

Memorial moving to Orangeville in honour of late volunteer firefighter Dan Little

Written By SAM ODROWSKI

Canada's very first memorial for firefighters had a decommissioning ceremony at the former Gravenhurst Campus of the Ontario Fire College on July 13.

With the Gravenhurst Campus shut down, the Ontario Firefighters' Memorial that was built there in 1988 needs a new home, and that new home will be in Orangeville. The relocation, taking place this fall, is in honour of late volunteer firefighter Dan Little, who served with the Orangeville Fire Service from 1949 to the year he passed, 1989.

Little, who grew up in Shelburne, conceived the idea of creating a memorial after seeing one at the Michigan State Firefighters Conference, which he attended annually for 14 years. Once the idea was formed, Little worked tirelessly over six years to turn his dream into a reality, as a tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of firefighters who have died in the line of duty.

"We are incredibly honoured that the Firefighters Memorial will soon call Orangeville home. This monument is a powerful tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of firefighters who gave their lives in service," said Orangeville Mayor Lisa Post, who attended the decommissioning ceremony.

"Its move to Orangeville holds special meaning, as former firefighter and Orangeville resident Dan Little was instrumental in its creation. With the closure of the Ontario Fire College, it truly feels like the memorial is coming home. We are committed to honouring that legacy with the care and respect it deserves."

The monument will be relocated to a visible location along Riddell Rd. in Orangeville.

"We are prepared to create a very safe, ongoing space, where families can come and recognize the sacrifices of their family members, where we can all come together to pay tribute to all the firefighters who have come before [us]," said Mayor Post.

Orangeville Fire Chief John Snider shared a speech at the decommissioning ceremony, reflecting on the monument and Little's efforts to bring it to fruition.

"We stand here today at an important moment in Ontario Fire Service history. A moment where we're here to gather to bid farewell, to an important symbol that has graced the grounds of the Fire College since it was unveiled in 1988," said Snider. "The firefighter memorial is not just a physical structure, but a poignant tribute that resonates with the unsung heroism, courage and selflessness embodied by firefighters across our province. This monument serves as a steadfast reminder of those firefighters who are no longer with us."

He added that he would be remiss if he did not acknowledge and celebrate the passionate advocacy that created the monument in the first place.

"It was the dream of a devoted volunteer from Orangeville Fire, Dan Little, whose vision and perseverance ensured this tribute even exists," Snider said.

Little's first day as a volunteer firefighter happened by accident, but nonetheless, it marked the beginning of his four-decade-long role at the Orangeville Fire Service.

"Dan was driving his transport truck through Orangeville when the fire chief commandeered it to block traffic at a fire," Snider recalled. "From that day forward, Dan was a volunteer firefighter."

‘He was a volunteer firefighter by mistake, but the next 41 years were definitely not a mistake, and we cherish every year that he served with us,’ Snider added.

Dan Little's son, Robert Little, attended the decommissioning ceremony and said his family is ‘ecstatic’ about the memorial moving to Orangeville.

Robert remembers the many years Little spent in meetings, on phone calls and travelling to other communities to ensure the families of firefighters would have a place to pay their respect. He recalls Lt. Governor Lincoln Alexander sitting at the kitchen table of their Elizabeth Street home in Orangeville, discussing plans for the monument.

With no monument for firefighters existing anywhere in Canada before 1988, Little built the very first one.

Reflecting on Little's dedication to the Orangeville Fire Service, Robert remembers many Christmases and holidays where he wasn't at the dinner table because he was out extinguishing fires and saving lives.

His mission was to keep people safe.

‘Volunteer firefighting is much more than just the firefighter itself. So often, the volunteer firefighter embraces and touches the entire family, whether it be missed birthdays or holidays or those events that are interrupted by the siren or the pager going off,’ said Snider.

During his remarks at the decommissioning ceremony, Snider thanked the Little family for the impact the memorial has had on the fire service over the years.

‘Thank you to all that are here today for being part of this endeavour, for your support and for keeping the spirit of every firefighter alive in our collective hearts,’ he said.

Former Orangeville fire chief and Orangeville councillor Andy Macintosh also attended the ceremony and reflected on his time working with Little.

‘Dan had seen a need. He realized there was not a fitting tribute for Ontario firefighters, both past and present. So, it began his six-year journey to correct this. His countless hours of meetings, travelling, phone calls and fundraising finally paid off on Oct. 2, 1988, with the dedication of this very fitting monument.’

Macintosh added, ‘This monument will have a great home in Orangeville. It's almost as if, in a way, it's actually coming home. I would like to thank the Fire Marshal's Office and all the people that will be involved in the moving of this monument.’

Gravenhurst Fire Chief Jared Cayley spoke at the decommissioning ceremony as well. he noted that for the last four years, the monument has sat outside of the public's eye. The Gravenhurst location of the Ontario Fire College (OFC) closed down on March 31, 2021.

‘The decision to close the OFC grounds left it in limbo, no longer to be seen, to inspire or to promote the remembrance of those who have gone before,’ said Cayley. ‘Soon, it will rest in a new home, a new site from which to remind the next generation of firefighters what this job really means. A public site where its visibility to the community around it will remind them of what it takes to answer the pager, the gong or the bells.’

‘May it stand straight and tall for many years to come,’ Cayley concluded.

After the OFC closed the Gravenhurst Campus, the Little family expressed interest in having it preserved in Orangeville.

?I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dan's family for Dan's commitment to the fire service, for his support in establishing this memorial, and for the efforts to preserve Dan's wishes,? said Deputy Fire Marshal Jon Pegg, during a speech at the decommissioning ceremony.

?Bringing this memorial home to Orangeville will help the community and the province continue to honour his commitments to his neighbours.?

Gravenhurst Mayor Heidi Lorenz also shared a few words at the ceremony.

?I would be remiss to say we aren't a little disappointed to see the monument leaving Gravenhurst, but I know it will be in terrific hands in Orangeville, under the care of my counterpart, Mayor Lisa Post and her council and staff,? she remarked. ?I want to thank the little family for coming here today and say that I'm grateful for the opportunity to pass along the monument.?

The monument stands at eight feet tall, on top of a two-foot cement base. It is made of black granite from India at a cost of \$125,000 when it was installed in 1988.

Saunderson Monuments Co., based out of Orillia, built the monument. The company also made the nine-foot-tall bronze Terry Fox monument that sits near Thunder Bay in 1982.

Little's dedication to his community and country extended beyond his role at the Orangeville Fire Service. He served as a Canadian Armed Forces member in the Second World War and has volunteered with countless mutual aid associations as well as the Ontario Firefighters Association, where he held several roles, including president.

He is remembered by the community for his dedication to service and keeping Dufferin County residents safe.