

Britannia Boating Club in World War I

Our History - 1914 to 1918

The Summer of 1914 - The Quiet Before the Storm:

In the early summer of 1914, there must have been a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in our Club. We were thriving. We were regularly reported on in the press, had good boats for our rowers and paddlers, and by now a well-organized sailboat racing fleet.



The Steamer G. B. Greene alongside our Clubhouse. Thousands of Excursionists visited our Club each summer to view the aquatic events and take a ride on the Steamers

A full-page spread in the Journal that June highlighted how well our Club was doing in 1914. “The present Britannia Boat House Club occupies two club houses at Britannia-on-the Bay, at the end of the long pier and the other just above the rapids, the old clubhouse.

The old building is now used as storage for boats and the convenience of members living close to the club. The old building was erected in 1893 and the club moved to the new building, erected by the Ottawa Electric Company, in 1906.”

Everything, of course, was about to change, 15 days later on 28 June 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in Sarajevo, with what was known as the "shot heard round the world", setting an inexorable course towards the Great War.

Britannia's remarkable accomplishment success in becoming Ottawa's dominant centre of athleticism and a showcase of aquatic display was fuelled by the competitive spirit and energy of young men. As the dog days of the summer of 1914 passed, it must have become increasingly evident to those men that war was becoming inevitable and that personal duty would call almost all of them to volunteer.

There must have been a sense of foreboding at our Club that summer, when members began to realize that not only would our young men start to become absent as they started to volunteer, but that the aquatic activities in which they participated, that drew so many to our bleachers just could no longer be filled.



*Ken Slater, on his new boat, 'Skipper',
in the summer of 1914, enjoying an early evening sail with 3 friends.*

Little could Ken know of the fate that awaited him.

We can only surmise the topics of conversation taking place in the Skipper's cockpit: the inevitability of the pending war, the weighing of their options, and for which service they would volunteer.

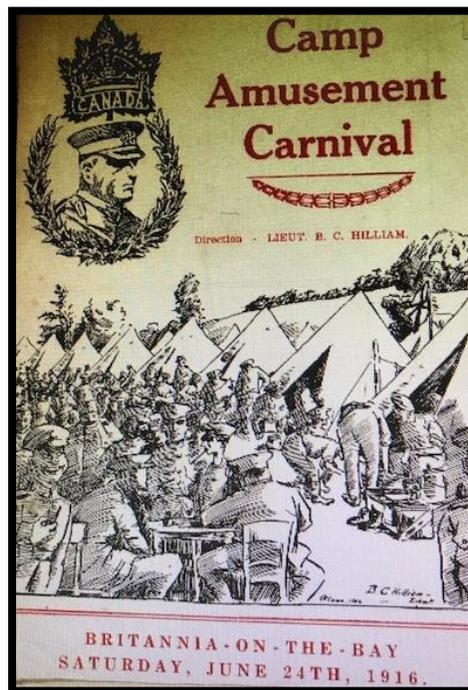
Soon it would become apparent that the boys would not be home for Christmas. Our Club was about to find out that almost everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. The War Years caught our Club in a pincer movement; that saw 500 of our young men go off to war, and a fire that destroyed our new clubhouse and with it, our financial underpinnings. By War's end Britannia would pay a very heavy price.

BBC's War Years 1914 to 1918

Don Kirby wrote in 1967 a historical sketch where described the effect of the outbreak of war. "...The good days of the Club were drawing to a close as it was 1914 and, when war was declared in August, the enlistment of members began to affect the Club's activities. Over 500 members (out of a total of 600) were at one time or another on active service during the four years. There were no members of the Sailing Division left who were eligible for service and activity was carried on by a few older members and a number of young people. From an article Don wrote in the 1918 edition of Yachting Magazine; "...out of about a total membership of about ninety the Sailing Division has given fifty-two of its members to the cause of freedom (on service). Of the forty left there is not one eligible for service overseas, all of them being either above or below military age, married men, or men who have been pronounced medically unfit for active service."

