

Banner project honours local heroes

By Jody Didier

There is a small stone at the Bancroft Cemetery which was the first memorial for the lives lost during the First World War. The cenotaph monument beside the York River, near the Station Street Bridge was erected in 1956 - in memory of First World War, Second World War and Korean War veterans.

While many of the names are familiar, the list of names carved into stone at the Bancroft cenotaph does not include all of our local heroes or those related to local Bancroft families. One might suggest that no monument would be substantial enough to recognize every individual who deserves our respectful observance for their duty to our country and its citizens.

To recognize each Canadian veteran separately would be a daunting exercise. One only needs to imagine, the Vietnam veterans memorial in New York, where two 246-foot and nine-inch long gabbro walls are etched with the names of servicemen and women. Installed in 1982, there are more than 58,000 names on those walls and yet many argue that names have been missed and the walls do not include veterans who have since died, from causes related to their service. Not to mention the number of casualties that were buried unnamed. For these reasons, a bronze statue, a woman's memorial and a memorial plaque have been added to the Vietnam Memorial.

The Canadian Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was part of the Canada Millennium Partnership Program. Created at the request of the Royal Canadian Legion, The Tomb contains the remains of an unknown soldier, formerly buried in the vicinity of Vimy Ridge, who was repatriated and buried with full military honours. The memorial represents Canadians who have died in combat and, also, those who may die in future conflicts.

This year, the Bancroft Business Improvement Area and the Bancroft North Hastings Heritage Museum, have launched a banner program, providing an opportunity for families and friends to honour a veteran. The banners include the phrase 'Lest We Forget?' and include a photograph of the honouree alongside stylized poppies.

The poppy has traditionally been a symbol for the fallen. Throughout western Europe, scarlet poppies have popped up, naturally, in places where the earth has been ripped apart. The destruction wrought by the Napoleonic Wars from 1803-1815, transformed the landscape into fields of poppies which grew around the bodies of fallen soldiers.

A hundred years later, the fields of Northern France and Flanders were, once again, greatly disturbed by the rages of the First World War. Once again, poppies flourished in the otherwise lifeless battlefields.

Taken by the symbolism, Canadian poet, physician and Lt.-Col. John McCrae penned the poem In Flanders Fields as a memorial tribute to his friend, Alexis Helmer, who was killed by a German shell on May 2, 1915.

That famous poem was written from the perspective of fallen soldiers. Their voices speak gently of sacrifice and inspire the living to carry on. Sometimes, it is simple humility that gives one pause, much like a blood red poppy that blooms from a soldier's grave.

It's something to consider as we pay tribute, with two minutes of silence on the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month.