



VIMM Newsletter

Spring 2020

Vancouver Island Military Museum

NANAIMO HERO REDISCOVERED OSBORNE ORR, DFC

By Angus Scully

In November 2019, Allan Snowie visited the Nanaimo Cenotaph and hoped to see there the name of a locally born hero of the Great War, Osborne Orr. Orr was a fighter ace killed in October 1918 and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery. Allan is a retired RCN pilot and Air Canada pilot who has written several books on Canadian military topics. He is also a friend of this Museum. Allan wondered why a local hero would not be on the Cenotaph. He had written briefly about Osborne Orr and had found his Nanaimo birth certificate. We decided to look into this, and even consider having Orr's name added to the Cenotaph. My research soon found two major errors that have entered the on-line world about Osborne Orr.

Americans Claim Nanaimo Hero

The first of the errors was a shocker. On Wikipedia and other internet sites, Osborne Orr is claimed as an American born fighter ace who served in the Royal Flying Corps. This is easily proved not true, but Wikipedia errors have a way of being repeated and repeated across internet sites. The Canadian Virtual War Museum does correctly list Orr as a Canadian and even has a photo of him, but the record across the internet needs to be corrected. The Wikipedia record has been partially corrected, but the other errors may be beyond reach.

The document record about Osborne Orr is clear. We have his birth certificate and his BC marriage certificate. Local business records and the Census begin to reveal his family's life in Nanaimo and Vancouver. We have the



The famous Camel fighter. Another Canadian Ace, William Barker, also flew a camel.



This photo of Osborne Orr of Nanaimo is posted on Canada's Virtual War Memorial.

Attestation Papers he completed upon joining the Royal Flying Corps in Toronto in 1917. Adding his service record from the UK National Archives gives us a nice history of this young Canadian hero. How could the Americans end up claiming Osborne Orr? Records show that he had an uncle in St. Paul Minnesota and Orr lived and worked there for several years after finishing high school in Vancouver. In St. Paul, he met and became engaged to Virginia Kennedy of Akron, Ohio. That seems to have been fact that started the errors repeating and repeating.

(Continued on page 3)

FROM THE PRESIDENT

I would like to wish all a Happy New Year for 2020. It seems that we just did this for 2019 so as the old saying goes ... “where has the time gone?”

Last year was again a good year for attendance with 5909 visitors. On Remembrance Day, the museum was open to the public free of charge, and we enjoyed 305 visitors, with lots of children with their parents...standing room only. This year we hope that we see even more visitors as we are now known as a place to visit in Nanaimo. For the past two months we have had visitors from Australia, Mexico, South Africa, China, Ireland, Germany, Philippines, Spain, South Korea, and the US, as well as from all over BC and Canada. Hopefully 2020 will be another record year for visitors.

We have finished the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, RCAF Airwomen, and War Grooms displays (thanks to Brian’s hard work). Soon to come is an updated Korean War display. We had a presentation from the Hong Kong Veterans Association consisting of a permanent poster which we mounted in the Hong Kong/Asia section. The poster was presented during a small gathering on December 9 of last year. We have re-purposed some of the downstairs offices for better storage areas thanks to Pat Murphy’s renovations, and donation of the space by the Nanaimo District Museum.

Our annual Christmas dinner at the Grand Hotel on November 28, 2019, was enjoyed by all with door prizes and volunteer gifts for all - 40 people attended the event.

We welcome a new young volunteer Thor Zupanec from Gabriola Island, who is on the Tuesday AM shift. We welcome back Recce Kuhn who is now on the Tuesday PM shift.

Roger Bird

Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame. Contact us for further information and prices.



Did You Know?

The 1943 Nickel

During WWII enormous pressure was placed on Canadian resources, including nickel, which was essential in making stainless steel. Canada was the largest producer in the world at that time. To help reduce domestic consumption of nickel, the Canadian Mint produced a five-cent piece made from Tombac, a brass alloy. These were known as the “Victory” nickels, with a large V on the reverse. Around the rim in Morse Code (dots and dashes) is the motto, “We win when we work willingly”. You can still buy an original today from coin dealers – for about \$3.00 !

