

The proud history of the Royal Canadian Legion

By Chris Drost

Following the First World War a number of veterans groups came together but, although they had common objectives, they largely floundered. An appeal to bring groups together resulted in the formation of the Dominion Veterans Alliance. In 1925 the Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League was formed and incorporated by a special Act of Parliament with a Charter being issued in July 1926.

On Dec. 19, 1960 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth consented to using the prefix 'Royal' and the current name, the Royal Canadian Legion, was approved and incorporated in 1961.

When the RCL was first formed the focus was providing a voice for First World War veterans. When the Second World War came along, there were more and more demands for support and the RCL expanded its offerings to support veterans and those serving overseas.

The RCL continues its role of helping veterans to current day. This includes supporting the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP and their families. The RCL has 1,350 branches and 248,000 members. While in the past you had to be a veteran to be a member, any Canadian citizen or citizen of an Allied nation 18 years or older is welcome to join. While membership fees vary between branches, most are in the \$50 per year range. According to the RCL website, 'You don't have to be a veteran to support a veteran.' Veterans and graduating cadets receive their first year of membership free.

Membership comes with some advantages, including a monthly member newsletter, many deals and discounts from local and national retailers, a paid subscription to Legion Magazine, exclusive products at the Legion Poppy Store, an official Legion membership card and pin, opportunities to participate in member sports, activities and sweepstakes, volunteer opportunities through local branches and an opportunity to add a voice to local and national Legion efforts.

Locally, there are two legions in North Hastings, Bancroft's Branch 181 and Coe Hill's Branch 581.

Branch 181 in Bancroft first opened in 1931 with Balfour Vader as the first president. The original building burned down and then was rebuilt at the current site on Bridge St., with additions to the building taking place over the years.

According to Larry Shatraw, president of Branch 181, their focus is 'vet to vet.' They make donations to the local Viking Sea Cadets, to the Leave the Streets Behind program, the District Hospital Fund (to which the local hospital can apply for funds), youth education, the Service Dog program and bursaries for local high school students going on to post secondary education. They donated \$8,000 to the Hastings Centennial Manor last year alone. Additionally, they have donated to the local fire department, Hospice North Hastings, Home Again, the North Hastings Community Cupboard and the North Hastings Community Fish Hatchery.

The Poppy Fund is an important part of the Legion's fundraising efforts. 'We can't tag again this year,' says Shatraw. They lose quite a bit of money by not being able to stand out in front of places and sell the poppies. People are encouraged to purchase a poppy from one of the boxes around town.

With concerns still lingering about COVID-19, the decision was made to have the same kind of scaled back Remembrance Day service as last year. There will be the pipe band and colours at the cenotaph but it will not be a large public event.