

NEWS LOCAL

Service 'memory markers' unveiled in Owen Sound



By Scott Dunn, Sun Times, Owen Sound
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OSCVI student Spencer Greason, left, with John Johnson who stands beside the plaque honouring his uncle, Stoker Alexander Milton "Jimmie" Johnson, the city's first fatality of the Second World War. (Scott Dunn/The Sun Times, Owen Sound)

OWEN SOUND - War service of five local people was recognized Wednesday in Jervis Bay Park.

Five plaques or "memory markers," each commemorating a local man or woman's war service, were unveiled in the downtown Owen Sound park established in 1941 following the sinking of the HMS Jervis Bay.

John Johnson's uncle, Stoker Alexander Milton Johnson, with the Royal Canadian Navy during Second World War, died after that armed cruiser was sunk while defending a convoy of ships in the North Atlantic.

"Jimmie" Johnson was the first Owen Sound fatality of the Second World War and he was one of the five commemorated.

Douglas Thomas Anderson with the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment and Curwood Neville Armstrong with 424 Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force also served during the Second World War and each is remembered with a plaque.

Nursing Sister Luella Euphemia Denton and Lieut. James Thompson Robb served in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces during the First World War and are represented by plaques. Details regarding each individual's service and sacrifice is recorded at www.theyservedforus.ca.

Each plaque contains a smartphone QR code which links to that website. The plaques will remain up for a couple of weeks. After that, they may be displayed at OSCVI, where they were created, by students including Spencer Greason and Joey Carruthers, Greason said in an interview after the event.

"All are from the Owen Sound area. With the exception of Alexander Johnson, all of them were students of the OSCVI or the OSCI. So that's how we went about picking who we were going to commemorate this year," Greason said.

The British liner Jervis Bay was armed and converted for service as the sole escort assigned to protect the convoy of 37 supply ships traveling from Halifax to Britain. The vessel engaged the German battleship Admiral Scheer which sunk her as she defended the convoy Nov. 5, 1940.

"After some initial fighting, the HMS Jervis Bay was disabled," the website's entry describing Johnson's service says.

"According to some accounts, Stoker Johnson was able to make it off the ship and into a life raft, but was reported to have slipped off the crowded raft into the freezing water. Jimmie Johnson is remembered by family members as a hero; the HMS Jervis Bay's crew fought valiantly until the ship went under."

HMS Jervis Bay suffered 190 fatalities, while 65 survived in the one-sided battle. The convoy was ordered to scatter and 32 ships escaped, according to a detailed history of the battle described at hmsjervisbay.com, a website of the HMS Jervis Bay Association.

John Johnson, 72, never met his uncle Jimmie. What Johnson knows comes mainly from his mother's stories about him. He knows he once worked at Keenan's aboard the Dan Proctor, the lumber-carrying barge which was recently re-discovered submerged near the city's sewage treatment plant outfall.

Johnson wonders about the circumstances of his uncle's death in the Atlantic.

"He made it to a life raft," he said. "And so the last they remember of him is that he come up out of the water and he was sitting on the raft and they turned around and looked a minute later and he had fell over backwards into the water. Whether he did it on purpose or whether he did it because he froze to death, who knows? He might have made room for somebody else."

The ship captain, who was listed "missing or presumed killed" was awarded a Victoria Cross posthumously.

Johnson understands his uncle “was quite a character, he enjoyed life and dad told me about him and Jimmie skating over to Wiarton on the ice floes in the harbour, and then opened their coats on the way back and let the wind push them in the harbour.”

OSCVI history teacher Dave Alexander, in background provided before the event, wrote that 407 Owen Sound Collegiate Institute students served in the First World War and 56 died. There were 18 woman who served as “nursing sisters.”

During the Second World War, more than 1,100 men and women who attended OSCVI enlisted while 5 made the “supreme sacrifice.”