

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Decoration Day

By Chris Ballard, MPP
Newmarket-Aurora

On June 11, I had the honour of participating in the 69th annual Decoration Day ceremony, hosted by the Newmarket Veterans' Association at the Newmarket cemetery.

Since then, I have heard from several people who told me that they had never really understood the history behind this important date, so I thought I would share some of the history in this week's column.

This is from the Decoration Day website: On June 1, 1866, after nearly 50 years of peace since the War of 1812, what is now Canada was invaded from the United States by experienced soldiers, Irish-American Fenians, determined to expel the British from Ireland by taking Canada hostage.

An 800-man, heavily armed vanguard of battle-hardened Civil War veterans from the US and former Confederate army, seized the town of Fort Erie and began moving toward the Welland Canal, threatening to destroy it.

On the morning of June 2, near the village of Ridgeway, west of Fort Erie, they were intercepted by a brigade of militia from the Queen's Own Rifles of Toronto and the 13th Battalion of Hamilton in what became Canada's first modern battle to be fought exclusively by Canadian troops and led entirely by Canadian officers: The Battle of Ridgeway.

33 soldiers were wounded. Nine lost their lives ? three of them University of Toronto students who hastily left their final exams to join the Queen's Own Rifles.

Twenty-two more Canadians would die of either wounds or disease sustained during the fighting or on frontier duty during the Fenian Raids. Those raids would also extend into Quebec. Beginning with the first casualty, Ensign Malcolm McEachern, killed in the early minutes of the battle on June 2, these 31 casualties were the first 31 of nearly 120,000 Canadian servicemen and women to fall in military service, including Afghanistan.

?We will remember them? is the call heard at military memorial ceremonies and parades these days, and especially on Remembrance Day, November 11, chosen by the Government of Canada. That day marked the end of World War I, the Great War, on November 11, 1918.

But for some 30 years before that date was chosen, Canadians had a different memorial day, called Decoration Day. On that day, Canadians commemorated their war dead by laying flowers, on the weekend closest to June 2 ? the anniversary of Canada's forgotten first modern battle, the battle of Ridgeway in 1866.

Decoration Day had begun as a protest in 1890 by veterans who had fought at Ridgeway, but had received no acknowledgement from the Canadian government. Decoration Day was born of protest ? a protest of veterans' sacrifice forgotten or ignored by their government and the public.

It stands as a lesson to us all that we must never forget. Every year that I attend Decoration Day ceremonies the number of attendees continues to grow, I truly hope that next year you will remember the sacrifices of these early veterans, and all who serve today, and attend a service to honour them.

York Region Pride Parade

This past weekend I walked with family, friends and colleagues in the fifth annual York Region Pride Parade. It was the largest parade I've been in. This year's route was down historic Main Street in Newmarket and ended with a celebration at Riverwalk Commons.

I was moved to see the many individuals with their families and friends who came out to celebrate love, to celebrate pride and to celebrate respect for one another.

I was moved at the welcoming reception given the parade by residents and Town of Newmarket Council.

What better place to celebrate peace and love than in Newmarket, founded by peace-loving Quakers. As I looked around at the attendees, participants and organizers, I was reminded of something that our premier Kathleen Wynne said, ?We live in a country that, even though not perfect, strives to be more inclusive, we strive to be more equitable.?

Our riding of Newmarket-Aurora embodies all of those values, regardless of our different points of view. We come together to support all individuals of all sexual orientations and of all genders. Celebrating in events and parades like the pride parade promotes community, respect, diversity and it contributes to changing hearts and minds.

I encourage individuals within our community to learn from each other, to support and encourage ourselves to remember who we

are, why we are here, and how we can be the very best version of ourselves.

Celebrating Seniors

I would like to thank everyone who attended my community BBQ at the Seniors Information and Active Living Fair. We served over 400 burgers and hot dogs. The fair was hosted by the Aurora Seniors' Centre, Club Aurora Fitness Centre, Activate Aurora and the Aurora Seniors' Association.

This annual event host seminars and activities that promote health and wellbeing for seniors. I always enjoy these community events. It's always a great time to catch up with old friends and make some new ones.

As always, I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. I look forward to hearing from you.