Renewing the LeBreton Gallery at the Canadian War Museum

The Canadian War Museum (CWM) preserves and displays a sizeable collection of large military technology artifacts, including weapons and vehicles, in its LeBreton Gallery. This collection is publicly displayed so that visitors can better understand the military technology that Canadians have used, faced, and experienced in times of peace and conflict. As an integral part of the new Canadian War Museum building which opened in May 2005, the LeBreton Gallery replaces previous off-site storage and display facilities. The gallery provides modern, climate-controlled facilities linked to a workshop and collections vaults. With its array of large military artifacts, it is also a signature destination and space within the museum, and is used for a variety of purposes in addition to exhibitions, including public programming and events, and bookings for private functions. LeBreton is visited by a significant proportion of overall CWM visitors, and is one of the most popular galleries of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, which includes the CWM and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

The Canadian War Museum recently renewed the exhibition in the LeBreton Gallery, and presented it to the public in mid-April 2013. This process involved the selection and organization of artifacts and decisions about how they were to be displayed and interpreted. A team of CWM staff and external contractors worked to create the new exhibition, and the project involved most of the museum's permanent staff at one point or another. This paper will examine the process of renewing the gallery, providing an overview and discussion of the means by which a major permanent gallery at the CWM presenting military

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technology has been renewed while working within stringent time and operational constraints. Starting with a brief overview of the gallery, it will bring the audience through the renewal process to the end product.

As mentioned before, the LeBreton Gallery fills a number of museum functions. Foremost among them are:

- Exhibition and storage – the display and interpretation of artifacts, as well as their open storage.

- Events and programs, such as educational events and concerts, as well as museum programming activities.

- Rentals for various events, including receptions and dinners.

In some of these areas, especially exhibition and storage, LeBreton replaces part of the function of Vimy House, the offsite storage facility when the museum was located at 330 Sussex Drive. In others, including events, programs, and rentals, it fulfills some of the same functions as large spaces in many other museums. This variety of uses places a wide range of demands on the space, which therefore requires different treatment than the museum's permanent exhibition galleries and an adaptation of the museum's standard exhibition planning and development processes. It was important to develop a floor plan that worked for visitors, met exhibition and collections needs, and also provided sufficient open space to accommodate events. This affected many aspects of the gallery renewal, including the physical organization of the artifacts, the design, appearance, and placement of the interpretive panels, and the design and placement of barriers and interactives.

A wide range of people use the LeBreton Gallery. Its primary target audience consists of general museum visitors, a largely adult audience with an interest in history, and especially military history. They tour LeBreton Gallery as part of a broader museum visit. This category can include intergenerational groups. There are also specific audiences, including veterans and current members of the Canadian military who are interested in seeing artifacts related to their own experiences. Still other visitors have interests related to military history and technology. There are also younger children, attracted to the open spaces and large vehicles, who visit with families who may not feel the rest of the museum is age-appropriate for children. Finally, there are incidental visitors. These include guests and media attending special events held in the LeBreton Gallery, visitors touring the Second World War gallery who see LeBreton from the mezzanine located in that gallery, as well as visitors and non-visitors who see LeBreton from outside through its large windows. The key is that there is a more diverse audience for LeBreton than for the museum's other galleries, and it was important to plan the interpretive aspects of the gallery accordingly.

In addition to its wider range of visitors, the LeBreton Gallery is also physically different from other galleries at the CWM, which influenced a number of the changes outlined here. LeBreton features very high ceilings in some areas, with relatively low ceilings in others. Because of its large windows, it also has quite high light levels in some areas during the day. This helped shape a number of decisions, including choices of label colours, panel finishes (a non-glare finish

is required), as well as future possibilities for features such as audio-visual materials and computer interactives.

To implement the gallery update, an exhibition team was created, drawing from CWM staff and outside contractors. The team worked within a tight timeline and budget, and also planned around staff availability, given other major exhibition projects and commitments. Physical changes to the placement of artifacts, ranging in size from motorcycles to main battle tanks, also had to minimize disruptions for gallery visitors. Since moving many of the larger artifacts required lifting of various sorts, including by forklift and air caster, this aspect of the update alone required extensive planning and after-hours work.

In keeping with the museum's standard practices, the team developed an interpretive scenario to help determine and define what the exhibition is intended to accomplish, beginning with the central message: "The Canadian War Museum preserves this collection of large military weapons, vehicles and equipment so that the public can better understand the technology that Canadians have used, faced and experienced in times of peace and conflict."