2ND LIEUTENANT OSBORNE ORR - ROYAL FLYING CORPS AND ROYAL AIR FORCE

Another error about Orr is that he served in the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). This seems minor compared to the American claim, and comes from confusion about time lines. Orr joined the RFC in Toronto in October 1917. On April 1, 1918, the RFC and the RNAS were merged to form the RAF. When Orr completed his RFC and RAF training in June 1918, he was posted to 204 Squadron RAF, which had been 4 Squadron RNAS. Orr's records show he was entirely RFC/RAF in training and service. Not a big error, but the truth should be protected.

Osborne Orr – Shoe Salesman and Fighter Ace

Osborne Orr was born on July 15, 1895, in Nanaimo, British Columbia, to William John and Caroline Orr. He had a sister, Vera Eleanor, born in 1898, in Wellington BC, which is now part of Nanaimo. William Orr owned Orr and Rendell, Boot and Shoe Dealer, in Nanaimo. Shortly after the birth of Vera, the Orr family moved to Vancouver, and William opened William J. Orr Boots and Shoes at 420 Westminster Ave., with the family living nearby. Some years later they moved to Point Grey. Osborne attended Grandview Public School and Britannia High School. In June 1914 he visited his uncle, Dr. O. G. Orr, a dentist in St. Paul MN. We do not know if Osborne returned home before he enlisted, but he did take out (but never used) a Minnesota marriage license to marry Virginia Kennedy in 1917. Business records show him working as a shoe salesman in St. Paul. Osborne married Virginia in Vancouver on September 14, 1917. He was 22, she was 19.



A Camel fighter on display in Perth, Western Australia.



*The German D. VII fighter.
Aircraft on both sides were often brightly coloured.*

Two weeks later Orr joined the Royal Flying Corps in Toronto. Virginia was living at 20 Grosvenor St in Toronto. Orr would have attended the School of Military Aeronautics at the University of Toronto, then proceeded through flight training, gunnery school, and completion of a minimum of 30 hours of solo flying. He was then commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant and sent to England. Records show that Virginia returned to Vancouver.

By June 1918, Orr was in England and posted to 45 Training Squadron, then 1 Fighting School. On July 20 he was posted to France and on August 1, joined 204 Squadron as a fighter pilot flying the famous Sopwith Camel. Orr had his first victories on August 12, shooting down two Fokker D.VIIs on the same day. He was a good pilot and a good shot. He shot down another D.VII on August 14, and his fourth victory was on August 15. It was another two months before he got his fifth victory, on October 14, and became an Ace.

On October 23, Osborne Orr and three other pilots from 204 Squadron were shot down by German fighters. Orr's body was never found. He was 23, his widow, 20. In January 1919, Orr was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for bravery.

Thus, two men from Nanaimo became fighter aces in the Great War. Raymond Collishaw shot down 60 German aircraft.

The VIMM will now work with local authorities and explore the possibility of having Osborne Orr's name added to our Cenotaph. Allan Snowie has donated money for a plaque.



The RFC under canvas at the University of Toronto.



SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE 1942-1944

By Greg Devenish

The First Special Service Force was an elite American-Canadian commando unit in WWII. Although this unit had a short history, it served with great distinction and earned many nicknames including the “Devil’s Brigade,” and the “Black Devils.” Trained in mountain warfare, rock climbing, skiing, and parachute jumping, this elite unit laid the foundation for the Green Berets and Canadian Special Forces of today.

On June 3rd, 1942, Col. Robert T. Frederick of the U.S. Army was given the task of creating a commando unit. Colonel Frederick was a respected leader and, as one soldier stated, “He was always at the front and got just as dirty and wet ...as anyone”. On July 9, the FSSF was activated at Fort Harrison in Montana.

The FSSF would number 2300. Canada’s contribution was 697. The Canadian soldiers were subject to the Canadian code of discipline and pay. The Americans provided uniforms, equipment, arms, and expenses. The second in command was a Canadian, Lieutenant Colonel Don Williamson, and half the officers were Canadian.

One can only imagine the reactions by Canadians and Americans when they sized each other up on that Thursday in August at the railway station: the American officers in their Stetsons and khaki uniforms, the Canadians in summer uniforms and an assortment of head gear and, for some, kilts. Historian Saul David wrote;

“Inevitably, as the two nationalities got acquainted, there was plenty of good-natured banter. “Where you from soldier?” asked one American. “What outfit?” “The Princess Patricia’s Light Infantry.” “You have to be kidding. What the hell is that?”

