

# A CHALLENGE COIN TO REMEMBER

BY RON CHEEK, FCNRS

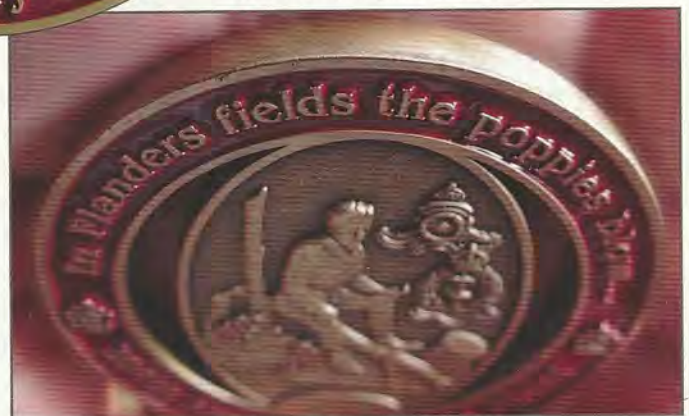
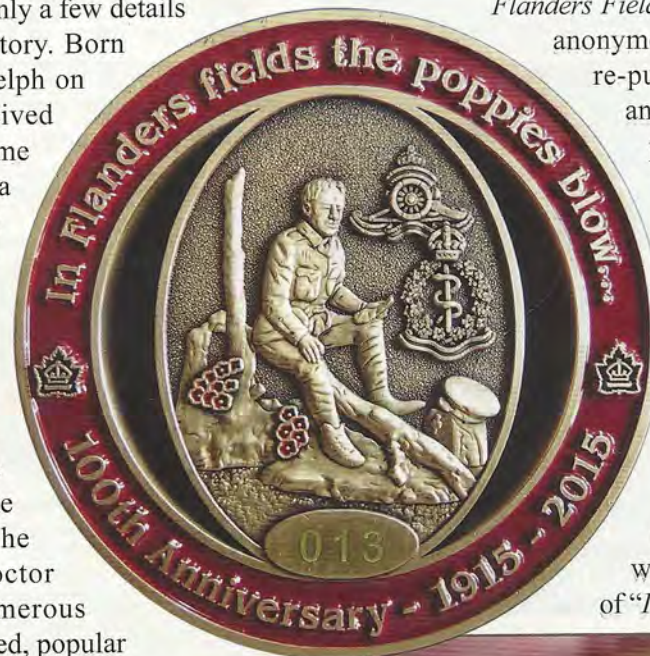
May 3, 2015, was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae penned “*In Flanders Fields*,” the best known and most beloved poem of the Great War era. To honour that anniversary and to mark the unveiling of Ruth Abernathy’s twin statues of McCrae, one in Ottawa the other in Guelph, ON, Dr. George Vanderburgh, C.D. M.D., of Eugenia, ON, personally issued this beautiful challenge coin.<sup>1</sup> Both the coin and the unique manner in which it has been distributed are inspirational.

Much has been written about Lt. Col. John McCrae, so I will offer only a few details here of his remarkable life story. Born into the upper society of Guelph on November 30, 1872, he received an excellent education, became a soldier, a teacher, and a medical doctor. He has been described as a renaissance man, a true citizen soldier. Seeing it as his duty, he volunteered and served as an artillery officer in the Second Boer War (1899–1901). For much of the decade before World War I he lived in Montreal. By then he had become an eminent doctor and medical teacher at numerous hospitals, and a highly regarded, popular member of Montreal society.

When war was declared in August 1914, McCrae enlisted with the first wave of Canadian volunteers. He wished to serve with an artillery unit, but because he was a

<sup>1</sup> Also called a military coin, a challenge coin is defined by Pelletier in *The Canadian Dictionary of Numismatics* as a “Check issued by a unit to identify the members that are serving or have served with it. It is usually numbered and the tradition is that when two or more members meet they compare checks and the one with the highest number buys a round as a gesture of honouring the seniors.” The Dictionary also defines a challenge coin as a “Check given out by a military commander as a token of his appreciation.”