BBC's War Effort

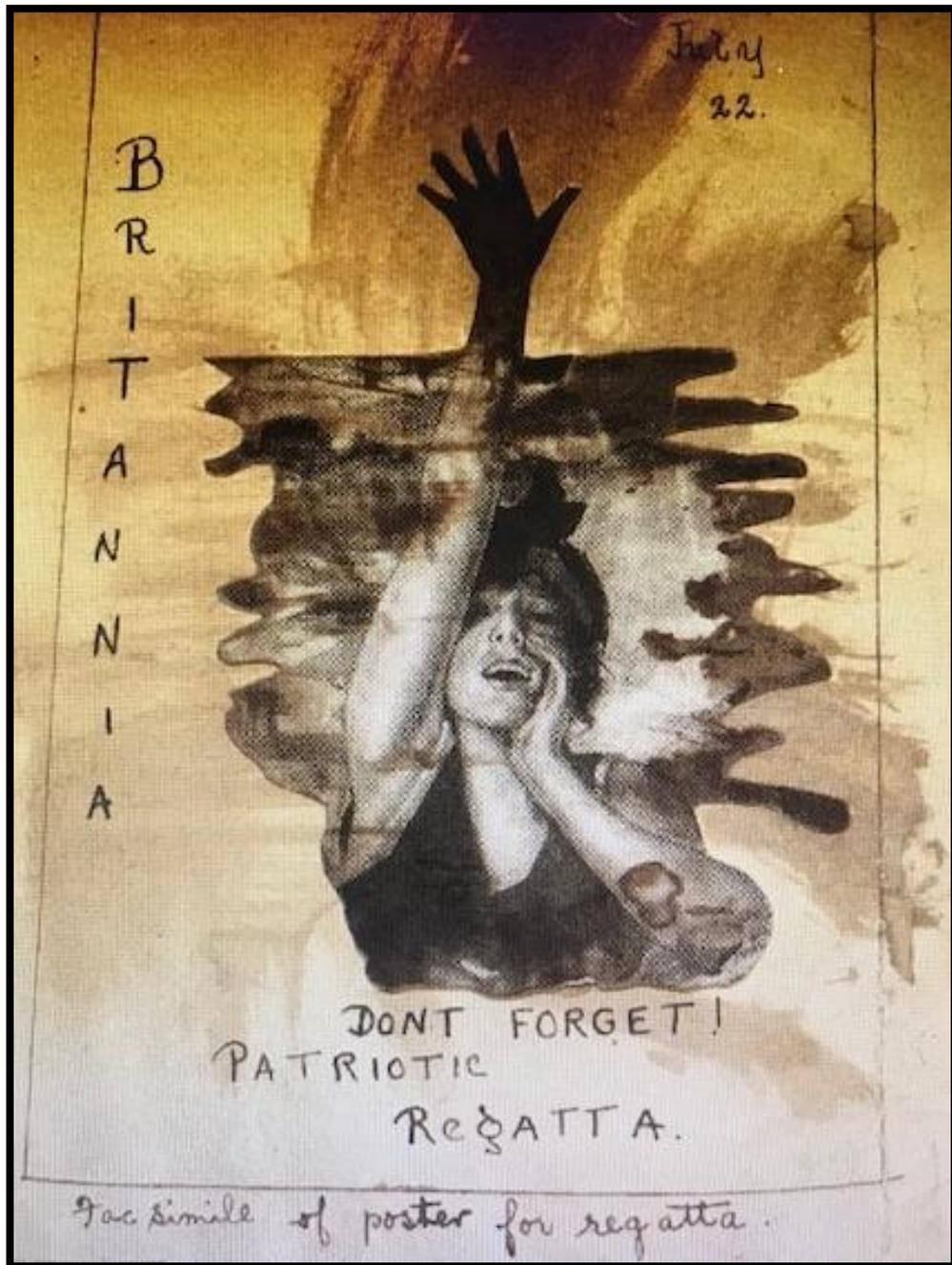
Florence (Floss) Westman, was a Ladies Associate Member at our Club. She compiled a scrapbook, entitled, "My Chronicle of the War," that covers the First World War. Floss was actively involved in the Soldier's Service Club, organizing entertainment of the soldiers, including programs for sporting events, theatre and concert performances, and church services. In 1916 she started putting together her scrapbook of her experience during the war from which the following is taken.



Poster promoting a soldiers' carnival at Britannia,

Her scrapbook offers a unique perspective from the Homefront - offering a glimpse into the life of a young, Canadian woman, and providing evidence of how her family and community were affected by war.

Floss, then in her early 20s in 1916, undertook the promotion and organization of our Club's Annual Regatta.



