



Spring 2022

# VIMM Newsletter

Vancouver Island Military Museum

## *Treasured, Stolen, Found, Returned: The Quest to Find a Medal's Owner*

By Greg Devenish

In early December 2021, Liam Robertson, a Nanaimo civic parks employee, was cleaning up an encampment in a local park and found a medal with a name inscribed on the rim. He decided to take it to the Vancouver Island Military Museum to establish its authenticity and return it, if possible, to its rightful owner. At VIMM we gave it a close look and verified that it was indeed a Military Medal from the First World War. The Military Medal was awarded to recognize gallantry and devotion to duty when under fire in battle on land. On the rim of the medal was inscribed "Sgt. J.P. Austin 50th Battalion." Who was Sgt. J.P. Austin? Did he survive the war? Where was he born? In what engagement did he receive the medal? Does the initial "J" stand for Johnson, Jeffrey, Jon, John? Lastly, how does a Military Medal end up in a park in Nanaimo?

Research at the Library and Archives Canada website revealed there were many Austin's including first names which began with "J". However, there were no Sergeants. A review of WWI Military Medal recipients in the British war records indicated there was a Sergeant J.P Austin who received the MM. He was a member of the 50th CEF Battalion from Calgary. A discussion with staff at The Military Museums in Calgary produced the name John Petrie Austin, who was a Lieutenant in the 50th and had been promoted after he received the MM as a sergeant. With this information we were able to find J. P Austin's military service record in Library and Archives Canada and in that, his birthplace. A British community web project commemorating the Great War, Durham at War, proved invaluable in finding out who J.P Austin was.

Their records show that John Petrie Austin was born in 1884 in Hartlepool, Durham County, England. He was one of five children and at some time he volunteered for the 4th Durham Garrison Artillery. In 1908 he married Annie Rutter and they emigrated to Canada in 1910. They settled in Calgary and were joined by his sister, and his younger brother Roy. When the war started, it was Roy who joined up first, in 1915, with the 56th Battalion. After arriving in England, Roy joined the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles, and in the battle of the Somme, Roy was wounded, taken prisoner, and spent 27 months in a German POW Camp.

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Margaret Sloat and Liam Robertson

# Report from the President

The museum is still exercising the COVID 19 protocols in accordance with the BC Health Authority announcements. However, our attendance is up from this time last year which is a good sign. Most of our visitors are from the Island and mainland.

We are still trying to book the Grand Hotel for a late spring luncheon which looks promising with the lifting of restrictions on meetings and other gatherings.

We welcome Ron Sayer from South Africa as a new volunteer. With sadness we note the passing of Bill Eubank, one of our stalwart volunteers.

We are still in good shape financially which will keep our doors open to the public for the near future. We have had a lot of favourable publicity for the museum by the news media coast to coast with the recent assault event that Pat Murphy was involved in. Also, the return of the stolen Military Medal to an Island family that was researched and orchestrated by Greg Devenish got very good media coverage, again coast to coast.

Our new neighbour, the Marriot Hotel, has announced that they will be opening 1 October 2022, rather than in August of this year. Consequently, our days of operation will remain as they are now – closed Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. We look forward to the end of construction.

Enjoy the spring weather, and continue to be safe,

**Roger Bird, VIMM President**

## Did You Know?

A Diefenbunker is buried in Nanaimo. VIMM President Roger Bird knows it well, as he was part of the de-commissioning of the facility while an officer in the RCAF. During the Cold War, Diefenbunkers, knick-named after Prime Minister John Diefenbaker by his critics, were built to shelter governments during a nuclear attack. Roger says the Nanaimo site was chosen because meteorological records showed prevailing winds would blow fallout from nuclear bomb explosions in Vancouver or Victoria away from the Island.

The underground shelters were designed to withstand a nuclear bomb exploding 2 km away. They were equipped with communications equipment, living space, and supplies to keep several dozen people alive for weeks. Our bunker was stripped and buried. The Diefenbunker at Carp, Ontario, near Ottawa, was the largest and is now a museum, open to the public.

