and community groups.

**Our summer camps were:**

**1. Behind Enemy Lines: Evasion, Escape, and Espionage in WW2**
How did secret operatives navigate behind enemy lines? What tools did pilots have to find their way home? Learn about Canadians in the Second World War and make your own secret map! This program focuses on the tactics and tools of evasion and escape provided to airmen and soldiers who ended up behind enemy lines by accident, and the SOE agents who operated there intentionally.

**2. Sparks and Scrambles**
Have you ever wondered about the planes that flew in the Battle of Britain? Who built them, and where did their pilots train? From the ground crew to navigators, learn about the many different roles of Canadians in the air force during the First and Second World Wars, and make your own wooden airplane.

**3. Young Curators**
What is it like to work in a museum? Explore behind the scenes at the museum and learn about what goes into the making of an exhibit, from selecting the artifacts on display to the design of an exhibition. In this engaging, hands-on program you will learn how to safely handle museum objects, write an object label, design an exhibit, and think about how we share our history.

**4. Decoding the Diefenbunker**
What was the Diefenbunker? In this hands-on program, learn about Canada's role in the Cold War, the building of Nanaimo's underground bunker and the protests that responded to it. On your visit, you will tour our newest exhibit, make a cipher to encrypt secret messages,  spell your name in morse code and make your very own morse code bracelet.

The programs were a success, especially the Morse Code bracelets! Other activities were learning  to pack a museum object, making and sending a soldier's postcard, and wooden airplane making. There were also seasonal activities throughout the fall and winter for the holidays and Remembrance Day.

Visit our web site for updates to programming. **https://militarymuseum.ca/programs**



# Remembering and Grieving

by Angus Scully

The museum is, of course, a place for learning, conservation, interpretation, and enjoyment. But a sensitive look at the building, displays and artifacts quickly reminds us that it is also a place of remembering, and for many, a place for grieving. Visitors to VIMM immediately see the Wall of Honour on the outside of the building, where families have permanently placed stone plaques honouring loved ones who have served in the armed forces. Inside are thousands of medals donated by Vancouver Island veterans and their families. Pride in their service goes hand in hand with memories of deaths and wounds, both physical and mental, and with the stress endured by families themselves.




Memorial Plaques and Silver Crosses on display

**Silver Crosses and Memorial Plaques**

Surely the most moving items we have are the Memorial Crosses and Memorial Plaques that have come into our care after being preserved in homes for over a hundred years. In the First World War, 60 000 Canadians were killed out of a population of under eight million. So many families and communities were in shock and mourning. Starting in 1919, grieving families received two types of official recognition of their loss. A memorial plaque, cast in bronze, with the dead soldier's name, was sent to each next of kin. Many have survived and we have 31 in our care. Canada, uniquely, created the Memorial Cross, in silver, that was given to the mothers of dead soldiers. *The mothers are the heroines of the bitter home trenches*, wrote the man who first suggested the idea, *they suffer in silence with no reward but the sense that they have answered the call with their heart's blood - their sons.* Today, the Memorial Cross (Silver Cross) is still awarded to the mothers, fathers, and spouses of those killed while serving. A total of 130 000 have been awarded, and we have 29 in our care. At the National Remembrance Day ceremony in Ottawa each year, a Silver Cross Mother lays a wreath on the national memorial, representing the mothers and families of the fallen.




**The Nanaimo Cenotaph**

A nation in grief and shock - Canadians built thousands of war memorials across Canada after the First and Second World wars, and other conflicts. The Nanaimo Cenotaph design by Cyril Millins, represents the gateway into the afterlife in an ancient Egyptian tomb. The names of the dead are engraved on the door. To begin the two minutes of silence on Remembrance Day, a bugler plays the Last Post, once a signal that all was safe for the night and now a signal of a farewell, that a soldier's duty is done. It has also been called a summoning of the spirits of the dead to the cenotaph.

VIMM is open to the public on November 11, at no charge, after the ceremonies at the Cenotaph. Annually, hundreds of people make a visit to the museum a part of their act of remembrance.

