

Sunderland group pays tribute to veterans

Historical society marks 100th anniversary of armistice with special display honouring residents who served overseas

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Being part of a family of 17 children aside, the McLean brothers - (clockwise from front center) Charles, Clark Clifford, Donald, Earl and George - all served in the First World War, fought at Vimy Ridge and returned home to Sunderland. The brothers are part of a special Remembrance Day project marking the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day created by the Sunderland & District Historical Society. - Sunderland & District Historical

The Sunderland & District Historical Society is doing its part to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day.

“The entire area of Brock Township was well-represented during the First World War,” said society president Larry Doble.

Earlier this year, the society developed a special display — honouring local veterans who fought overseas — that was featured during Sunderland’s fall fair. It will also be part of the Armistice Experiential Expo taking place on Port Perry’s main street on Saturday, Nov. 3 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. that will include military vehicles, a First World War airplane flypast/air show, re-enactors, demonstrations, exhibits and even a 90-foot inflatable military themed obstacle course.

“So many of our young men were killed in the battles. Many of those who returned, simply went back to the lives they had beforehand. Others helped put Sunderland and Brock Township on the map,” said Doble.

They are people like Sunderland-born farmer and physical education teacher George Arthur Welsh, who made his mark during the First World War as a Canadian flying ace.

Welsh enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps in 1917. He served in northeast France during the war where he was credited with five "victories" and received the Belgian Croix de Guerre.

After he returned home, Welsh served as the village postmaster and later took over the family farm and mill.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Welsh re-enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army and was put in charge of an anti-tank battery. His unit took part in the invasion of [Sicily](#) in July 1943 but returned to Canada — where he served as commander of the training wing at Camp Shilo near Brandon, Man. — after being wounded in September.

Welsh was recognized for his efforts by being awarded the [Distinguished Service Order](#) twice.

Walsh entered the political arena, serving as minister of travel and publicity from 1946 to 1948 and [provincial secretary and registrar](#) from 1949 to 1955. After retiring from politics, Welsh served as sheriff for [Ontario County](#) until his death in 1965.

John Stanley Miller served in the 116th Battalion, led by Uxbridge lawyer Col. Samuel Sharpe and comprised primarily of recruits from Brock Township and surrounding area, and was wounded during battle at Vimy Ridge.

Miller continued to serve after returning home, becoming the charter president of the Sunderland Royal Canadian Legion in 1929. He later served as president from 1939 to 1945 was also instrumental in helping construct the Brock Memorial Community Centre.

Then there's the McLean family that made history, but not exactly for what they did overseas.

"I do believe they hold the record for the highest number of siblings who fought in the war, simultaneously, for the British Empire," said Doble of Clifford, Donald, Earl, Clark, Charles and George McLean. The family had 17 children in total; 13 of them boys.

Five of the six McLean brothers served with the 116th Battalion.

"They all fought at Vimy Ridge and they all came back. That was kind of amazing considering that so many local boys didn't," said Doble.

That fact almost led to Sharpe becoming a permanently forgotten part of history.

A prominent Uxbridge lawyer, Samuel Sharpe was first elected to the House of Commons in 1908. Sharpe was actually considered by then prime minister Robert Borden for the position of militia and defence minister before deciding on Sam Hughes; with whom he clashed in parliament over militia policy.

In November 1915, Sharpe began recruiting for the 116th Battalion. The group arrived in England six months later and was deployed to the front in France in February 1917, where Sharpe led them into such famous battles as Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele and Avion. That same year, he became the only MP to be re-elected to the House while still fighting on the front.

Sharpe returned to England for a senior officer's course in December but came back to Canada the following May on convalescent leave. Soon afterwards, haunted by losing many of his men — including his best friend — Sharpe was hospitalized with what was then called nervous shock, but now recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He died May 25 after throwing himself from a Montreal hospital window.

“It is believed he was so upset over being the one who had recruited all those young men, that he decided to commit suicide instead of return home and face their families,” said Doble.

He never returned to his seat in the House, and his name was virtually forgotten until earlier this year when a statue honouring his wartime and political contributions was unveiled.

Doble looks forward to being part of the Port Perry event and local Remembrance Day activities.

“We really want to recognize our veterans because there’s nobody left from the First World War and the number of Second World War veterans is dwindling,” said Doble. “Kids today have no idea what these young men went through. Many of them were barely out of their teens when they went overseas; some weren’t even old enough to go. It’s important that, what they did is not forgotten.”



by [Catherine Whitnall](#)