

# Why I Designed the Monument to Canadian Fallen



By Vincent Courtenay

Some 20 years ago I was working in Korea on the Monument to Canadian Fallen. My wife, Mak-ye, whom I had met in Korea two years earlier was giving me full support and assisting at times with language interpretation. The monument now stands in the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Busan. A copy of it, also developed in Korea at the same time, is located in the Canadian capital of Ottawa. It serves as the capital's Korean War memorial.

While it was conceived and crafted to commemorate Canadians who fell in the Korean War, in mood and in spirit and intent it can be considered as a representation for all of those soldiers from the 21 United Nations countries and from South Korea who also fell in battle. All veterans of that war realize and appreciate that their countrymen served not independently, but as part of a United Nations Force. They all feel a kinship for those soldiers no matter what nation they came from.

My wife and I spent three years working on the monument program. I did not assume any artistic proprietorship, or feel vaingloriously that it was a work of art that I had designed, supervised and worked on.

Indeed, it is a monument for, and one that belongs to the Canadians who fell in Korean War service. It is theirs and nobody should ever try to extract any part of that ownership. They paid most dearly for it and it is a very small, humble tribute to their memory, and to what they believed in and died for. This is why I designed the Monument to Canadian Fallen, and I was fortunate and privileged to have artist Yoo Young Mun work with me on it for more than three years. I was afraid to return to Korea after the war. For the first several years I could not afford to. Yet later, as I became a senior journalist, and then a corporation executive and consultant, I still could not do it.

One prays many times when he is in action at the front, and like many other young soldiers I thought I might not live through each day, let alone survive the war. Although part of me greatly admired the beautiful, rugged nation and its resilient, communal people, I pledged if I could get home safely, I would never return. I felt like I had been spared and had a responsibility to make an accounting of myself back in Canada.

Actually, I immigrated from Canada to the United States, where I lived for 40 years, and that is where I had excellent career success. Finally, as I was winding down my business, I did return to Korea. I did it after coming home from a successful business trip to Paris and was filled with goodwill and happiness. I had worked up enough nerve to visit the graves of my friends at the UN Memorial Cemetery in Nam-gu, Busan. There are 12 of them buried there whom I served with when they fell. I was spiritually crushed by the utter starkness and loneliness and nothingness of the place as I found it then. It was still, still as a writer would say, the grave. There was a frost and there was a bit of cold mist. The sky was slate gray.

I had to hunt for their graves. I came on them not by logic but by wandering. They were all together, but one or two, because most had fallen in one battle location. I nearly crumpled to the ground. There, in

memory of each of them was a small bronze plaque, flat to the ground. It bore their surname with only initials for their given names, their service number and rank, their age and the date of their deaths. I knew that nobody from Canada flew out there like I had done to visit these fallen friends, these comrades. They had been there then for fifty years, alone. It broke my heart. There was nobody else in the cemetery. All of the bravado with which I went there, my expensive boots bought at Claridge's on the Champs-Élysées in Paris a few weeks before, my fine tailored suit and new topcoat, my cocky, confident disposition, and a wallet stuffed full of Korean won and travelers checks, all that was knocked out of me.

I felt mild shame that I had such largesse and such freedom and happiness from our world. One might call it a "feeling of hollowness." I had enjoyed decades of wonderful life, much success; the rewards had kept coming as I kept working and pursuing them, yet look there at what was given to them... icy cold bronze tablets on the frosty soil. Yes, one sheds tears. One sees tragedy; no trace of those brave souls remaining. I decided at once that I would try to put a face on these young Canadians. It would be for their identification by the Korean people and by whomever else might come there. It was for them, the Fallen, so that people would know more about them than a stark bronze marker plate in the frosty grass. I wanted to show they were kindly men, good men, family men, young boys who might better have been in high school, or in college readying for the professions, or anywhere else but in that lonely ground in Korea.

I had tried to do that in a couple of books I had written and they were meant for Canadian and American readers, but here was a need to show their faces to the Korean people, and to others, in the place where they are buried. I have knowledge that makes those austere graves as seen on that day even more bleak and sad. Our fallen friends were shipped there, most in the backs of trucks. They arrived as they had been retrieved from the front. At the cemetery they were wrapped in squares of tent canvas. It was bound by the yellow communications wire that was used in field telephones. That is how they were buried, side by side, in canvas, bound by wire. A small bronze funeral bottle was buried a foot above them. The graves were marked at first by white wooden crosses or Stars of David. The crosses and stars were replaced decades later by the bronze plaques.

I designed every element of the Monument to Canadian Fallen, no matter how minute. My good friend, sculptor Yoo Young Mun translated the elements into a wonderful three-dimensional form in composite, then cut it in sections, made his plaster



The Monument to Canadian Fallen which was designed by Vincent Courtenay. The young girl and boy hold bouquets of 21 Canadian maple leaves, and the Mugunghwa national flower of South Korea, symbolizing the 21 Canadians who fell and have no known graves. The names of 516 Canadians are embossed on the base of the Monument.



Vincent Courtenay (right) seated beside Private Stanley Mud a day after fighting in a counterattack on a position called the Hook on the northwest front. Stanley Mud was killed in action by enemy machinegun fire on a night patrol a few days later.

## Initiated Turn Toward Busan

### Vincent Courtenay

joined the Canadian Army Special Force a few days after turning 16, in August, 1950. He served with the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry (PPCLI). Front line service in Korean War 1952~1953.

He worked in journalism and also has served as a consultant to several major corporations in the United States. He developed the plan for the annual November 11 Turn Toward Busan global ceremony. He was awarded Canada's Meritorious Service Medal and Korea's Order of Civic Merit in 2014 for services for Korea's Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs.

He was awarded an honorary Busan citizenship on November 11, 2019 by the recommendation of the Namgu Office.



splashes. Then he supervised the artisans who poured the bronze, and then he welded the components together. He painstakingly hand carved the great granite plinth, then directed workers who set the assembled bronze in place on the plinth in the Canadian Graves Section in the United Nations Memorial Cemetery.

We worked together, side by side, in his small studio in Pocheon, near the Demilitarized Zone. He worked for next to nothing, about all that we could pay him, and me, for nothing, except to honor our Fallen and put a face on them for the Korean people—and the few other visitors who come to the United Nations Memorial Cemetery.

Actually when I went to Korea with my wife to work on the program I was in very poor health. I was supposed to have a major surgery in Detroit. I thought I could complete the work in six months, but for various reasons it dragged on to nearly three years. For more than two years, I was on a special diet and I went repeatedly to the emergency room at the U.S. Military Hospital at Yongsan Garrison in Seoul. Shortly before the Monument to Canadian Fallen was dedicated in the United Nations Memorial Cemetery on November 11, 2001, my wife took me to that hospital and I had the major surgery there. I nearly died and my wife stayed with me night and day, for six weeks during my stay, and when I was released. Later I had to be rushed into the Intensive Care Unit, too weak to even turn over in the bed. Mak-ye stayed with me every minute, and the following spring we returned to Canada. The Governor General of Canada gave me a medal in recognition of our work in Korea.