# Lucky Find: German WWII Documents On Display

by Greg Devenish

The Rotary Club of Nanaimo has a large used book sale twice a year. This has required volunteers to sort thousands of books into categories. This in turn has morphed into a wonderful relationship with the Military Museum. They allow the museum to select books that can used in the museum library and, in return, books that are donated to the museum that we don't require are turned over to the book sale. In the last six months, a German Wehrstammbuch booklet was found. A Wehrpass was found recently in museum storage and now both booklets are on display in the museum.




On Display at VIMM: Wehrpass and Wehrstammbuch.

The *Wehrpass* was an official military registration and service booklet issued to German conscripts during WWII. The comprehensive documentation book contained personal data and civilian details. When a soldier reported to a military unit, the *Wehrpass* was exchanged for a Soldbuch which was an active duty pay book. Once an individual was discharged, the *Wehrpass* was returned, and a veteran was required to keep it until the age of 60. In case of death while serving, the *Wehrpass* was sent to the next of kin as a keepsake. The *Wehrstammbuch* was a stationary military service register book which was stored and updated in the military district where an individual was enlisted.

The *Wehrpass* on display was issued to Georg Handler. He was born in Schellen, Germany, on 6 January 1913. His booklet indicated that he was a farm labourer and had an elementary school education. Georg was conscripted into the army on 25 February 1939, registered in Neustadt, and completed his army infantry training in Mistelbach. Georg went on to serve in Poland. He was qualified to use the MG-42 machine gun and pistols. In May 1941, he was discharged from active duty and sent assigned to 482 Infantry Reserve Battalion as an instructor. In December 1942 he was sent to Tunisia and was reported missing in action on 24 April. There are no more entries in the Wehrpass, and we can only surmise the Georg's Wehrpass was sent to his next of kin.

The *Wehrstammbuch* on display was registered to a Gerhard Belling. He was born in Altgrosstadt on 7 January 1903. The pass indicated he was married, had one child, and was a cook in civilian life. Gerhard was conscripted into the army and deemed fit to serve on 6 May, 1940, in Lower Saxony. After training he was stationed in Germany with the 211 Battalion. In August 1943, he was discharged and sent to the Kriegsmarine (Navy) where he served in a naval installation. In June of 1944 he was sent back to the army to serve out the remainder of the war doing various administration tasks.

Special thanks to Tom Molfenter, a local resident of Nanaimo, who was born in Germany and was able to assist with the translation in both booklets.

# DISPATCHES
from VIMM

## Congratulations

Our General Manager, Carina Nilsson, has been elected as a member of the Board of Directors of the Organization of Military Museums of Canada. For more information see: https://ommc.ca/board-of-directors

## Annual Volunteer and Staff Christmas Lunch

The volunteer and staff Christmas lunch will be held in the Crystal Room at the Grand Hotel on Tuesday December 1 at 11:30 am. Please watch for the signup sheet and include guests.



Welcome Bob Tolmie

## Farewell and Welcome

Richard Lee is leaving us and moving to Langford. Thank you Richard for being a loyal volunteer. We also have a new volunteer – welcome Bob Tolmie.

## Thank you, Downtown Business Association

VIMM is taking part in the downtown Hallowe'en trail for children. Thank you to the Business Association for their donation.

## *In Memoriam*

We sadly note that Gordon Buch passed away on October 3rd at the Nanaimo Seniors at the age of 96. He was a veteran of the RCN (1946-1957). He was also our Volunteer Coordinator and member of the Board of Directors.

## The Joseph Fall Collection

Mike Fall has donated more of his father's photos and records. We now have the complete collection of photos taken by Joseph Fall while he served in the RNAS, RAF, and RCAF. Six VIMM volunteers are busy scanning and cataloguing this important collection.

## The Best Machine Gun of WW2

A German MG-42 machine gun has been added to the display of German arms. It averaged about 1,200 rounds per minute, compared to 500 for the Bren Gun used by Canadian and Commonwealth forces.



The new Diefenbunker display with some of our museum staff and directors (l to r): Amanda Flores, Caitlin Wareing-Oksanen, Carina Nilsson, Brian McFadden, Greg Devenish.

## Museum Directors and Staff

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|---|---|---|
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