## Medal Mounting

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



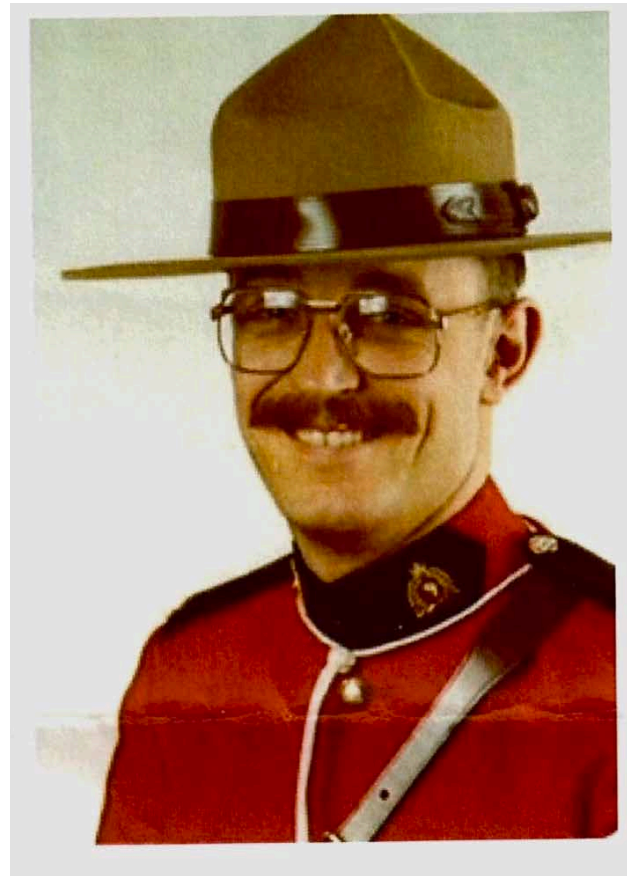
# In Memory of Bill Eubank, VIMM Volunteer

Bill Eubank was a dedicated VIMM volunteer on the Friday crew. His dry sense of humour was much appreciated by visitors to the museum and by other volunteers. Bill was raised in Saskatchewan and graduated from the University of Calgary. He taught high school physical education before joining the RCMP in 1978. Bill had a long and successful career, serving first in Saskatchewan, then in the far north at Whitehorse, Watson Lake and Pelly Crossing. He then served in Toronto as a member of the Drug Squad, and Immigration and Passport units.

In 1993, Bill served with the United Nations Civilian Policing Mission in the former Yugoslavia. He was the commander of a UN monitoring station that came under artillery fire. In the face of great danger, Bill calmed the staff and ensured their safe evacuation. For his actions he was Mentioned in Dispatches, an award of gallantry. He was also awarded the UN Commendation Medal and a Meritorious Certificate from the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Bill's calmness was obvious to all who knew him, and while he was quiet about his own actions, he was ready to ensure others also got recognition for their work.

After the Yugoslav mission he returned to duty in Toronto and then the Arctic, serving in Arviat and Fort McPherson. Wherever he was posted, Bill used his skills in woodworking to make wooden toys for local children.

In 1999, Bill was awarded the Lester Pearson Memorial Peacekeeping Scholarship and studied at the UN Headquarters in New York City. He also took part in the Haiti Peacekeeping Mission. He then served in Alberta and returned to the Arctic at Inuvik as Advisory NCO for the North District. He was named a Distinguished Alumni by the University of Calgary in 2001.



*Bill Eubank*

In 2010, Bill deployed for a year to Afghanistan, training Afghan National Police. Bill then returned to Alberta postings and retired in 2013. Throughout his career Bill was a volunteer first aid instructor and active in the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. In 2018 he was awarded the Governor General of Canada Caring Canadian Medal. He was active in the Royal Canadian Legion in Nanaimo, and of course here at VIMM.