skilled doctor he was soon assigned to the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. May 3, 1915, found him as a major and brigade surgeon at the front in Belgium, attached to the First Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery, in the midst of the Second Battle of Ypres. The full horrors of war confronted him – among soldiers he was treating, some suffered the hideous effects of chlorine gas attacks, many were terribly wounded; others traumatized by the relentless shelling and rifle fire of battle. Filled with despair after having presided over the funeral and burial of his close friend that morning, McCrae sat down and wrote “*In Flanders Fields*.” The poem was first published anonymously in *Punch*, but it was later re-published under McCrae’s name and soon became the most famous poem of the Great War. Beautiful as the words are, the poem is dark, revealing McCrae’s broken spirit. Unable to help his friend and others who had been killed, he gave voice to the dead through his poem. He had written poetry throughout his life, but after “*In Flanders Fields*,” he would write only one more poem, an even darker one titled “*The Anxious Dead*.” It would never achieve the popularity of “*In Flanders Fields*.”





In June 1915, McCrae was reassigned from his posting at the front with the artillery unit to a field hospital a few miles back. By January 1918 he was in command of No. 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill) near Boulogne. Bitter, disillusioned, worn out, and filled with despair at the horrors of war, he nevertheless continued to carry out his duties with selfless devotion. McCrae's health was never robust due to chronic asthma. Ultimately, the stress, exhaustion, and the harsh conditions under which he was living made him gravely ill. To the great sorrow of all who knew him, he succumbed to pneumonia and meningitis on January 28, 1918. He was buried the next day in Wimereux Cemetery in northern France, not far from the fields of Flanders.

### The challenge coin

The coin, shown opposite, is enameled bronze, 44.5 mm in diameter, 4 mm thick, and weighs 33.1 g. It was designed and produced by Rod McLeod of AFPP-International, a division of Stampede Graphic Services Limited, using concepts and images from Dr. George Vanderburgh. It was die-struck.

The front has the famous photograph of McCrae, appearing to be under glass in an antique oval frame. This portrait was made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by photographer William Nottman of Montreal. On the coin the portrait in its oval frame is held top and bottom by the surrounding black-enameled ring leaving crescent-shaped openings at each side. The legend in the ring reads: "LT COL JOHN McCRAE, MD" at the top and: "November 1872 - January 1918" at the bottom, the two being separated by images of Canadian Forces uniform collar dogs. On the back of the coin, within the oval, is an image of the McCrae bronze statue by famed Canadian sculptor Ruth Abernathy. The statue depicts McCrae, seated on a fallen tree

trunk, reflecting on the famous poem he had just written. On the ground in front of him are his hat and his medical kit bag. Red poppies bloom near his feet, as they did in the vast makeshift burial grounds nearby. In the coin's field are the insignia of the Royal Canadian Artillery and the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, the two units in which McCrae served. The appropriately red-enameled ring retaining the oval has the legend: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow..." at the top and: "100th Anniversary - 1915 - 2015" at the bottom, separated by collar dogs. Below the image of the statue is the coin's issue number.



Figure 2: Lt. Col. John McCrae 1872-1918; photo by William Nottman of Montreal.



Figure 3: The newly dedicated Ottawa statue at the National Artillery Memorial.



Figure 4: Some of the recipients of the McCrae challenge coin at Ottawa.

Far better known as a medical doctor and as the poet who wrote "In Flanders Fields," McCrae's service as a gunner and artillery officer is often overlooked. His heart was always with the artillery, but because of his medical training and skills he was reassigned to the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps in April 1915 before he even left Canada. In honour of the centenary of McCrae's famous poem and because of his little remembered career as an artillery officer, it was the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery that commissioned the statue project. The regiment led a private fundraising programme that collected \$300,000 for two copies of a heroic-size statue, one for Ottawa and one for Guelph, McCrae's hometown. Donations to the highly successful campaign came from artillery regiments across Canada, the citizens of Guelph, many other generous groups, and from individuals. The Ottawa statue is alongside the National Artillery Memorial. It was unveiled in a military ceremony May 3, 2015. The Guelph statue is at the Guelph Civic Museum and was dedicated in a civic ceremony there June 25, 2015.

### The McCrae statue project

The Guelph statue is at the Guelph Civic Museum and was dedicated in a civic ceremony there June 25, 2015.



## Dr. Vanderburgh's challenge coin project

Dr. George Vanderburgh is a retired Medical Officer. A veteran of the International Commission for Control and Supervision in Vietnam (1973) and other postings, including Kenya and Somalia in 1993; he retired from the Canadian Forces and from private medical practice in 2008.