While the Regatta's events appear to follow those held in peacetime, most of the Club's young men by now, were away at war. Boy Scouts preformed the majority of the 'entertainment' activities. Some of these activities; the Gunwale race (jumping on the gunwales of a canoe and propelling it forward) and the Greasy Pole (trying to walk out on a greased horizontal pole till you fall off) can be seen on the web. The others such as the Hurry Scurry, Tub Race, Surf-riding, etc., are lost to history.

Shown below is the Program for our July 22nd 1916 Regatta

Programme .	BANG AND GO BACK RACE	
2.30—Single, 100 yard sprint.....	<p>Motor Boats will start in a line between the Gasolene tank and end of Pier at old club house and will run for three minutes towards Shirley's Bay. A return gun will be fired from one of the leading boats which will be the signal for a turn. Any boat finishing under 6 minutes will be disqualified.</p>	
2.45—Senior Tandem.....		
3.00—Tandem, 100 yard sprint.....		
3.20—War Canoe, ¼ mile.....		
3.35—Fours Rowing.....		
3.50—Senior Single.....	<p style="text-align: center;">BONNET HOP</p> <p>this evening at 8.30 p.m. Open to holders of Club-house tickets, Competitors, Officials and their Lady friends.</p> <p>Competitors should be on the Starting line sharp on time. Owing to the lengthy program no delay on the competitors' part will be tolerated. Each club is expected to appoint their own whipper in.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">VISIT THE TEA ROOM</p> <p>Meet your friends upstairs in the tea room. Refreshments are being served by the Soldiers' Service Club, both afternoon and evening.</p>	
4.05—War Canoe, 200 yards.....		
4.20—Eights Rowing.....		
4.35—Senior Fours.....		
The following events will be run during intermissions without reference to order in which they appear on programme:		
Tandem Broomstick Race, for Boy Scouts, pleasure canoes to be used		
Tail End Race, for Boy Scouts, racing canoes		
Crab Race, Tandem, for Boy Scouts, pleasure canoes to be used		
Swimming, 50 yards, Boy Scouts.....		
Upset Race.....		
Hurry Scurry.....		
Relay Race, 4 men, 200 yards.....		
Gunwale Race, Tandem, Boys.....		
Swimming, 50 yards, Boy Scouts, Members only		
Diving Contest, Boy Scouts, open.....		
Tub Race.....		
Swimming, 50 yards, open.....		
Tilting, Pleasure Canoes, 18ft. Sponsons barred		
Surf-riding.....		
Greasy Pole.....		
Bang and Go Back Race.....		
Exhibition of Life saving by Boy Scouts.....		

Recruiting On the Pier

As the war dragged on and casualties mounted, Britannia Pier was used as a recruitment station. The following is taken from the website

<https://britanniaottawa.wordpress.com/2017/01/31/britannia-at-war-wwi-the-207th/>

This is your flag---
Fight for it.



This slogan of the 207th has been made the title of a stirring song dedicated to the 207th Battalion—Read it —

Words by Miss Esther Knott.
Music by Donald Heins.

How would you care to see the old flag
down, boys,
Would you care to see her dragged in
the mire?
Could you bear to hear it said
That you crawled beneath the bed,
While the rest of us were standing up
to fire?
Would you care to hear the Kaiser was
in England;
That his feet was on the way to Old
Quebec?
Would you care to have the girls
With the pretty golden curls,
See you got a German bayonet in the
neck?
Chorus.
Come on the boys, this is your flag,
And it surely means to you
That the world expects to see your tag
And believes that you'll be true.
Come on, boys, this is your flag,
Show the red blood—and the blue—
For the men are white—
Who join the fight—
And surely you'll be true.

JOIN THE 207th NOW.

Lt.-Col. C. W. MacLean
Officer Commanding 207th Battalion.

Apply at the **Marquee—Connaught Square,**
or **Base Recruiting Office—Sparks Street—**or
any Branch 207th Office.
HINTONBURG—987 Wellington Street.
OTTAWA SOUTH—1123 Bank Street.
EASTVIEW—Cummings Bridge—opp. Bank of
Ottawa.
BRITANNIA PIER.



