

# THE HISTORY OF THE SILVER CROSS MOTHER

By J. Charles Griffin

The National Silver Cross Mother is a mother of a fallen Canadian servicemember who is selected by the Royal Canadian Legion to represent all the mothers of fallen Canadians, not only at Remembrance Day, but at other events throughout her tenure. The main duty of the National Silver Cross Mother is to lay a wreath at the National War Memorial during the National Remembrance Day Ceremony, held in Ottawa on November 11<sup>th</sup>. She does so on the behalf of all Canadian mothers who have lost a child in service to Canada. The tenure of the Silver Cross mother begins on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November and ends on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October the next year. Throughout her tenure, she also is called upon to perform various other duties honoring the fallen of all conflicts.



*Mrs. C.S. Wood at the unveiling of the Vimy Memorial, 26 July 1936*

The Silver Cross Mother was first introduced in the year of 1936, when the first Silver Cross Mother, Mrs. Charlotte Susan Wood, (nee Fullham) (1881-1939) of Winnipeg, Manitoba was selected to place a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Westminster Abbey in London. She placed the wreath on behalf of all Canadian mothers who had lost a child that was serving in the military. Mrs. Wood was the mother of twelve children, six stepsons and five sons and a daughter of her own. All eleven of her sons enlisted to serve during the Great War (WW1), serving with both the Canadian and British forces. Unfortunately, five of her sons would give their lives, making her a five-time silver cross recipient.

The first of her sons that fell was Pte. Frederick Francis Wood, a member of the Duke of Cambridge Own (Middlesex Regiment), who was Killed in Action near Mons, Belgium on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 1914. A second son, Pte. Peter Percy Wood, of the Canadian Infantry (Saskatchewan Regiment) fell at the Battle of Vimy Ridge on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1917. The other Wood's children to give their lives during the war were: Louis, who was lost at sea while serving aboard the HMS Hogue; Harry, Killed in Action on the Helles Front at Gallipoli, and Joseph, Killed in Action at the Battle of Passchendaele.

She would become known as Canada's most famous war mother. She was very active in many veterans and war widows' organizations and was awarded the George V Jubilee Medal in 1935. She also was presented to His Majesty King Edward VII, while attending the unveiling of the Vimy Memorial in 1936. While being presented to the King she reportedly said "I have just been looking at the trenches and I can't figure out why our boys had to go through that", to which the King replied "Please God, Mrs. Wood. It shall never happen again". Mrs. Wood passed away just a few weeks after the start of the Second World War and was buried in an unmarked grave in Winnipeg's Brookside Cemetery. Sixty years later she would have a new headstone erected at her grave.

The Silver Cross Mother is named after a decoration that was first instituted shortly after the First World War, via Order in Council (OIC) No. 2374 of 1 December 1919. This decoration is called the Memorial Cross, which is informally called the Silver Cross, hence the title of Silver Cross Mother. The Memorial Cross is presented to widows and mothers of fallen Canadian servicemembers as a memento of loss and sacrifice on the part of the widows and mothers. It is sent automatically to widows and mothers that qualify, and can be worn by the recipient anytime even though they are not veterans themselves.

The decoration is in the form of a cross pattee made of silver and suspended by a bar broach (prior to 1945 it was suspended by a light purple ribbon). At the top of the cross is a crown and on the remaining cross points are maple leaves. In the center of the decoration within the laurel wreath is the Royal Cypher of the current reigning monarch. The decoration is also engraved with the service number, rank, and name of the fallen son or husband. There are three versions of the decoration, one featuring the Cypher GRI (George V), GVIR (George VI), and EIIR (Elizabeth II). Recently there have been changes to who can be a recipient, as now up to three persons who are a fallen servicemembers next of kin can be designated as recipients. The changes were made in order to stay current with modern societal norms, as previously, it could only be awarded to widows and mothers.

The Memorial Cross has been the influence for another similar decoration called the Memorial Ribbon, which was created as a symbol of personal loss and sacrifice of the recipient. It can be issued up to five individuals, who are the next of kin of a fallen Canadian servicemember and who are not already a recipient of the Memorial Cross. The criteria for issue is if a Canadian servicemember's death was a result of duty related illness or injury on or after 1 October 1947. This is the first inscribed date of the "In Service to Canada" Book of Remembrance that lies in the Peace Tower.

To date (1936-2022) there have been 80 Silver Cross Mothers, each representing a fallen child or in some cases children. Only two of which have served consecutive year terms. (Mrs. C Lewis 1939-41 & Mrs. J.I. McCleary 1944-46). The current Silver Cross Mother is Mrs. Candy Greff of Lacombe, Alberta. She is the mother of Mcpl. Byron Greff (3 PPCLI) who was Killed in Action on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2011 when the NATO bus he was riding in was hit by a vehicle borne IED (VBED). Mcpl. Greff was the last Canadian soldier to give their life during Canada's Mission in Afghanistan. This year's Silver Cross Mother has a Swift Current connection, as her son Mcpl. Greff was born in Swift Current on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, 1983.

National Silver Cross Mother, Royal Canadian Legion. Online < <https://www.legion.ca/remembrance/silver-cross-mother> >. Copyright 2022, accessed 2022-10-24.

Past Recipients of the Silver Cross Mother, Royal Canadian Legion. Online < <https://www.legion.ca/remembrance/silver-cross-mother/past-recipients> >. Copyright 2022, accessed 2022-10-24.

1936 National Memorial (Silver) Cross Mother- Charlotte Susan Wood, Remembrance, Veterans Affairs Canada, Government of Canada. Online < <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/books/silver/1936> >. Date modified 2019-02-14, accessed 2022-10-27.

Memorial Cross, Medals and Decorations, Veterans Affairs Canada, Government of Canada. Online < <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/medals-decorations/memorial-cross> >. Date modified 2019-02-14, accessed 2022-10-27.

HMH Charlotte Susan Wood-Winnipeg Manitoba-Manitoba Historical Markers on Wamarking.com, Waymarking.com. Online < [https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMM4RE\\_MHM\\_Charlotte\\_Susan\\_Wood\\_Winnipeg\\_MB](https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMM4RE_MHM_Charlotte_Susan_Wood_Winnipeg_MB) >. Copyright 2022, accessed 2022-10-27.

Photo: Mrs. C.S. Woods, who represented the Silver Star Mothers of Canada at the unveiling of the Vimy Ridge Memorial.

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