For some time, Vanderburgh had a personal desire to create and distribute a military coin, so he had been looking for an appropriate event. Being a veteran, he had participated in a number of military events where mementos were only given to senior personnel while many of those on parade and other participants received none. He decided this would not happen with his challenge coin. The McCrae statue project and its two dedication ceremonies were just what he had been looking for. Thus was born his idea of his McCrae challenge coin.

As he developed his concept for the coin Vanderburgh decided also to collect and publish McCrae's 29 poems (entered by original publication date) in a book to accompany the coin. He included several European language translations of "In Flanders Fields" and added other suitable works and excerpts from books about McCrae. As he studied McCrae's life, his illness and despair during the Great War, and his ultimate sacrifice, Vanderburgh became keenly interested in what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and Operational Stress Injury (OSI). These terms were unknown, of course, in 1914–1918. It was not even understood, let alone acknowledged, that soldiers could become emotionally injured from the stress of battle. Vanderburgh collected and solicited input from, as he calls it, "many hands," including portions of McCrae's diary, excerpts from books by Christofer Linford and Roméo Dallaire, among others. While assembling this book, which he titled *Remember Flanders*, Vanderburgh became aware of a book by Lord Moran entitled *The Anatomy of Courage*. Charles McMoran Wilson, later Lord Moran, is best known as Churchill's personal physician during the Second World War. But he was, like McCrae, a medical doctor who experienced the full horrors of the First World War and he saw its debilitating effects on soldiers under fire, living in the trenches. In *The Anatomy of Courage*, Lord Moran, as a Regimental Medical Officer, recounts his observations and diary entries at the front. His book was published later, in 1946. As Vanderburgh writes in his introduction to *Remember Flanders*, "It is a seminal volume describing the effects of war on soldiers, and should be required reading for every soldier before entering combat." Vanderburgh obtained permission to re-publish *The Anatomy of Courage*. It is published back-to-back with *Remember Flanders*, in a single volume.



Figure 5: Governor General David Johnston at the Guelph statue dedication.



Figure 6



Figure 7: Dr. George Vanderburgh with sculptor Ruth Abernathy at the newly unveiled statue in Guelph.



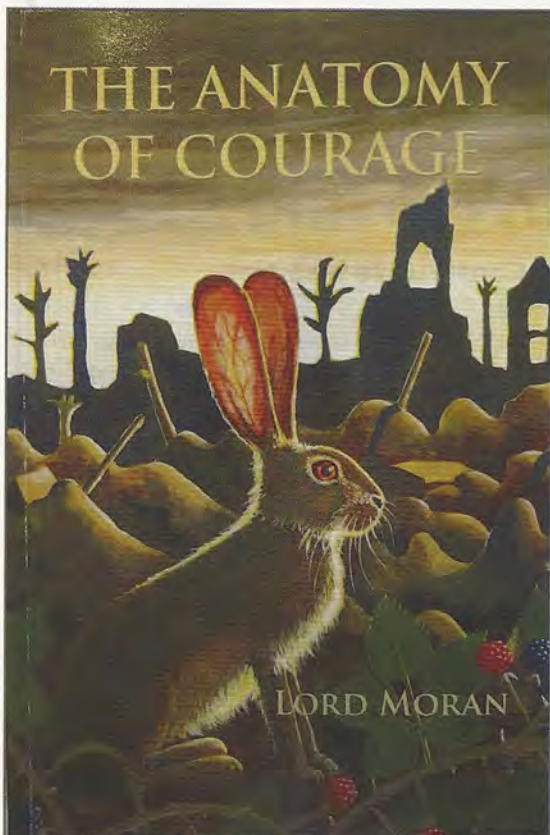
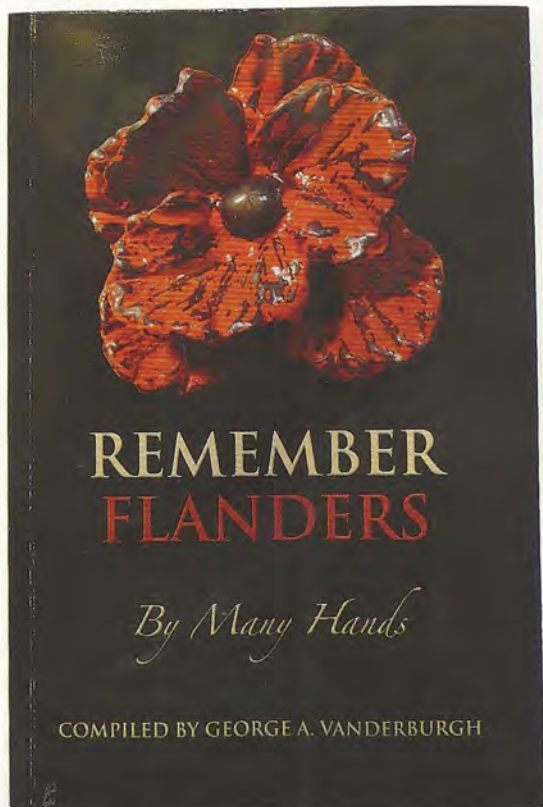