626

“The decision to call up the 207th as a new Battalion had been announced on Feb 8, 1916. The news may not have been as electrifying as first hoped as the announcement came alongside the first pictures of the smoking ruins of the Parliament Buildings which had just burned down;

Bringing the Battalion up to strength proved difficult as by 1916 the War had already sucked up a lot of the local men of fighting age. This forced Colonel MacLean to adopt some novel tactics, including buying four motor cars so officers could to travel to remoter locales, a recruiting office (Kiosk?) at/on Britannia Pier, and wilder ideas which were not even tried.

The 207th finally left Ottawa about Jan 20th, 1917; rather a long wait for those who had signed up almost a year earlier. They arrived in Amherst NS in early Feb in preparation to board ship and depart for Europe. Immediate departure was so imminent that they did not even bring their rifles; and then they waited, and waited and waited.

Just when departure seemed assured, scarlet fever broke out in the unit and on Mar 1st the entire Battalion was quarantined. Two weeks later a mumps epidemic swept through the ranks, then measles and black diphtheria a week after that; the Front must have started to look safer than Nova Scotia, or at least healthier.

Finally they left for Halifax on May 28th, set sail on June 2nd, and on June 11th it was revealed that the 207th had arrived safely in England. At which point the Battalion was immediately broken up and used to fill out the ranks of other units needing replacements, such as the 2nd Battalion, The Princess Patricia's Light Infantry among others.

The 207th never saw action and was disbanded on Apr 11, 1918”.

The Storm of September 1915

Don Kirby in his history puts this terrible storm into a wartime perspective: “In 1915 a most severe storm hit the Lake in mid-September and waves washed drifting logs over the pier where the Club craft were moored. The slips broke up and all the boats piled up in a heap in the whirlpool caused by the waves behind the pier. Practically all of the boats were damaged. Dr. Higginson's motor boat disappeared and was never seen again, despite the efforts of divers. This was another hard knock for an infant yachting group which was struggling to get ahead.”

Sailing and Racing During the War Years

The BBC members raced continuously throughout the war and the results were routinely reported in the papers. Perhaps the reporting was done as a diversion to the growing horrors of the Great War and to off-set the gruesome full-page spread casualty lists that were now becoming routinely printed in the papers. The following is a typical newspaper clipping from June 22, 1917

“Sloops Get Away

The sloops starting ten minutes later were so close together (at the start) that the Restless luffed the Velvet and the Riona off course making them jibe over and come again to the line. Blackadar of the Caleroo got away first, but was passed by the Restless, both in turn being passed by the Riona. These three boats hung closely together, making several tacks, until by the time the Fraser Mill Buoy was reached had overtaken all the dinghies except Frank Blackadar.”

The few members that were still in Ottawa during the War carried on as best they could and, in fact, the first organized Club cruise took place over the Labour Day weekend of 1916. It was to Armitages wharf and was such a success that Colonel Long donated a cup for the race to Armitages, to be held on Labour Day weekend. For many years these cruises were to continue and were the highlight of the Club season. From 1917 they were mixed affairs, complete with chaperones, Baskens' Landing one and a half miles beyond Armitages was the rallying point.”

The Loss of the G.B. Greene

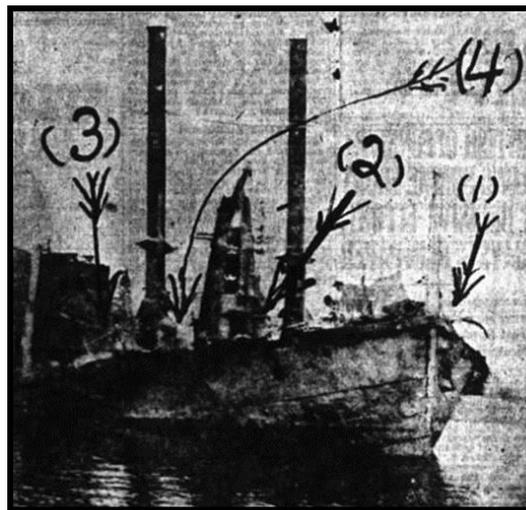
The front page of the Journal July 27, 1916 ran a story accusing the Germans of using poisoned shell at the front, but on that day a local story of the loss of the Greene was the headline. The front page headline ran;

“Fire Broke Out Suddenly About 1 O’Clock This morning While the Boat Tied to Dock - Crew Forced to take to water; retreat by Dock Cut Off; Men helped Save Woman Cook. The Steamer G. B. Geene known to thousands in Ottawa, was burned to the waters’ edge at its dock at Quyon between 1 and 2 o’clock this morning. Four of the crew were burned to death.

