



Second World War veterans George Metcalfe, 86, John Slater, 88, and Don Stewart, 85, enjoy the view at the CNIB Lake Joseph Centre (above). The three are from the Sunnybrook Veterans Centre. Lee Irwin, 89, looks out over the lake (below).

# Veterans go to camp

Article by Dianne Park Thach / Photographs by Jan Pitman



It's a warm summer day in cottage country and campers are sitting out in Muskoka chairs, taking in the sun. A few sit in silence on the dock with their fishing rods sticking out, waiting patiently for a bite on their lines. A gentle, cool breeze is blowing off of Lake Joseph, and birds chirp in the treetops.

These special men and women are residents of the Veterans Centre at Sunnybrook Health Science Centre, and this summer marks the 15th year of the Veterans Summer Camp.

A group of 32 residents accompanied by 26 support staff made the drive from Toronto to Muskoka in three buses packed full of luggage,

wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes, and the buzz of anticipation that comes with the drive to cottage country.

The Veterans Centre at Sunnybrook is the largest veteran residence in Canada with 500 men and women living in two dedicated wings. The average age is 88, and 10 per cent of the residents are women. The majority served during the Second World War and 12 served during the Korean War.

The Veterans Centre creates a comradeship among residents, says operations director Dorothy Ferguson.

"They see other people that they have a com-



*War vets get a taste  
of Muskoka thanks  
to a special program*

mon bond with," she says.

That bond is also shared in the summer with veterans from Parkwood Hospital in London, Ontario, who also come to camp, this year with 19 residents and 11 staff.

"It really is an opportunity to give the veterans a chance to live not in the city or in an institution, to experience just a nice, peaceful and relaxing atmosphere," says Ferguson. "It's just wonderful to see everyone sitting and relaxing."

The annual camp excursion is funded by the Royal Canadian Legion's Tri-District Hospital committees ABC and DEF. The former is comprised of 172 branches spanning from Windsor to Niagara and north to Tobermory. The latter is made up of 122 branches, encompassing Toronto, Muskoka, northern Ontario and eastward to Napanee. Fort York Branch #165 also funds the program.

The idea for the summer camp came from the recreation therapy department of the Sunnybrook Veterans Centre. The CNIB camp on Lake Joseph was chosen because it is wheelchair accessible.

Don Stewart, president of the veterans and community residents council at Sunnybrook, says everyone is grateful for the Muskoka retreat because of the freedom and choice they have available during their time at camp.

"The veterans are really indebted to the Legion," he says.



**Eighty-nine-year-old Lee Irwin, a Second World War veteran who grew up in Muskoka, looks at old photographs and reminisces about the past.**

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This is his second summer as a camper, and he enjoys the tranquility of being lakeside, especially in the evening.

"It's like going to a five-star hotel. We've been sitting here without having the need to even talk to each other," says Stewart, who was in the navy and was stationed on the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships. "It's so peaceful," he adds, as he gazes out at the lake from the cabin's screened-in Muskoka room.

George Metcalfe, first vice president of the council, nods in agreement. Metcalfe, who was also in the navy, met Stewart at last year's camp and the men got along so well that upon their return, they ran for council together.

Fellow camper John Slater says it's his first summer at the lake with other veterans, but he is not new to the cottage life.

"It brings me back to when I had a cottage on Horseshoe Lake," he says, remembering the summers he spent by the water with his wife and children.

"I always said the drive to cottage country was going to God's heaven," says Slater, who was an army signaller during the war. "It's just like back in the old days. The air is so fresh," he adds with a big grin.

The three men talk happily about the breakfast they ate this morning, which included sausages, French toast, eggs, pancakes, and most importantly, maple syrup.

They also think about the evening – a casino night with gaming tables set up outside on the deck, hosted by the Ladies Auxiliary from the Legion's Gravenhurst Branch #302 and Bracebridge Branch #161. Providing musical entertainment is a Dean Martin look-a-like, who has been advertised on posters throughout the camp.

Camp for these veterans also includes storytelling and a sing-along by the campfire, led by a music therapist. An art therapist has a walking stick painting activity which is then customized to fit when they return to Sunnybrook.

Sign-ups for camp start in January, and new applicants have preference over those who have gone before. It gives them something to look forward to and, in some cases, work towards. Ferguson explains how one camper last year required more upper body strength in order to get around in a wheelchair.

"He spent all winter going to the gym every day, and he got himself strong enough to come," she says. "It also gives them something to look forward to for the next summer."

Lee Irwin is a first-time camper and he is already looking forward to coming back next year.

"It's a dream come true," he says, looking out at the lake. "It looks the same as the time when I was born. It hasn't changed at all."

Irwin is originally from Muskoka, and was born in a log home built by his father in Hekkla, a small community near Rosseau. He grew up on the family farm in Baysville where they kept horses that worked in the logging camps, and as a teenager he also worked as a cook at the camps.

He joined the army at 18, and when he



**Lee Irwin relaxes in a Muskoka chair overlooking Lake Joseph.**


returned he went to Aurora to work at a factory. After the factory closed he returned to Muskoka, working a variety of jobs.

Irwin fondly remembers going hunting with his father, and loved fishing and playing hockey. Coming to camp reminds him of a simpler time.

“It’s the simple things,” he says. “I’ve been counting the number of trains that go by before I go to bed,” he adds, as the horn of a passing train is faintly heard in the distance.

The veterans camp experience is unstructured, with opportunities for choice. It’s calming and therapeutic, giving restoration to the mind and body. This year there were 10 campers with dementia. Coming to camp is a positive experience for them because while they have poor short-term memory, they can easily recall memories of their past. Seeing the lake may remind them of their memories from being at the cottage.

Having fun and participating in various activities also makes the campers feel younger – last year the oldest camper was 103 years old.

Whether it’s a camper’s first or second time attending, they will all return to Toronto with the same summer camp experience: making new friends, enjoying the outdoors, and creating lasting memories. 



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