Figure 8: Covers of the two books, published in one volume, which became part of the McCrae challenge coin project.



Figure 9: An early design of the McCrae coin proposed using poppies to separate the obverse legends. The Royal Canadian Legion that controls use of the poppy image in any Remembrance context declined to authorize its use on the challenge coin because Dr. Vanderburgh could not guarantee that any pieces left after distribution at the ceremonies would not be offered for sale.

The challenge coin design needed permission to use many images: the statue (the maquette or miniature model of the statue), the McCrae photograph, and the military insignia. Development came through a number of design adjustments. It was ready for production by February 2015. Vanderburgh had 600 coins made, 500 of which are numbered and another 100 without numbers. The books were published in a run of 500.

### Distribution of the challenge coins

Altogether, some 300 McCrae challenge coins were distributed to the 100 artillery gunners, 50 medics, cadets and officials and others on parade at the May 3, 2015, statue unveiling in Ottawa. Most presentations included a numbered challenge coin and a copy of the *Remember Flanders/The Anatomy of Courage* volume. At the Guelph ceremony, logistical and timing difficulties prevented Dr. Vanderburgh from distributing coins to every intended recipient on parade. He was, however, able to present about 100 numbered coins, including one to Governor General David Johnston. To complete the distribution, Vanderburgh will attend the November 11 Remembrance Day ceremonies in Guelph and present coins to all whom he missed among those who had been on parade June 25.

Coin No. 1 was presented to the Guelph Civic Museum. The many organizations and individuals providing input or assistance to the coin and book project have also received or will receive a challenge coin and, where appropriate, a copy of the two-book volume.<sup>2</sup>

An inspired part of Dr. Vanderburgh's project was the purchase of ten pounds of Red Corn Poppy seeds. The challenge coins were given out in a double plastic coin flip. The other pocket contained a small paper envelope in which there were poppy seeds along with an information card that includes the following message: "This packet contains more than 221 Poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) seeds.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing this article, Dr. Vanderburgh was unable to tell me precisely how many of the McCrae challenge coins might be left over after the distribution to all intended recipients. Any undistributed coins will be offered for sale. Inquiries should be directed to [george.vanderburgh@gmail.com](mailto:george.vanderburgh@gmail.com).



Please, plant them in a sunny spot when you get home and Remember the Fallen. Poppies will reseed and become a perennial in your garden, around your home, or at a soldier's grave."

As this article was being prepared, the Royal Canadian Mint announced that it would be producing three circulation-coin designs to honour the centennial of John McCrae's writing his famous poem. These will no doubt be collected and saved by millions of Canadians.



Figure 10: Jennifer Lee, Arthur Lee and Dr. George Vanderburgh at the Guelph ceremony on June 25, 2015. Mr. Lee was the purchaser of John McCrae's war medals that were auctioned in 1997. Having paid in excess of \$500,000 for the medal set, Mr. Lee immediately donated them to the Guelph Civic Museum as an act of patriotism. Mr. Lee and his daughter attended the Guelph statue unveiling as Dr. Vanderburgh's guests.

But for the lucky few hundred people involved with the McCrae statue project and its dedication ceremonies, Dr. Vanderburgh's challenge coin will be a very special memento.



A poppy blooming in the author's garden in the Spring of 2015. RCNA



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