Given these factors, what are the key changes? The layout of the gallery is the most immediately visible change. Here we see a model that was used as part of the planning process, with an early version of the floor plan. The artifacts are already physically grouped according to their functions, which for conceptual purposes were broken down into four "F"s: Feed, Fix, Find, Fight, as we see on the chart here. These were in turn broken down into further sub-groups. "Feed" includes supply and transport equipment, "Fix" includes engineering and

maintenance equipment, and "Find" includes artifacts related to communications and command and control. The largest group of artifacts, "Fight", includes armoured fighting vehicles, aircraft and aerial weapons, naval equipment, and artillery. As part of the initial planning process other arrangements, including the chronological presentation of artifacts, were considered but rejected, in part because of a preponderance of First and Second World War equipment in LeBreton. This later version of the floor plan is quite close to the final product. In comparison with the previous plan, circulation paths for visitors, staff, and events are wider and better identified, and dramatic sightlines of large and/or significant objects are enhanced. Objects deemed to be unsuitable for display (owing to their physical condition, for example) have been removed.

In addition to the floor plan, another very visible change is the new design for interpretive panels. Previously, the gallery used basic, floor-level panels with interpretive text and cataloguing information. Every object in LeBreton now has an enhanced panel at a raised reading height. In creating these panels, museum staff drew on their prior experience with permanent and temporary physical exhibitions, as well as online exhibitions. This range of experience was necessary and useful, because given LeBreton's open spaces and wide range of artifacts, the gallery is much more of a "random access" experience than the CWM's permanent galleries, which use a largely chronological and thematic approach. In some respects, it's similar to a website experience, where the visitor's path is far less pre-determined. The interpretation on each panel therefore needs to be able to stand on its own at the level of the

individual artifact, without depending on higher-level messaging in another location. At the same time, presenting visitors with lengthy texts was not a viable solution, so the interpretive scenario also included guidelines for maximum text lengths.

The resulting panels use a prominent title to identify the artifact, a stand-alone introductory sentence giving the key interpretive message, and a longer text providing more information. This arrangement allows casual readers to quickly identify what they are looking at and why it is significant, while providing additional information to those who are interested in learning more. The longer text can include content about a variety of subjects, including the historical significance of the artifact, or details of its use. This can involve the specific history of the artifact, where it is known, including information about how it came to be in the museum's collection. A selection of technical specifications is also provided, along with basic cataloguing information. Furthermore, the four functional groupings mentioned earlier are identified by colour bands and text on their panels. Sub-groups, such as armoured fighting vehicles, are also identified, using additional text on the lower portion of the panel.

In addition to this information, most panels also contain what the team called "flex content": additional interpretive material related to the artifact. This can include images, often showing the artifact in use, or in some cases explaining its function. In other cases, it is "Did you know?" text providing interesting information about the artifact. In some instances, the flex content includes additional historical information about the artifact or its provenance.

Small physical interactives are provided for some objects. A number of "key" artifacts, linked to functional groupings and sub-groups, have received additional interpretation, including larger panels with higher-level messaging, and enhanced "flex" content, sometimes involving larger-scale interactives.

As you'll have noticed from the images I've just been showing, the interpretation in LeBreton Gallery is bilingual. As part of a federal organization, the CWM conforms to official languages requirements, which require equal treatment of both English and French. This drives not only how text will be used, but also affects matters like flex content – reproductions of posters, or of other materials with printed content, for instance, have to be equally accessible in both languages.

Hardware is needed to support these new panels and make them more accessible, as well as to provide barriers to help control physical access in order to protect visitors and artifacts. It also needs to be more movable and adaptable than hardware in the museum's permanent exhibition galleries. It has to accommodate the movement of large artifacts in and out of the space, and changes in floor plans. The hardware also needs to be durable, and to provide flexibility for interpretive developments, including the potential inclusion of audiovisual materials and computer interactives, along with any supporting wiring or equipment that might be required. The team ultimately chose an off-the-shelf system – Octanorm – rather than designing or commissioning a custom system. The new exhibition hardware provides better accessibility for interpretive panels

by raising them to a good reading height, while offering various options for barriers and for future expansion.

The placement of barriers and non-interpretive visitor signage was also a significant consideration in the reworking of the LeBreton Gallery. One of the gallery's attractions is that it provides access to large military artifacts, but visitor safety and conservation considerations also mean that this access needs to be regulated. The exhibition team sought to maximize visitor access, while protecting visitors and artifacts alike. It's worth noting that this access is visual as well as physical – both for direct viewing by visitors, as well as for photography of artifacts. The Octanorm system can create barriers that can help regulate physical access without interfering substantially with visual access to the artifacts. These replace a number of temporary barrier systems that were previously used in the gallery, and provide a more uniform appearance. Many of these barriers serve a dual purpose, also helping to support interpretive labels. A system of visitor behaviour icons (photography permitted, do not climb, do not enter) also helps orient visitors in the gallery.

The end product was unveiled to the public during a weekend event in mid-April 2013. A second phase is currently underway, to address issues remaining from the first phase, including additions of artifacts that have taken place since the opening. As with other museum galleries, LeBreton continues to develop and change. I hope I've given you some idea of how and why it has come to be in its current form.