

# MONTGOMERY LEGION

## History of the Montgomery Legion



In 1944, Cecil Hall and Jim Potter, members of Ottawa Branch 16 of the Canadian Legion, were travelling by train to a Dominion Convention being held somewhere in Western Canada. One of the prime topics of conversation was how to receive veterans from the European theatre of war on their return. The main point discussed was the necessity of explaining the basic purposes of the Legion to the returning veterans and, having done that, how to approach them to become members of the organization. As a result, Cecil and Jim, together with another dozen or so organizers, were instrumental in finally forming a new branch of the Legion here in Ottawa.

Temporary quarters were obtained in the Belle Claire Hotel on Queen Street, through the kind permission of Harry MacMillan, then manager/owner of the establishment. Monthly meetings were held in the basement of the hotel after the branch charter was obtained on 13 June 1945. After receiving permission from the proper source, the branch was officially named Montgomery (Ontario 351) Branch in honour of Field

Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery of Alamein. The first serving president was Comrade Cecil Hall, one of our charter members.

The new branch was successful in recruiting a number of veterans into the membership and by 1946, it was realized that a more permanent home would be needed to accommodate the continued increase in the strength of the branch. Through Lyle Beamish, one of the joint owners of a commercial building located at 199 Queen Street, we were able to rent the second and third floors as our new quarters. The second floor was used as the main lounge and General Meeting room. The third floor was used as a storage room. Mr. Beamish rented the two floors to the branch at below par rental and in recognition of his great kindness; he was eventually installed as a honorary member of Montgomery Branch.

Another prominent Ottawa business man also came to the assistance of the branch. Lawrence Freiman, son of the owner of A. J. Freiman's Department Store, donated a considerable amount of used furniture to our new quarters. He also offered the branch up to fifteen per center in discounts on any purchases made in their store. Mr. Freiman was also recognized with a honorary membership.

The branch had already obtained a license to serve beer. During these early years liquor was not available for regular sale through special licenses were issued for specific occasions. They were usually reserved for dances when members and their spouses or lady friends could attend. It was only in the early fifties that women were accepted into the branch as ordinary members, providing, of course, they had served in the Armed Forces. Bar hours were from 12 noon to 6:30pm and 8pm to 12 midnight. The idea of the 6:30pm to 8:00pm closing was to ensure that beer drinkers would go home for their supper. Amusing as it may seem today, it was actually illegal to purchase beer between those hours. Of course, some members would "stock-up" prior to the 6:30pm closing in order to have enough to carry them through to 8:00pm when the bar re-opened again!

A variety of entertainment was periodically presented by some of the more talented members. Many ridiculously humourous skits were presented as well as entertainment by individual soloists and

instrumentalists. One of the better known groups of entertainers was called "The Organized Confusers". This group contained eight to ten of our members most of whom have since passed on to their reward. Although our quarters were centrally located, it was always a fair climb of approximately twenty steps from the street level to the second floor. On the odd occasion some descended the stairway at a much faster pace than when ascending same. It appeared that the upstairs imbibing helped their descent much more rapidly!

The gradual increase in membership and in revenue from bar sales, membership fees and other fund producing sources eventually made us realize that the branch would have to invest in a permanent home of its own. This time arrived when we were able to purchase property located at 330 Kent Street. This property was a three storey red brick home built in the late 19th century. Renovations and other improvements were made to the building primarily by many members on a purely voluntary basis. Hammers and saws could be heard in a chorus during the evenings and on week-ends after the working members had finished their own daily tasks.

Progressively membership continued to increase. The basement at the southwest side of the building was utilized as a combined tavern, darts and card room. In those days, as now, conversation and story-telling was always one of the most common forms of pastime. If those old hallowed walls listening then could speak out today many interesting stories could be re-told to some whose ears had never heard the tales related then. In retrospect, perhaps some of the stories related then might better remain buried rather than resurrected! The main floor contained the lounge, known as the "Dieppe Room", together with a smaller sitting lounge named the "Poppy Room". Another room across from the Poppy Room was used as the Branch Office. It was manned by a salaried secretary. At that time, there was no Office Manager, the Secretary doing the bulk of the administration work together with voluntary assistance from the Branch President and Officers. The second floor, which contained a large hall was used for General Meetings, dances, banquets, etc. and was called "Flanders Hall". Two other small rooms in this area were used as a board meeting room and Ladies' Auxiliary meeting room. The top floor was the living quarters for the resident janitor and his family.

