

GRANATSTEIN: National park 'natural fit' for memorial statue

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Historian Jack Granatstein backs the controversial Never Forgotten War Memorial project slated for Green Cove in Cape Breton Highlands National Park. (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

Nova Scotia is home to incredible stories, and has long played a central role in Canada's military history.

It was the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) — composed of citizen soldiers from Sydney, Yarmouth, New Glasgow, Truro and Amherst — that took part in some of the most important battles of the First World War. The 25th distinguished themselves in devastating battles at the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Passchendaele and The Hundred Days. This last stands as Canada's most decisive military achievement ever — a sustained chain of victories that brought the Great War to a much faster end.

Over the course of the Second World War, the province served as a hub for training, deployments, and maritime supply traffic that sustained the European effort.

Sydney harbour was a gateway to the U-boat battles in the St. Lawrence, a repair station for ships, and a heavily fortified outward-facing outpost from which convoys crossed the North Atlantic.

In Halifax, hundreds of thousands of Canadian military personnel were channelled through Pier 21 to the European front. The city was an essential way station for Allied ships that fought and won the Battle of the Atlantic — and a key arrival point where thousands of refugees and evacuees shed the turmoil of war and were welcomed to Canada to make new lives.

Tens of thousands of our own, though, left Nova Scotia's shores, never to see their homes again. Their bodies lie in hundreds of cemeteries scattered across the globe, disappeared under the earth of foreign battlefields, or lost deep below the oceans' waves.

It is essential — for the safeguarding of our history and for the sake of our future — that these sacrifices be recognized, preserved, and remembered. The new Never Forgotten National Memorial will do exactly that. And for the reasons laid out here — and for many more that were not — Nova Scotia is an ideal location for it. What's more, the Cape Breton Highlands National Park is a natural fit.

National parks not only protect our natural history — through dozens of Parks Canada interpretive centres, they house and display countless stories of Canada and its people. These places purposefully give Canadians dedicated space to reflect, to learn, and to appreciate and enjoy the land we are fortunate to call our own.

I have been proud to support this multi-year project. I have been equally proud to see the partnership, collaboration, and teamwork between the foundation and Cape Bretoners, including the dedication and enthusiasm of local supporters like Lisa MacLeod. Together, excellent work has been done. I know that this will continue.

I know, too, that great diligence has also been applied throughout. A consulting firm has done an environmental assessment, public community meetings have been held, and feedback has been sought and received through a standing government consultation process. The memorial will no doubt become greater still thanks to that input.

All of this effort has occurred because of a single shared belief: so many Canadians died in service to this stunningly beautiful country they never saw again. We must remember them.

Protecting the past, by telling our stories and preserving our natural heritage, requires work. We can do both.

Historian J.L. Granatstein is a fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, a retired member of the Canadian Armed Forces, and former CEO of the Canadian War Museum. He is an honorary patron of the Never Forgotten National Memorial Foundation.