Training included parachute drops, mountain climbing, skiing, boxing, obstacle courses, weapons training, and a punishing physical training schedule to produce a high level of fitness. Dermot “Pat” O’Neill, a former Shanghai policeman, was assigned to teach hand to hand combat to the FSSF. “I am not here to teach you how to hurt,” he said, “I’m here to teach you how to kill.”

In July 1943 the FSSF was part of the joint Canada-USA invasion of Kiska in the Aleutians. While there was no action against Japanese forces, much was learned about securing military installations.

Then the FSSF was sent to Italy as part the U.S. Fifth Army. During the 1943 offensive against the German Winter Line, the FSSF objectives were the peaks of Difensa and Remetanea, defended by the 104th Panzer division. Colonel Frederick’s decided to attack up a near vertical 330 meter cliff where there was less German resistance. Six hundred men began the ascent on Dec. 2. One soldier recalled, “It looked as if we were marching into Hell. The whole mountain was being shelled and the whole mountain seemed to be on fire.” They took the Germans by surprise on Difensa and secured the objective in less than an hour.



Sgt. Jack Glenn, 21, of Brockville ON was killed on Dec. 25, 1943, serving with the FSSF. Note the Canadian stripes on the American uniform.



Sgt. Tommy Prince, Canada’s most decorated Indigenous soldier in WWII. He received a Military Medal, and a Silver Star from the USA. He also served in Korea and a statue of him was unveiled in Winnipeg in 1989.

In a six-day battle for Remetanea, there were 511 casualties. Canadian Lt. Col. MacWilliam was killed by a mortar blast while leading the assault battalion.

In January 1944, the FSSF landed on the beach head at Anzio. German prisoners were surprised at how few men the force contained and, at how effective they were. It was at Anzio that the FSSF was nicknamed the “Devil’s Brigade”. The diary of a German soldier said, “The black devils are all around us every time we come into the line, and we never hear them come.” The FSSF used trademark stickers with the unit symbol and a slogan: “Das dicke Ende kommt noch” (“The worst is yet to come”). These were placed on German fortifications and corpses. On June 4, 1944, the FSSF was the first allied unit to enter Rome.

Following participation in the invasion of southern France, the force was deactivated. The Canadian military was no longer willing to man the FSSF. The 620 Canadian members were shipped to France and reassigned to Canadian units.

Soldiers of the unit received 21 Distinguished Service Crosses, 5 Legions of Merit, 104 Silver Stars, 105 Bronze Stars and 1,214 Purple Hearts. Canadians were awarded one Military Cross, two Military Medals, one Distinguished Conduct Medal. The Force was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal in 2013. The Force’s legacy is the foundation for CSOR (Canadian Special Operations Regiment) and the U.S. Special Forces Command (“Green Berets”). Sholto Watt, a reporter, summed up the Force’s legacy when he wrote;



On display at the VIMM.

“...it was the first joint force of its kind, drawn from two neighbour democracies, and ...was a brilliant success... (an) example of international brotherhood which deserves enduring honor.”



FSSF. Notice all members were outfitted with American equipment.



The Army Museum of Western Australia

By Angus Scully

Located in Perth, The Army Museum of Western Australia is a world class museum. When VIMM Vice President Brian McFadden heard that I would be visiting Perth, he contacted Richard Bennett of AMWA and put us in contact.

The AMWA operates at the former barracks of the artillery garrison defending the harbour of Fremantle. The museum precincts include several buildings and an extensive outdoor collection of armoured vehicles. Operations are carried out by two part-time Army personnel and about 80 volunteers. This museum is a must visit for anyone visiting Perth. And I should add that anyone visiting Australia should make the effort to get to WA.

I was greeted on arrival by a group of cheerful volunteers, who resembled in age and humour my colleagues at VIMM. It was close to Remembrance Day and I was able to distribute poppy pins brought from Nanaimo. I had coffee and a friendly meeting with curators Richard Bennett and Robert Mitchell. Then, volunteer Graham Berry took me around the museum. Graham is superbly knowledgeable about the displays and I had a wonderful tour. There was something amazing around every corner, in every room. We had a great time and I learned a lot about Australia's long military history. We have a shared history too. The Canadian Corps and Australian Corps together broke the German Army on August 8, 1918.