In 1949, the branch inaugurated the "Older Veterans' Christmas Dinner". This dinner was usually held about two weeks prior to Christmas and was arranged by a Christmas Dinner Committee. The food was prepared and served by the branch Ladies' Auxiliary. The traditional roast turkey, trimmings, vegetables and desserts were served together with a couple of beers, cigarettes and a gift for each and every guest. The attending committee Chairman was accompanied at the head table by a special guest speaker, the Branch President, the two Padres and possibly a Zone or District Officer. The "Older Veterans' Dinner" continues to this day and is a very important event on the yearly calendar of Montgomery Branch.

In the early fifties, the branch started bingos as an additional source of accumulating funds for special community projects. The bingos were held in the Coliseum at Lansdowne Park. Small household appliances were some of the regular prizes while the major prize was usually a small car. Consolation prizes varied from turkeys to electric frying pans or some such item. Unfortunately, because of competition from other service clubs who also held bingos, the net profits from these ventures were very unpredictable. A "break-even" or \$200.00 nightly loss was not uncommon. However, a good average night might show a profit of \$300 - \$400. One project initiated from branch bingo revenues was the building of a children's playground on Main Street near Hawthorne Avenue in Ottawa East. The playground contained swings, a playhouse, a metal slide and a shallow wading pool as well as the traditional sandbox. This playground was officially turned over to the City of Ottawa with the pre-arranged proviso that they take over the maintenance of the project. The branch also held periodic car raffles as another source of raising funds for different commitments. Also during the fifties the branch sponsored the sale of tickets for a circus coming to Ottawa. Most tickets were purchased in bulk by local merchants and commercial outlets and were usually returned for the use of under-privileged children.

By the time the sixties arrived, the old building needed a lot of upkeep and maintenance with respect to plumbing, electrical repairs, etc. The end result of this was that we began looking for new or more up-to-date quarters. A site on Catherine Street was purchased and temporarily rented to Brewers Warehousing as a retail beer and ale outlet. It was intended we would convert this building to new quarters for Montgomery Branch. However, after a couple of years the property was sold.

At this time, our membership had settled at 700 to 750 members. The building we occupied was limited in space because of the number of rooms it contained. The extremely thick walls made it impossible to enlarge

any of the rooms by knocking out the walls. As a result, it was decided to tear down the property and erect a new edifice. The only portion of the building left standing and still in use is the south western area. This portion was left standing for a purely technical reason. Had the entire building been torn down, city by-laws would force us to provide a reasonably sized parking lot upon erection of a new structure. This would have meant a very expensive additional commitment. However, by leaving up the portion at the southwest corner city by-laws considered it to be a renovation. As a result, we did not have to provide a parking lot. In order to obtain a first mortgage of \$100,000 on the property, the branch approached three hundred members to sign individual \$1000 guarantee bonds. Additional funds were obtained by membership loans. Eventually the loans were either repaid or the monies applied to future payment of membership dues.

During reconstruction temporary quarters were provided through the kindness of the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans Unit situated at 100 Lyon Street. This move took place in the spring of 1963. We were able to move back to our new home in May 1964. On June 13, 1964, the new edifice was officially opened by the late Governor-General, Georges P. Vanier. Dr. Charlotte Whitton, then Mayor of Ottawa, was also invited to attend the opening ceremonies.

Our renovated quarters offered us a lot more space for the various activities planned, such as dances, banquets, bingos, dart and card tournaments, shuffleboard, etc. Within a year, our membership climbed quite rapidly and by the mid-seventies hit a peak of over 1700. The branch mortgage was burned approximately seven years after the official opening. After the burning of the mortgage, it was planned to purchase the property on MacLaren Street, directly behind the branch. However, when this proposal was presented to the General Meeting for approval it was turned down. Today, this property could have been used for branch parking and/or branch expansion.

We are indebted to Comrade, R. M. Elliott for the presentation of the stained glass window, now installed over the entrance to the lounge, which was above the door of the original Albion Hall.

