

# From Flanders Fields to Tokyo Bay

by John Scott Cowan, Principal Emeritus

The RMC of Canada

**Note:** A considerable amount of the material in this story comes from a slim volume that was a spin-off of the Hill 70 Memorial project, of which I have been Vice-Chair and Director of Research. The 60-page bilingual paperback, by Kyle English and Dr. Robert C. Engen, is entitled *Valour Forgotten*, and contains brief descriptions of the lives of the 13 RMC ex-cadets who had important roles in the Battle of Hill 70. I was so charmed by their work that I wrote the foreword and donated 2/3 of the cost of publication. And it prompted me to dig even deeper into one of its stories.

On Sunday morning, 2 September 1945, the formal instrument of Japanese surrender was signed on board the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, just off Yokohama. At 9:18AM the Canadian official representative at the signing, Col. Lawrence Moore Cosgrave, signed for Canada. He was there, because, as the Canadian Attaché for Australia and the South West Pacific Area (theatre of operations), he was the closest available senior Canadian. Col. Cosgrave signed both the US and Japanese copies, but in signing the Japanese copy, he mistakenly signed on a lower line intended for the French signatory, General Phillippe Leclec de Hauteclocque. This bumped the remaining signatures down a line each, with the last signature, that of Air Vice-Marshal Isitt of NZ ending up in the lower margin. The Japanese objected, so Lieutenant General Richard Sutherland, MacArthur's Chief of Staff, took his pen and corrected the title lines for the representatives of France, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. This evidently satisfied the Japanese representatives.

If, as a tourist, you have occasion to visit Charleston, SC, I recommend a visit to the superb naval museum at Patriots Point. The centerpiece is the carrier USS Yorktown (CV-10), and, while the ship itself is a museum ship, it is so voluminous that it contains many smaller specialty museums on cognate topics, and also displays naval aircraft covering 75 years of

aviation history. One of the museum rooms is an exhibit on the end of the Second World War, and a photo-reproduction of the Japanese copy of the surrender document clearly shows the Cosgrave slip-up and Sutherland's fix.

At the time, the press graciously ascribed Col. Cosgrave's slip of the hand to the fact that he was monocular, having lost an eye in World War 1. As we shall see below, this is unlikely to be the cause of the misplaced signature.

Lawrence Moore Cosgrave was an exceptional person. The son of a Toronto brewery owner, he attended RMC (Cadet # 851), and after excelling many areas, graduated quite high in his class in 1912. Of course, at that time RMC did not grant degrees, so he continued on to McGill University to complete his undergraduate education. He continued to serve as a militia artillery officer in a Montreal unit. He became fast friends with another militia artillery officer, a man 18 years older than he was, and who was also at McGill, but worked in the medical faculty. That friend was Dr. John McCrae. When the First World War broke out, and the mobilization plan of Sam Hughes was stood up, McCrae and Cosgrave decided to join the CEF, and went together to sign up. They signed each other's attestation papers. Cosgrave signed the attestation for McCrae on the wrong line, something he was apparently inclined to do at important moments. So much for the one-eyed explanation.

Fast forward to a bad day in May at Second Ypres. Major McCrae was serving in the First Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery, as was his friend Cosgrave. Another who was a good friend to both of them was another junior artillery officer, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, of Ottawa, who had been in Cosgrave's class at RMC (Helmer's cadet number was 841, only 10 digits different from Cosgrave's), even though he was two years younger than Cosgrave. Most Canadians think of McCrae just as a doctor, but at that time McCrae was double-hatted, having both medical and artillery duties. On 2 May 1915, Helmer was killed by a German six-inch shell which exploded very near him. Major McCrae had to preside over his funeral, which he found deeply troubling.

There are many stories about the exact setting of the drafting of "In Flanders Fields", but Cosgrave's is the most likely. He stated that during a

lull in the bombing on 3 May, McCrae took a scrap of paper, and wrote a first draft of “In Flanders Fields” in 20 minutes, using Cosgrave’s back as a desk.

Not long after, on June 1, McCrae was ordered away from artillery duties to set up No.3 Canadian General Field Hospital. He was annoyed to lose his combat role and felt that he would be contributing less to the ultimate victory, but complied. We all know of Lieutenant-Colonel McCrae’s later death from illness early in 1918.

Lawrence Cosgrave went on to great accomplishment during the rest of the war. He won the DSO for exceptional bravery (in fact twice, once in 1916 and again in 1918, and so was DSO and Bar), as well as the Croix de Guerre. His connection with the Battle of Hill 70 was his reconnaissance and intelligence role that coordinated all the efforts to locate and neutralize enemy artillery, an activity which made a great contribution to the Canadian success at Hill 70. He finished up the war as a Lieutenant-Colonel at 28.

Between the two world wars Cosgrave served as a Canadian Trade Commissioner in various posts abroad, and from 1925 until his return to military service in 1942, mostly in Pacific Rim countries, and had been in that capacity in Australia up to the point of taking up the Military Attaché role in Australia.

After World War Two, he continued in a diplomatic career until his retirement.

**Colonel Lawrence Moore Cosgrave**, Canadian soldier and diplomat, was a tangible and substantial link between “In Flanders Fields” and the Japanese surrender 30 years later.



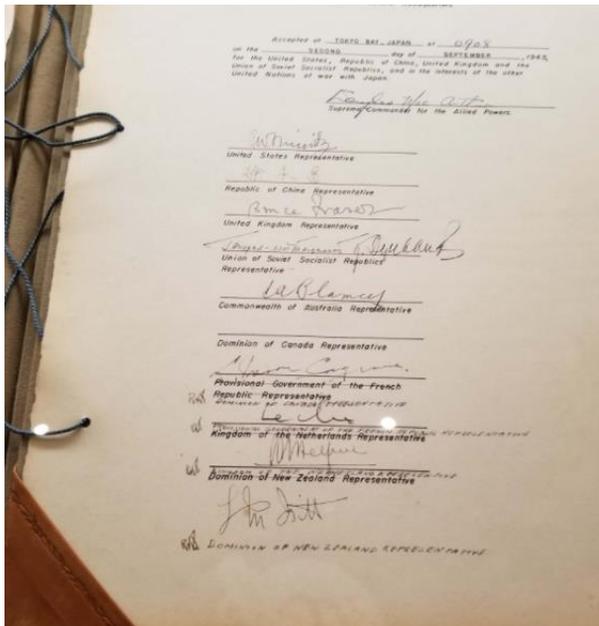
Colonel LM Cosgrave

1890 - 1971

# Photo History



Colonel LM Cosgrave signing the Japanese Instrument of Surrender aboard the battleship USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945



Canadian signatory to the Japanese Instrument of Surrender. Colonel LM Cosgrave inadvertently placed his signature one line too low on the Japanese copy.