This remarkable man will be missed.



# Gallantry and Devotion to Duty

*Continued from page 1*

On February 4, 1916, at the age of 32, John enlisted and was quickly promoted to sergeant. In the spring of 1917, he was in France with the 50th Battalion. On 25 August in the Battle of Lens, the 50th Battalion were engaging the German held Aloof Trench on the Lens - Arras Rd. Sgt. Austin showed great determination, leadership, and disregard for his own personal safety while leading his platoon to secure and consolidate the Aloof Trench. John was awarded the Military Medal and then promoted to Lieutenant in March 1918. After officer training in England, he returned to France with the 21st Battalion and was wounded on 11 August 1918. After convalescing in London, he returned to Calgary and worked for the CPR as a carpenter. His first wife passed away in 1941. John re-married, moved to Victoria, and raised another family. He passed away in 1958.



*John P. Austin was a carpenter and choir director in Calgary.*



*John and Roy Austin. Younger brother Roy was the first to enlist.*

The Nanaimo News Bulletin told the story of the finding of the medal by Liam. Interest by members of the public was high, and people called the VIMM to enquire about it, but more proof was needed. Once John Petrie was identified, the Nanaimo News Bulletin wrote an update early in the new year. VIMM staff were still wondering how the medal awarded to a Calgary man who had lived in Victoria came to be in Nanaimo in an encampment.

Margaret Sloat of Nanoose, just north of Nanaimo, saw the story and recognized her father's name. She was amazed and thrilled. The medal had been stolen from her home in 2019 during a break-in. Margaret was able to provide documentation and photos that confirmed her ownership. Then she added even more amazing information. Roy Austin's daughter, Joan Fayter, also lived on Vancouver Island and the two cousins were close.



VIMM then arranged to have a ceremony to return the medal to Margaret and her family. Copies of documents found in our research were also given to Margaret. We were also able to provide Joan with new information about her father, Roy. Both daughters said that neither of their fathers talked much about the war and were fine men – wonderful fathers they remembered with great fondness. Over a century of time separates us from the First World War, but here, time slipped away.

Among the documents VIMM gave to Margaret and Joan were copies of press clippings from the Calgary Herald in 1918 and 1919. One report speaks volumes about the kind of man John Austin was, and many were like him.

*“Perhaps it is the attribute of the real soldier to strenuously object to what might be construed as “blowing the trumpet.” Certain it is that a battalion of tanks could not draw from him one sentence for any newspaper as far as any personal achievements are concerned and perhaps many at the congregation of Crescent Heights Methodist Church were disappointed when after tendering him a reception, he merely referred to the good work of others and not himself.”* Calgary Herald, 16-12-1918

John Austin was the director of the church choir, in which his brother Roy also sang. Their daughters shared pictures of their fathers and Joan provided a copy of a secret diary that Roy kept as a POW. In one entry he wrote of his capture.



Margaret Sloat, Greg Devenish, Joan Fayter, Liam Robertson.



Margaret Sloat interviewed by CHEK News, Victoria

*“Behind the German lines, three days and three nights, nothing to eat but a pack of cigarette papers. My emergency rations had been foolishly given to some German prisoners.... Third night was espied by some Jerries coming up to the lines and taken prisoner. Very weak and miserable from rain and exposure, but had a powerful escort ... One soldier holding each wrist, two in front and two in the rear, and of course bayonets fixed.”*

The Vancouver Island Military Museum was proud to return the Military Medal to its rightful owner and along the way tell the story of two brothers who served in the Great War. “Lest We Forget”



Greg Devenish returns the medal to Margaret Sloan, with her family and cousin Joan looking on, along with Liam Robertson who found and turned in the medal

# A Strange Story – Number 1 Canadian Armoured Train

By Angus Scully

In early 1942 there was widespread fear of an attack on British Columbia by Japan. Prince Rupert was the western terminus of the CNR northern line. The rail line from Prince Rupert inland to Terrace along the Skeena River was particularly vulnerable – it ran close to the shore and there was no road. The river was navigable for 160 km inland from Prince Rupert. A landing force from the Japanese navy could easily attack this important link, isolate Prince Rupert, and cut the supply lines of American forces in Alaska. The Army moved in heavy artillery to defend Prince Rupert and the harbour, but the problem of the rail line itself remained. The solution was an armoured train.