How the fire broke out no one knows. The crew of eight men and a woman were sleeping on the boat. The crew were suddenly awakened about 1 o’clock by the sound of fire roaring. They were hardly awake before the fire was sweeping widely over the whole boat and they could hardly see for the dense smoke. The fire was all on the dock side of the boat cutting off their escape in that direction.

“When news of the burning of the “Greene” reached the city this morning it spread like wildfire and half an hour after the receipt of the message it was the chief topic of conversation. Thousands of Ottawans used the boat every season, hundreds having summer homes along the river and the “Greene” was in most instances the quickest and most convenient means of transportation.

A gruesome photo showing the location of the fatalities and of the aftermath



The ‘New’ Clubhouse Fire - The Ottawa Journal August 30 1918

It was a sad day that the paper announced the loss of the ‘new’ Clubhouse by fire.



“The clubhouse of the Britannia Boating Club at Britannia-on-the Bay, along with about 200 canoes and many thousands of dollars of personal belongings of the members of the club, were destroyed by fire in less than three-quarters of an hour on Thursday afternoon. The origin of the blaze is as yet unknown, but is believed it was started by a lighted cigarette butt carelessly thrown in through the window of one of the lavatories by someone passing on the pier. The total loss is estimated at approximately \$50,000. And the greater portion of this about \$30,000 is suffered by the Ottawa Electric Railway Company.

The fire started at about 4.40 o'clock. Immediately upon detection of a small curl of smoke and flame near one of the lavatories in the north side of the clubhouse, lower floor, and in less than five minutes the large ballroom on the upper floor was blazing fiercely.

A pretty stiff north-west wind was blowing and it soon became evident that the efforts to save the club house were futile. However, a telephone message to the Ottawa Fire Department was sent in, and in 15 minutes, the chemical motor pump from No. 2 station with a crew of seven men in charge of Captain Potvin were on the scene.

In half an hour the clubhouse had been burned to the water's edge and one hundred feet of pier destroyed. The heat from the fire was intense, especially when the flames reached the racks in the lower quarters. There was absolutely no chance for the few members of the club, or the caretaker...to save any of the canoes or furnishings.

Below is the only known photo of the fire. The second story (dance floor) is being consumed and must have been pretty well gone by the time this photo was taken.



Note two men are untying a motorboat below the walkway



All that remains is the structural steel. Our burgee is still flying at the masthead of a boat on the other side of the pier.

The War's Toll

David Kirby finished his 1918 article in Yachting Magazine with: "The club also has been struck heavily by the hand of death. Ten of its members overseas have been killed and

Mr. Jack Hickson, who was untiring in his efforts to promote the sport of sailing, succumbed to an attack of pneumonia this fall.