The Ladies' Auxiliary of Montgomery 351 can never be forgotten for their tireless work performed over the past forty years. Their continuous drives to raise monies have benefited the branch many hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. They are always there to cater to the Older Veterans' Dinner, to feed the endless number of veterans returning from the Remembrance Day Parade and for so many other special branch functions. They prepare light food and beverages for the bingo patrons. Over the past few years, the branch executive have honoured the ladies by preparing and serving a special banquet as a small token of appreciation to these wonderful workers who have dedicated so much time to the goodness of the branch – God Bless Them One and All!

Montgomery Branch is proud to have been involved in many worthwhile activities and projects since it came into being in 1945, some of which are chronicled here.

Winchester, Ontario Branch was assisted in their semi-annual or annual bingos held in a large barn-type hall in Winchester to raise funds for some of their own community projects.

The Remembrance Day ceremonies include a National Colour Party which, at one time, was made up of at least fifty percent Montgomery Branch members. The branch is still involved in this Colour Party which is now known as the "Dominion Command Colour Party". Other events attended by the colour party have been for Royal Visits by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, H.M. Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, and H.R.H. Princess Margaret, on the occasion of her officially opening the new City Hall on Green Island. In addition, they have attended functions at the National War Memorial for visiting heads of state including the late U.S. Presidents, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, General Charles de Gaulle of France, King Baudouin of Belgium, Prince Bernhardt of Holland and some past Prime Ministers of Great Britain.

Over the past four or five years, Montgomery Branch has undertaken the sponsorship of two Air Cadet Groups, 742 (Montgomery Legion) Air Cadet Squadron and 2442 (763 Ottawa Communication Regiment) Cadet Corps. In 1984, our Air Cadet Squadron was singled out as the top squadron in Canada in competition with over four hundred other squadrons. We are very proud to be associated with such fine groups of young men and women

who could conceivably become our leaders of the future. Other sponsorships over the past decade or two include juvenile track and field, little league baseball and minor hockey.

After the completion of Letson Hall, a home for the blind, built by the C.N.I.B, a dinner was held a few years ago for the residents and fifty radios were supplied for their comfort and convenience by Montgomery Branch. The residents of the Rideau Veterans Home have been the recipients of many items from Montgomery Branch. Over the past thirty-five years or more, weekly visits have been made and fresh fruit, chocolate bars, etc distributed. Each Christmas, many branch members, accompanied by old St. Nick, visit the vets in both the Rideau Veterans Home and National Defence Medical Centre to distribute gifts and spread good cheer. Our Hospital Visiting Committee also visits shut-in members in other hospitals around the city.

Donations are continuously being made to such worthwhile organizations as the Terry Fox Foundation, Ontario March of Dimes, Ontario Crippled Children's Society, Ottawa Civic Hospital, Riverside Hospital, Ottawa General Hospital, Queensway-Carleton Hospital, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), Salvation Army and C.N.I.B. and others.

In 1973, Comrade Robert "Bob" Brown, a past president of the branch, was instrumental in forming a senior citizens club out of the branch membership. The only qualification was that the member must have reached the age of 65 or more. It has been called the "65 Club" ever since its formation. The 65ers continue to hold monthly meetings in the branch. They discuss and plan trips to other branches in the district and in turn, many seniors from other branches have been invited to Montgomery for a tête-à-tête over a meal together with some entertainment and a dance. During the entertainment sessions, Comrade Tom Midgley was M.C. and Comrade Lee Sproul was the pianist. It was noticed that there was some talent among the 65ers and eventually a group called "The Keynotes" was formed under the direction of Comrade Tom. This group of entertainers goes around and entertains at various nursing homes and hospitals. In August, 1983, they were requested to perform in the Heritage Village at the Central Canada Exhibition and were invited back again in 1984.

The Senior Citizens around our community are not forgotten. On many occasions during the year, seniors from local Senior Citizen Homes are invited to the branch for an afternoon of hospitality and entertainment.

In 1986, Montgomery Branch finally accepted associate-voting members in to their ranks. Already many of these new comrades have shown their worth by assisting in many of the branch activities and projects and we look for their continued support in the future.

It is also worthy of note that our present day branch bulletin, the "Sentinel", originally came into being during the fifties and its first title was "Montgomery Newsletter". Over the years our bulletin has won many awards, not the least of which have been two Provincial awards, one when the late Comrade Irene Raymond was its editor and again in 1981, under the editorship of Comrade Bill Simpson.

As the president states in his message, we at Montgomery 351 can honestly say that we have a great pride in our past and great faith in our future!