



NEWS LOCAL

Jervis Bay Park once in decline, now rededicated



By Scott Dunn, Sun Times, Owen Sound
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Family of Stoker Jimmie Johnson, who served on HMS Jervis Bay and died in a battle with a German pocket battleship, was Owen Sound's first casualty in the Second World War. Owen Sound's Jervis Bay Park has been rehabilitated and was rededicated Thursday. Standing at the back, from the left, Kristine Fleming, Cassandra Fox, Shannon Weidemann and John Johnson. Seated in front are Johnnie Johnson and his son, Jonathan Johnson, 7, with Brodie Fox, 3, standing. (Scott Dunn/The Sun Times)

OWEN SOUND - People stood in Jervis Bay Park Thursday to rededicate it, which was created as a memorial to Owen Sound's first son to die in action in the Second World War, as well as others like him

The park is just across 8th Street from the cenotaph, where Saturday throngs of people will gather again to mark Remembrance Day, for the sacrifices past and present, of the dead and living.

In February 1941, the city, Royal Canadian Legion and the local historical society dedicated the park in honour of Stoker A.M. "Jimmie" Johnson and the rest of the HMS Jervis Bay crew. Johnson was 39.

He served on the Jervis Bay, a refrigerated cargo liner converted for battle, which was sunk defending a 36-ship convoy against a sophisticated German pocket battleship on Nov. 5, 1940 in the North Atlantic.

Members of Johnson's family have watched the little park's decline over the years, including in their view the indignity a Celtic festival beer garden with portable toilets placed there about 10 years ago, and late lit dinosaur displays for the city's annual Festival of Northern Lights.

Johnnie Johnson, whose great uncle was Stoker Jimmie Johnson, recalled Thursday that he stormed down to city hall and confronted the mayor of the day after he happened across the Celtic festival's use of the parkette.

"Me and dad have been after the city forever to start looking after this park and recognizing it," he said.

"Every year on Remembrance Day -- don't take this the wrong way -- everybody crowds around the cenotaph. Our family's over here," he said in the park after its rededication service.

"Not that we're disrespecting the cenotaph. It's just nobody recognizes this park."

That started to change at least a couple of years ago.

Flower beds which were near the back were moved towards the front. A new sign announcing Jervis Bay Park was installed last year. This summer, the city spent \$18,000 to fix one of the park's two prominent stone pillars, which had been leaning for years.

The east pillar, the one that was leaning nearest the Sydenham River by the 8th Street bridge, was taken apart and reassembled by stone mason Paul McLean, himself a veteran. He put it on a sturdy foundation on the west side of the park, positioned so that the pillars mark a gateway leading directly to the new sign and flower bed.

Adam Parsons, the city's parks and open space manager, said by phone Thursday that the city's investment also included new electrical wiring to ensure the large, white globe lights on top of each pillar could continue to be used, and new sod laid by the pillars.

Johnnie Johnson gave credit to Rev. David Shearman for his efforts with city hall to spur action after a column he wrote in November 2015, in The Sun Times. Shearman, Johnson and his father, John Johnson, had a couple of meetings at city hall with city officials a few years ago. That's when the city started talking about beautifying the park, Johnnie Johnson said.

Shearman, who officiated at the ceremony Thursday, told of the Victoria Cross awarded to the HMS Jervis Bay's captain, Edward Stephen Fogarty Fegen. He turned the ship toward the German pocket battleship Admiral Scheer despite there being a huge firepower mismatch, so that the convoy could scatter to safety.

There were only three British ships with greater speed and firepower than the Admiral Scheer, Andrew Armitage wrote in one of his Our History columns. He wrote: "With her power and speed, half the convo could be at the bottom within the hour."

Shearman told the assembly: "And in the 24 minutes before the Jervis Bay was finally sent to the bottom they worked together to confront and save and do their very best to protect the ships and their mission. For that we give our thanks."

"I think that it can be legitimately said that every crew member of the Jervis Bay shared in that Victoria Cross," he said.

Of the 190 crew, only 65 survived. The captain went down with his ship but 32 other ships escaped.

An armed ex-Canadian Pacific freighter, Beaverford, which also accompanied the convoy, was also sunk in the fight to hold off the German ship.

Asked how the park renovation came about, Shearman said that after he wrote his column, family members contacted him to clear up a few details which he didn't know. "And I thought wow, we really have lost this."

From there, Shearman said he began advocating with the Festival of Northern Lights group and with city hall, pointing out memorial parks are distinct from the city's other parks which are there for recreation.

Shearman also credited the Johnson family's effort and those of Pam Coulter, the city's community services director, for "a lot of this redevelopment."

The ceremony included remarks from city councillor Scott Greig and Capt. Rob Lay, a chaplain with 4th Canadian Division Training Centre Meaford.

Owen Sound District Secondary School students unveiled "memory markers" containing brief descriptions of five local veterans, including Jimmie Johnson.

The others included Lt. James Robb, Pte. Alan Dunoon, Pte. John Heyd, all local soldiers killed during the Battle of Vimy Ridge 100 years ago, and Lt. Jaffray Eaton, a local soldier killed at Passchendaele 100 years ago.

Each plaque contains a QR code which when scanned by a smartphone connects to the "They Served for Us" website detailing each soldier's story. They'll remain in the park for a week after Remembrance Day.

After two minutes of silence, a recording of God Save the Queen was played and was sung by some to close the service.