

## **Leslie Sutherland Branch 447 Corunna, Royal Canadian Legion**

-- Marg Emery

Leslie Sutherland Branch 447, Corunna of the Royal Canadian Legion received its charter on December 4, 1946. The first meetings of the branch were held in Christ Anglican Church Hall. The branch was named for the first Moore Township serviceman to give his life during the Second World War. Leslie Sutherland was a pilot shot down over Holland in 1943. His stepfather, Arthur Turnbull, a First World War Veteran, served as the branch's first President. The Beresford Street location was originally crown land. Footings for the Beresford Street location were poured in 1947 and the original building was built in 1948. It was located on Beresford Street at the foot of Hill Street, on the northeast corner. The original building was only the clubroom. Soon after, the kitchen was added followed by another addition for the "quiet" room. The members thought they could build up for a second storey on the building but that would not have solved their parking problems. Before deciding to move, the members tried to buy the adjacent trailer park located immediately north of the Legion to use for parking as the branch had no parking to speak of. Unfortunately this idea did not pan out. This location remained the home of the Legion branch until 1987 when the property at 350 Albert Street was purchased which became the new home of Branch 447. Although not all members supported the move, the majority did by a vote of the members so the old building was sold to the Township and the money used to purchase the property and begin the building. Moore Township tore the building on Beresford down in 1988 to make room for parking.

On April 30, 1988, the official opening ceremony was held with the President of Ontario Command, Comrade Joseph Kobolak, officiating. The evening events that night included recognition of the Ladies Auxiliary and recognition of several local dignitaries and special guests.

In the fall of 1987, the branch decided to move the cenotaph to their new property. President of the day Bob Hamilton, who was a crane operator working for Polymer Corporation, borrowed a crane (donated by Polymer) and along with his rigging crew moved the cenotaph at no cost to the branch. It was a big undertaking that showed the community support of the day. In later years the cenotaph was rebuilt by stone mason Dave Brown who meticulously refurbished the structure stone by stone and the result is what you see today.

On the 40th Anniversary of the branch, 145 members and friends gathered at the Polish Hall in Sarnia on Friday, April 24th, 1987. Keynote speaker was Bill Smith, RCL Provincial President. One of the few surviving charter members, Comrade George Gibb, was in attendance and reminisced over the warm memories of the branch. Ross McCorquodale was President of the day for the event which hosted a large number of Legion dignitaries from the area and far afield. Jim Haxton was Treasurer in 1989 and noted the branch was struggling with a bank account of only about \$500 a month. The Ladies Auxiliary (LA) were/are huge supporters of the branch in the day and their annual donations helped keep the branch financially stable for the most part. Sometimes the branch would ask the LA to help with a bill or two during the year as they gave their main donation at the Remembrance Banquet each year in November.

It should be noted that way back in 1988 the annual donation of the Ladies Auxiliary to the branch that year was \$10,000. Can you imagine how many meals they prepared and functions they worked to save that much

money in the 1980s? The relationship with the branch is still very strong today as the LA continues to provide annual donations and help fund large projects like the recent roof replacement.

Around this same time other revenue opportunities began to help make the branch the financial success it is today. Bell Canada contacted the branch for a partnership to erect a cell tower on the property with an annual amount to the branch for the lease of the property. Much of the property the branch owned was still farmed in the day. St. Clair Township had asked the branch to allow them to lease some of the extra property to build ball diamonds, but the Executive of the day did not agree to that proposal. Instead the branch sold about three acres of its property while maintaining the property you see today. Other major fundraisers were the bingos and break-open tickets. Bingos were held initially in a building at the old Zellers Plaza on London Road in Sarnia, then moved to the Canterbury Hotel on London Road near Modeland Road, another move to Point Edward and finally to Bingo Country on Upper Canada Drive. Money earned from the bingos and break-open tickets was used for donations and for the Building Fund. These endeavours allowed the branch to pay off its debts and make it viable financially. In the early 1990s, the branch added room for storage through an addition which completed the building as you see it today. In 2004, the outdoor patio was erected and the liquor licence extended to include it.

The 50th anniversary was celebrated in 1997 under the leadership of President Kevin Harris. Public Relations Officer of the day, Herbert Kewell, reminisced that when the original branch was built in 1947 “there was no money”. “We were only making \$1 an hour”. “Anything we can get ourselves into,” was Comrade Kewell’s explanation of the Legion’s goals for the community. Veterans, whose average age at the time was 75, have supported a strong tradition of community involvement. During this event a group of 50-year Legion members were honoured. It was especially noted at this celebration that the branch had brought in new Associate members who had a veteran as a parent which kept the connection to veterans strong. Comrade Kewell noted, “we are going to keep helping as long as we can”.

A special memory about one of the branch’s events in support of Veterans was the Boat Cruise on the original *Duc d’Orleans* where the branch would have two busloads of Veterans come from Westminster Hospital (now called Parkwood) in London, Ont. to enjoy an afternoon cruise and a meal back at the branch with the meal provided by the Ladies Auxiliary. With the aging veterans and the food and drink regulations becoming stricter, unfortunately the event was no longer a suitable outing for the veterans.

The members of Branch 447 Corunna have a very proud history of service to our Veterans, their dependents and the community in which we live and will continue to do so in the future.

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Information for the history was researched with input from Comrades Doug Heath, Jim Haxton and Jim Noyle, and compiled by Comrade Marg Emery.

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