A few days after my tour of this wonderful place, Richard arranged for me to meet the staff at the Aviation Heritage Museum operated by the Royal Australian Airforce Association in the Perth suburb of Bull Creek. And here was another stunner – 23 aircraft including a Spitfire, Lancaster, Anson, Dakota, Catalina, Auster, Vampire, and Canberra. The all-volunteer staff made me and my wife feel at home.

Well, this report can only end by thanking the Australians for their hospitality and by urging all readers to go to these great institutions if they get to Perth. In the meantime travel by the internet to:
<https://armymuseumwa.com.au> and
<https://www.raafawa.org.au>



The AMWA main building.



Graham Berry, volunteer and knowledgeable guide at AMWA.



The author and a Canadian Pattern Military Truck, one of the many vehicles at AMWA.



Canadian Prisoners of War (P.O.W) World War II

By Brian McFadden

Approximately 9,000 Canadians soldiers, sailors, and airmen were captured by the enemy and held as prisoners of war (POW) during the Second World War. This number included seamen who were serving in the Merchant Navy.

Conditions in POW camps were difficult, but for the most part, prisoners of the Germans had adequate food and were treated relatively humanely; however, there were exceptions especially in camps where prisoners attempted to escape, braving armed guards, barbed wire, and watchtowers in a bid for freedom. Perhaps the most famous POW escape was from Stalag Luft III in 1943, when 76 allied prisoners escaped the camp by tunnelling almost 300 feet underground and under the camp's barbed-wire perimeter. As the war progressed and the Nazi regime began to collapse under the Allied onslaught, conditions in the camps worsened and food rations for prisoners were severely restricted. As the Allies advanced across Europe, many POWs were forced on long, often deadly, marches to camps in more secure areas of the country.

One group of prisoners, mostly aircrew, who had been shot down over German territory, spent several months in Buchenwald Concentration Camp in 1944. These men were escapees assisted by the Resistance with false papers and civilian clothing. When recaptured they were arrested and interned as spies. They were questioned, beaten, subjected to other forms of cruelty, then jammed into overcrowded boxcars and sent to Buchenwald extermination camp. These prisoners were forced to sleep outside without shoes or shelter for several days before being housed in wooden huts where they slept packed tightly together for warmth. In late 1944, these prisoners were transferred from Buchenwald to a regular POW camp administered by the German Luftwaffe.



Canadians captured at the Dieppe Raid in 1942



Stalag Luft III – the scene of the Great Escape



Japanese POW camp

Canadians who became POWs in Asia faced a much harsher regime where great brutality and cruelty by Japanese camp guards was a daily occurrence. Food rations for prisoners were particularly meagre and starvation was used as a punishment for any infraction of the rules. Many prisoners were forced to toil in mines and shipyards in Japan, in terrible working conditions. Those POWs who were forced to work building a railway through the jungles of Burma and Siam (modern day Thailand) suffered the most extreme inhumane treatment at the hands of their captors. This particular construction project cost the lives of over 13,000 Allied POWs and was aptly named, "The Death Railway".

DISPATCHES

from VIMM



Retirements



Jack Ziebart

Jack Ziebart has retired from the VIMM after 21 years as a volunteer and member of the Board. Always a gentleman, Jack brought expertise in computers and communications to us. Jack served 30 years in the RCAF, retiring as a Squadron Leader.



John Pierce. His stories about his 25 years of service with the Royal Canadian Dragoons have appeared in this publication to rave reviews.

John Pierce has retired after 9 years as a volunteer. With his dry wit and a twinkle in his eye, John kept us, and our visitors, entertained and informed.

New Projects

2020 will see a major new exhibit dedicated to Allied prisoners of war in both Europe and Asia. The display will illustrate not only military personnel, but also civilians who were interned in South East Asia. The majority of the civilians were women and children, and the story of their treatment in internment camps is as shocking as that of military prisoners.



Both the Korean War and Juno Beach displays will also be updated with additional artifacts and information.

A plaque honouring the last Hong Kong P.O.W. from British Columbia, (Private Gerry Gerrard, Royal Canadian Signals) was presented by representatives of the Hong Kong Veterans Association and the family to VIMM during Remembrance Week 2019.

Museum Directors and Staff

Roger Bird, President

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Phil Harris, Treasurer

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Greg Devenish, Secretary, Library

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Bill Brayshaw, Acquisitions

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