Killed in Action

J. Cunningham
N.S. Macdonald
C. Saunders
R.W. Nichols
U. Seguin
R. Stata
D. Masson
G. Masson
W. Salton
S. McDonald

Prisoner of War

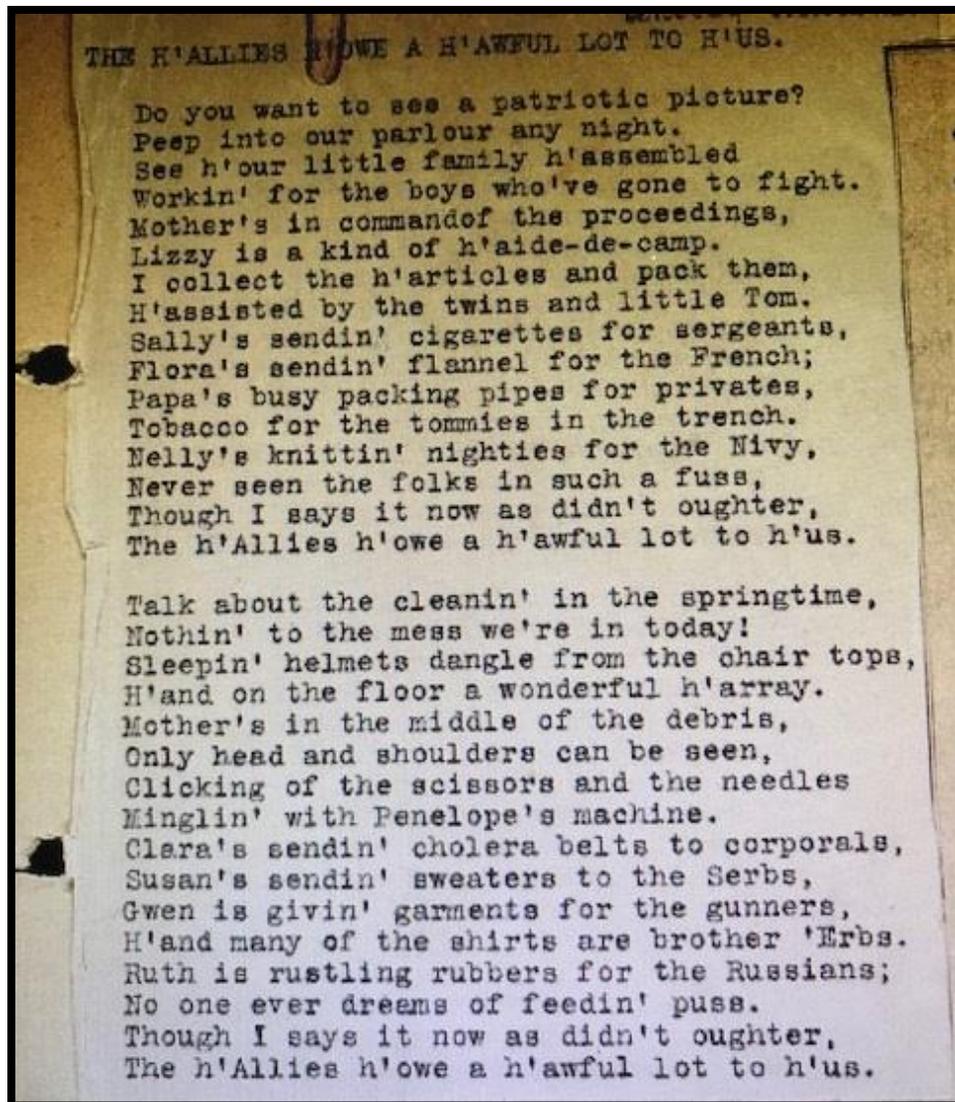
Ken Slater

Kirby's Yachting magazine article gave the 51 names of the Sailing Division Members that served in the war. ...Over 500 members¹ (of the overall club) were at one time or another on active service during the four years. There is unfortunately no record of the names of these members or of casualties. In 1918 the Club unveiled a service flag, about 12' x 24' with one large maple leaf in the centre with block letters showing the enlistment. Unfortunately no photo or copy of this flag can be found in the archives.

Don Kirby noted that the "The ravages of war wrecked all hopes of a continuation of the good times enjoyed before the war. The Clubhouse fire with the loss of equipment, trophies, records etc., this was the final touch and when members returned to civilian life after demobilization they found no old haunts to return to and many drifted off to other clubs and different forms of summer activity." There was now no steamer to draw excursionists to the pier, not much of a pier left, and no clubhouse from which to preform to the crowds.

Below is a poem, from Floss' scrapbook, as to how her family supported our troops in WW1

¹ The Club had only some 600 members listed by the summer of 1914.



The Britannia Boating Club Memorial Park

In 1946, a group of members got together, pooled their money, and bought the property at Baskins' Beach for \$700, which they named the Britannia Boating Club Memorial Park (BBCMP) for; "the express purpose of acquiring and developing a parcel of land as an up-river park in memory of those members of the Club who have fallen in the Empire's Wars".

War memorials are usually constructed in public areas by various levels of governments. Britannia has one of the very few, and perhaps the only, Memorial erected by a private entity to honor its own war dead. Our Memorial Carin is unique because it lies inconspicuously near a grove on our property, in the middle of our cruising ground. It is a very personal place to honour our guys who never made it home.

It is a tragic irony that our section of Baskins, which has been used by Britannia members as a recreation destination for the Civic and Labour Day weekends since our Club's inception, is a place where they never got to enjoy again.

Canada, then a country of 8 million, lost 60,661 men and women in the Great War. Canada's overall fatality rate of its servicemen and women was 10%. The ten men we lost from our Sailing Division was double the national average.