

James Melville, The man who brought the poppy to Canada

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*Brigadier J.L. Melville, OBE, MC, ED, CD – Canadian Military Engineers Colonel Commandant (1962-1973)

The poppy campaign arrived in Canada thanks to an Ottawa soldier, Brig.-Gen. James Melville. He was an engineer by trade who fought in both world wars. Melville worked in senior positions in federal departments dealing with veterans until he retired in 1958.

When Melville returned from fighting in the First World War, he was the director of an Ottawa workshop set up to employ disabled veterans. He got the manufacturing rights to the poppy symbol in the early 1920s so the lapel pins could be produced by those veterans. The profits from the poppies went to support vets and their families, as they still do today. “I promised . . . we would operate it on a non-profit basis,” Melville told the Ottawa Journal in 1978. “And I kept that promise.”

Melville’s descendants who live in Ottawa are proud of their family poppy connection. “He really was one of those one-in-a-million people,” says Melville’s granddaughter, Nancy Melville Lockwood. “He touched so many people’s lives. He had obviously done so much for the country, and contributed so much in a military way.” And, she adds, he was a wonderful grandfather, too.

Melville was a Scottish immigrant who loved his adopted country fiercely, she said. His five grandchildren would spend large parts of the summer with him at McGregor Lake in Quebec, where he followed the same ritual every year for opening the family cottage. “Every summer we would stand around the flagpole at his cottage. He would raise the Canadian flag and we would all sing O Canada. He was just so very, very proud to be Canadian, which is so interesting because he was an immigrant.”

Lockwood only found out about her grandfather’s role in the poppy campaign after he died, when she was reading a binder of information about his distinguished career that included a newspaper article about the poppy campaign. “I was kind of stunned that nobody had ever told us that.”

(*) Brigadier Melville was Honorary Colonel Commandant of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers from 1948-1962. His appointment title was changed to Colonel Commandant on 20 September 1962 and he continued in that capacity until 1968. He was so respected that, upon Unification of the three services, he continued to act in the capacity of Colonel Commandant during the evolution of the Canadian Military Engineers.