

From Ypres to Ukraine: The Enduring Legacy of Canadian Service

Remarks delivered by Captain (Retired) Andre Sochaniwsky CD at the UCC/UWVA
Remembrance Ceremony in Toronto, Canada 8 Nov 2025

Almost four years ago, the Russian Federation launched a renewed and horrifically violent invasion of the peaceful and independent country of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the second Russian invasion, the Russian military and authorities have committed war crimes, including deliberate attacks on civilian targets, forced deportations, and torture. Thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and more than 10,000 civilians have been killed, and millions have been displaced. These atrocities echo the horrors of World War II and challenge the very institutions created post-World War II to prevent such tragedies.

Among the most heinous acts have been deliberate attacks on schools, where innocent children and teachers have been killed, and, on energy infrastructure, leaving millions without heat, light, or water. These are attacks on the very fabric of civil society. Ukraine is not only defending its sovereignty but also the international structures and laws that countries like Canada rely on for peace and stability.

Volunteers from around the world, including Canada, have come to Ukraine's defence. Unfortunately, there have been casualties. To date, 15 Canadians have been killed in action. The Ukrainian War Veterans Association of Canada, in partnership with the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, created the Sacrifice Medal to recognize Canadians killed or wounded in action fighting for Ukraine with the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

With us today is the mother of Junior Sergeant Cole Zelenco. Cole was killed in 2023. He was one of the first Canadians to be presented with this medal. He also received the Presidential Order of Courage. A Ukrainian state award given for personal bravery and heroism in defending Ukraine's sovereignty. And he is not the only Canadian to receive such a medal for bravery. Cole's mother, Lynn Baxter, will be laying a wreath on behalf of all Canadians killed in Ukraine later in today's ceremony.

The family of Patrick Mazerolle, who was killed this past September is also attending this ceremony.

The next Sacrifice Medal presentation will honour Mandeep Singh of Toronto, Ontario, who was killed almost one year ago. The ceremony will be held on Thursday, December 4th at 7:30 PM at the UNF Hall on Evans Avenue in Toronto. We invite all who can attend to join us in paying tribute to his service and sacrifice. The courage and sacrifice of these Canadian volunteers will never be forgotten.

Let us also acknowledge the representatives of the Belarusian community, Sviatlana Abbasava of the Belarusian Canadian Alliance, who is here today. Many Belarusian citizens have fought and died defending Ukraine as well. Their sacrifice is a testament to the shared struggle for freedom.

We are honoured by the presence of the Colonel Oleksandr Opanasiuk, Ukrainian Military Attache to Canada and Colonel Serhii Hludyk, Ukrainian officer currently attending advanced security training here in Toronto. Your presence here today strengthens the bond between Ukraine and Canada and reminds us of the shared values we defend.

The Canadian Armed Forces continues to play a vital role in supporting Ukraine and NATO allies. Under Operation UNIFIER, now in its 10th year, over 40,000 Ukrainian military and security personnel have been trained in battlefield tactics and advanced military skills. This mission has had a profound impact on Ukraine's defence capabilities and has strengthened bonds between Canadian and Ukrainian troops. It has also provided an immense opportunity for Canadian and NATO soldiers to learn from the experiences of Ukrainian soldiers fighting against a power foe in modern warfare. These learnings will help save the lives of Canadians who may one day have to fight in a war against a comparable foe.

Today, we are honoured to have members of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada participating in today's ceremony. Members of this esteemed regiment have deployed to Europe in support of the mission. In fact, one of the former commanders of Operation UNIFIER is the current commander of the regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Boileau.

We also recognize Colonel Daniel Stepaniuk, who has served admirably in the Canadian Armed Forces for almost 40 years, including as the Lead Planner for the training of Ukrainian Forces in Europe. In that role, Col Stepaniuk was responsible for establishing standards, synchronizing training and building the coalition's unity of effort to provide Ukraine with the skills that will enable them to survive, fight, and most importantly win. His work has had a lasting impact on Ukraine's ability to defend itself. Today, will be one of his last official ceremonies in uniform as he is retiring in 3 days. We thank you for your service and commitment to peace and stability.

This year we recognize the 110th Anniversary of the Second Battle of Ypres in World War I. We commemorate the bravery of Canadian troops who held the line against the first large-scale use of poison gas. Despite Canada's small population at the time, 620,000 Canadians enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and by war's end, 60,000 Canadians had been killed.

This year we also recognize the 80th Anniversary of the End of World War II and honour those who fought to liberate Europe from Nazi tyranny. In World War II, 1.1 million Canadian soldiers served and among them 35,000 Ukrainian Canadians. 42,000 Canadians were ultimately killed.

Earlier this year in May of 2025, I had the opportunity and honour to attend a VE Day commemoration in London, UK. Standing among the memorials, I paid my respects to the hundreds of thousands of Canadians that served in World War II, and within that number tens of thousands of Ukrainian Canadians. Many gave their lives on the European continent fighting for the liberation of Europe. Their legacy lives on in our hearts and in the freedoms we enjoy today.

Among us today is Sgt (Retired) William Kowalchuk, whose family story exemplifies the deep commitment of Ukrainian Canadians to Canada's defence. Six of his uncles served in World War II and the Korean War. It was not uncommon to see multiple siblings from Ukrainian Canadian families serving concurrently, united in their dedication to Canada.

As we stand together at this ceremony, we are bound by a living connection to both the wars of the past and the conflict still raging in Ukraine. That bond runs through Canadian and Ukrainian soldiers and veterans, displaced Ukrainians who now call Canada home, the families of those who have fought or continue to fight or have been killed in the defence of freedom, and those who volunteer to heal and support the wounded and their families.

As combat in Ukraine continues, there will be more casualties and indiscriminate attacks. The world must not lose sight of what Ukrainian soldiers are fighting and dying for, and what Canadian soldiers have done and continue to do in the defence of democracy and security around the world.

Let our presence here today and every year be our eternal commitment to our fallen and to those who serve to preserve and protect the international rules of law and the rights of nations to live in peace within their defined borders.

We will remember them. Ми їх пам'ятаємо. Ми їх шануємо.

About the Author

Captain (Retd) Andre Sochaniwsky CD is a member of the Royal Canadian Legion and currently serves as President of the Ukrainian War Veterans Association of Canada—the nation's oldest Ukrainian Canadian veterans' organization. A proud veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Capt Sochaniwsky has continued his commitment to service through historical preservation and community leadership.

As a dedicated volunteer with the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre, he led a team that produced the landmark documentary *A Canadian War Story*, which captures the first-hand World War II experiences of Ukrainian Canadian soldiers.

Capt Sochaniwsky's work ensures that the legacy of Ukrainian Canadian veterans is honored and remembered by future generations.