

# Veterans of the Winnipeg River

By Arlene Davidson

A project to have the names of fallen veterans memorialized by geographic features in the region has come to fruition for one local historian.

Vince Lopata of Pinawa has been an active advocate of Veterans for many years. He joined the Winnipeg Grenadiers as a cadet in 1961 and eventually he became Commanding Officer of the Cadet Corps.

Lopata's extensive research and interest in the Hong Kong Veterans and the 1st Battalion of the Winnipeg Grenadiers 'C' Force has resulted in several books that have memorialized the fallen soldiers and the horrific situations they found themselves in while fighting for freedom.

In 1972, the Manitoba Geographical Names Program Lands Branch announced a program to recognize decorated Veterans who lost their lives in the Second World War by naming geographic features in their honour. Despite the perimeters of the program having been expanded to include all Canadian Veterans, Lopata said that to date, only Manitoba and Saskatchewan have made any attempt to participate in the program.

"Over 20 memorials have already been established in the Whiteshell Park," said Lopata.

This year, Lopata received approval to officially

declare two islands on the Winnipeg River in memory of Veterans of The Winnipeg Grenadiers, 'C' Force. The islands are adjacent to the river banks of Pinawa, on the portion of the Trans-Canada Trail known as the Ironwood Trail.

The newly named features are French Island and Furey Island.

Lieut. Charles Duncan French from St. Boniface was killed on Dec. 19, 1941 by a Japanese fighting force while attempting to defend the Wong-Nei-Ching Gap in Hong Kong. He was 20 years of age.

H6384 Pte. Joseph Furey of Firdale, Man. was taken as a Japanese prisoner of war in 1943 and was killed in his sleep in 1944 when the poorly built POW camp he was housed in collapsed from the weight of a heavy snow at 2 a.m. on New Years Day.

In March, 2015 Lopata sent a second letter to the Manitoba Geographical Names Program Lands Branch after receiving word that the remains of eight soldiers discovered in Hallu, France were identified as soldiers from the 78th Canadian Expeditionary Force Battalion, Winnipeg Grenadiers.

"These soldiers were part of the Canadian Army's 100 day push against the German forces in France and Belgium (during the Second World War). This push started with the Battle



Photo by Arlene Davidson

Vince Lopata stands at a monument on the Ironwood Trail that identifies the location of Furey Island, erected in honour of H6384 Pte. Joseph Furey of Firdale, Man.

of Amiens on the evening of Aug. 7, 1918 and would last till Nov. 11, 1918 with the Armistice," explained Lopata.

The soldiers were killed and buried in shrapnel when a large German shell ex-

ploded above the trench and instantly buried them on Aug. 11, 1918. Capt. (Acting) James Edward Tait was a casualty in this battle, and was one of the few who were awarded both the Victory Cross for

most conspicuous bravery and initiative in attack and the Military Cross for distinguished and meritorious services in battle.

"This find was the largest single find of unknown Canadian soldiers since the Department of National Defence launched a casualty identification program in 2006," said Lopata who has since taken steps to recommend that an island located between the (Pinawa) marina and the sailing club be named after Captain (Acting) James Edward Tait.

In his March letter to the Manitoba Geographical Names Program Lands Branch, Lopata also inquired about a more recent casualty of the Afghan War, but was informed that a remote island in northern Manitoba had already been officially assigned to him.

"On Jan. 31, 2009, Sapper Sean Greenfield, aged 25, was killed when an IED hit the armoured vehicle he was in. The incident took place while driving in the Zhari district, west of Kandahar. He was with the 2nd Combat Engineer

Regiment, Royal Canadian Engineers based in Peta-wawa," said Lopata.

Greenfield was from Pinawa.

Despite the fact that Lopata's final request was denied, Lopata is determined to acknowledge this local Veteran. He will continue to work with the LGD of Pinawa and local partners to ensure that a memorial island is named for Greenfield in his former home.

Lopata is grateful to Marsha Sheppard and the Friends of the Ironwood Trail (FIT) in completing the project to erect the first two monuments. Sheppard submitted a funding request to the TransCanada Trail Foundation for the funding needed to create the stunning, engraved metal stands that provide information and photos of the honoured Veterans.

Lopata was awarded the Minister of Veterans Affairs Commendation in 2007, in recognition of his outstanding contribution in commemorating the service and sacrifice of Canada's Veterans.

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