An armoured train seems to be an attractive military weapon – rapid movement of heavy weapons with protection for the crews. Armed and armoured trains were used in the American Civil War, in the Franco-Prussian War, and Winston Churchill was captured in the Boer War while travelling on a British armoured train that was ambushed by the Boers. That incident reveals some of the limitations that the trains face – they can only go in two directions, on rails.

The Canadian solution involved moving artillery along the CNR line, with the added protection of an infantry company to engage a possible landing force and protect the guns on the train.



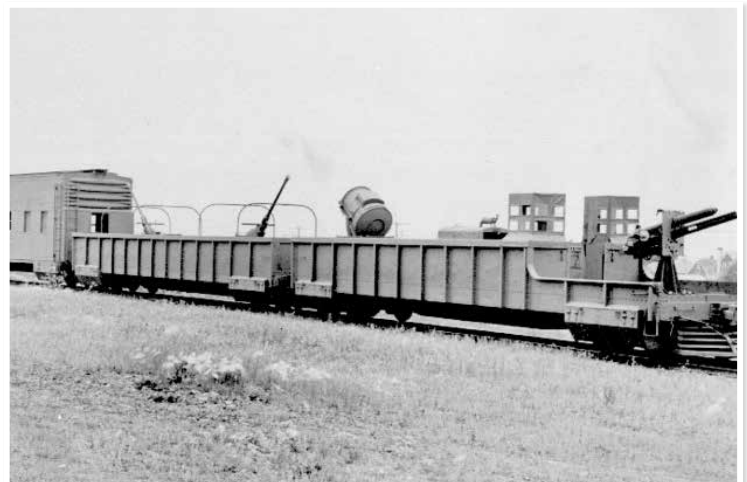
*There were four Bofors 40mm guns aboard No. 1 Armoured Train. The rail cars and engine had armour plate added to protect crews*

The armoured cars for the train were built at the CNR Transcona yard in Manitoba and then moved west. There were six armoured rail cars and a locomotive. Open gondola cars carried 4 Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft guns, two 75mm artillery pieces, and two searchlights. The infantry travelled in an armoured closed car. The orders for a patrol on 21 April 1943 list a typical manning.

**Armoured Train – 1 Officer, 4 Other Ranks**  
**21 Canadian Field Company – 3 O.R.**  
**H.Q. 14 Cdn Inf Bde – 1 Officer**  
**48 Lt. AA Bty RCA – 2 Officers, 41 O.R.**  
**1 Cdn. Fd Amb, RCAMC – 1 Officer, 2 O.R.**  
**Kings Own Regiment of Calgary – 1 Inf Coy**  
**“K” Section 8 Cdn Div Sigs. – 1 Officer, 1 O.R.**

The train was so heavy and the rail bed in such poor repair that a round trip patrol between Prince Rupert and Terrace took 13 hours, often moving at only 16 km/hr. The troops at first were poorly trained and would have been no match for a Japanese landing force. By the time training had improved, the Japanese threat had disappeared, and No. 1 Armoured Train was decommissioned in October 1943.

The armoured train was considered Secret, and people in Terrace and Prince Rupert later said that they did not know it existed. Given its size, it is likely many saw it and even commented about it among themselves.



