

Afghanistan Memorial Hall in Ottawa damaged by water – repairs planned for later this year

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The Canadian Armed Forces paid tribute to Canada's Fallen in Afghanistan during a rededication ceremony of the Kandahar Cenotaph in the Afghanistan Memorial Hall at the National Defence Headquarters, Saturday August 17, 2019. PHOTO BY ASHLEY FRASER /Postmedia

The new memorial hall in Ottawa to honour those killed during the Afghanistan war has been damaged by water and will cost around \$500,000 to repair.

The Afghanistan Memorial Hall at the Department of National Defence's Carling Avenue headquarters was officially opened last year but a leaking roof and other issues have caused officials to close the building.

“Over the winter, environmental damage was discovered in and around the Afghanistan Memorial Hall,” said Department of National Defence spokesman Dan Le Bouthillier.

The memorial hall has been closed since February to allow for maintenance work, he added. A project to repair the problems is expected to go out to tender later this month, with work to be completed by December, Le Bouthillier said.

The memorial hall houses the cenotaph that had been built at Kandahar Airfield during the Afghanistan war. Canadian Forces personnel and Afghan employees originally built the cenotaph in 2006 and added to the monument over time. On the cenotaph are plaques that honour 158 Canadian Forces members who died as well as Foreign Affairs official Glyn Berry, Calgary Herald journalist Michelle Lang, and Marc Cyr, a civilian from a company under contract to the DND. Other plaques honour 42 U.S. military personnel and one civilian who died while serving under Canadian command. The cenotaph was dismantled and transported to Canada from Afghanistan in 2011.



A toy soldier, placed by the daughter of Pte. David Robert James Byers, adorns his plaque on the Kandahar cenotaph in the Afghanistan Memorial Hall. PHOTO BY JUSTIN TANG /THE CANADIAN PRESS

“While the building itself was damaged, the Kandahar Cenotaph and all its components, which include the Plaques of the Fallen, were not impacted and remain fully intact,” Le Bouthillier said. “The prominent features of the memorial also remained in mint condition and continue to be protected and preserved.”

The cenotaph weights about 225,000 kilograms and a DND study concluded that it should be housed in a new structure as it could not endure long-term exposure to Canadian winters.

Construction of the Afghanistan Memorial Hall started in May 2017.

The hall, which had a total project cost of approximately \$3 million, was built by Laurin & Company and handed over to DND and the Canadian Forces in March 2018, Le Bouthillier said. The building had a one-year warranty which expired in March 2019, he added.

Dennis Laurin of Laurin & Company noted that roofing warranties typically extend past a one-year period. “If it was a warranty issue with the roof then it would have been dealt with,” he explained. “If it’s going out to tender then presumably it’s a design issue.”

Laurin & Company was not responsible for the design of the memorial hall, he added.

Le Bouthillier could not provide a cost estimate for the repair work needed as that might affect the bidding process for the job. But defence sources say the repairs are expected to cost at least \$500,000.

Le Bouthillier said the work to be done is needed to “ensure the safety of personnel and visitors, and to restore the structural integrity of the building.”

The work will include repairing the surface of the roof and adding protective roofing material, repairing the exterior building envelope, restoring the water damaged on the interior, and modifying the landscaping to rectify drainage issues, he added. Repairs will also be done to fix the damage caused by small animals.

Le Bouthillier said the families of those killed during the Afghan war can still visit the memorial upon request. Staff remains onsite to conduct such visits under strict established measures to ensure the safety of all, he added.

A small group of DND personnel and military personnel dedicated the cenotaph in May 2019. But the Canadian Forces faced intense criticism from the families and the public when it was revealed that families of the fallen weren’t invited to that event. The event was inexplicably kept secret for several days until the military quietly announced it but only on social media. Chief of the Defence Staff Gen. Jon Vance later apologized for the military’s mishandling of the event and a rededication ceremony with the families was held in August 2019.

In 2011 a military working group recommended the cenotaph be located on DND property at Dow’s Lake in Ottawa. At the time three Ottawa venues were considered the most serious options as a home for the cenotaph: Beechwood Cemetery, the new DND campus at the former Nortel site on Carling Avenue and the Dow’s Lake property, according to a July 2011 briefing note prepared for then army commander Lt.-Gen. Peter Devlin.

The Dow's Lake option came out on top, followed closely by Beechwood Cemetery, according to the briefing. There was concern installing the cenotaph at the headquarters at Carling Avenue would limit the number of people who could visit the memorial.