*The train had two 75mm guns, borrowed from the US Army.*



# Reunion With de Havilland Chipmunk DHC-1 “038”

By Robert Muir, VIMM volunteer



*Robert Muir re-united with “038” in 2007. This Chipmunk (one of 250 made in Canada) entered service in 1956, and served at RCAF Station Fingal, Centralia, Dunnville, and Borden. It ended service in 1971, was restored in 1992*

I joined the RCAF on August 22, 1956 (age 19) and was initially sent to London, Ontario, to undergo an intensive selection process. Chosen for pilot training, I was posted to Centralia, Ontario, for 13 weeks of pre-flight ground school on course 5611. After graduating, I stayed at Centralia to begin my flying training at the No. 1 Primary Training school where I flew 25 hours in the de Havilland DHC-1 Chipmunk. This training ended late in December 1956, with a new posting to the No. 2 Flying Training School at RCAF Station Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, to further train on the North American Harvard Mark II and Mark IV.

Fast forward to Yuma, Arizona, February 24, 2007.

While spending the winter of 2006 – 2007 in Yuma, I attended an airshow at the Marine Corps Air Station there. To my surprise, while touring

the tarmac, I came across a beautifully restored de Havilland Chipmunk all painted in RCAF yellow, the well-known roundel, and the number “038” on the fuselage. It was on display during the airshow, along with several other restored older aircraft. I met the owner, Jack Pollack from the Phoenix area, and we discussed the fact that I had trained on Chipmunks in 1956 in Centralia when I was 20 years old. Jack took my picture with the Chipmunk. Later, on checking my logbook, I discovered that I had flown “038” on December 12, 1956, for one hour in the morning with instructor F/O Broadbent and for one hour solo later that same afternoon.

Jack later sent me some details of his ownership and invited me to go for a ride with him in “038” if I happened to be in the Phoenix area the next winter. On March 3, 2008, Jack picked me up at Falcon Field (FFZ), Mesa, Arizona, for a 40 minute flight in “038” – 30 minutes of which he kindly gave me the controls. How incredible it was, at age 71, to again fly “038”, only 51 years after my original flights in her. I can never thank Jack enough for that wonderful opportunity.



*Robert Muir again at the controls after 51 years.*

# DISPATCHES

from VIMM



## News Coverage About the Medal

The remarkable story of the lost and found medal has gained attention across the country. The Nanaimo News Bulletin is to be commended for running the first story, then continuing their coverage, which resulted in the finding of the medal's owner. Here is a link to their story

<http://www.nanaimobulletin.com/news/first-world-war-medal-found-in-nanaimo-returned-to-recipients-family/>

## The television coverage can be found at

<https://www.cheknews.ca/vancouver-island-military-museum-reunites-bravery-medal-with-family-948376/>

<https://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=2378261>

## Volunteers Pitch In

When Liam Robertson brought in the medal he had found, our volunteers pitched in to track down its owner. Greg Devenish did most of the research and pursued contact with other museums. His enthusiasm and effort made the difference. Pat Murphy helped with media relations and Angus Scully found some documents for the families. And all of this with COVID rules in place.

## New Volunteer

Welcome Ron Sayer.

## Volunteer Writes Book

In Our Youth: The Lives, Adventures, and Sacrifices of Early Canadian Flyers, by VIMM volunteer Angus Scully, will be published by Heritage House Publishing later this year. Part of the book is based on the story of Osborne Orr, first covered in this newsletter in 2020.

## Acquisitions

An officer's swagger stick, with the badge of the Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles engraved on the silver end. Dated before 1914. A commemorative watch for the RAF Goering Raid, 1943, (A modern watch.)



*Phil Harris has retired from running the VIMM medal shop for many years. Great work Phil, and thanks.*

## Museum Directors

**Roger Bird**, President

**Brian McFadden**, Vice President

**Phil Harris**, Treasurer

**Pat Murphy**, Armoury/Security

**Greg Devenish**, Secretary, Library

**Bruce Davison**, Volunteer Coordinator

**Bill Brayshaw**, Acquisitions

**Angus Scully**, Newsletter Editor