

BROCK'S BANTER: When Canada was a sprightly 46

By Brock Weir

Amid the excitement and all-round whirl leading up to Canada's 150 Celebrations, which kicked off Friday with the 150th Anniversary of Town Park and continued right through to the following evening's fireworks, I was saddened to learn of the death of one of Aurora's eldest surviving veterans just shy of the grand old age of 104.

Allen Griffiths was born in the United Kingdom and served in the Royal Navy through multiple theatres of war. Having first met him when he was a young lad of 99, I was immediately struck not only by his good humour, but the fact he was always so forward-looking.

Although he told stories of the past, with some memories dating back to the final years of the First World War with enthusiasm and relish, he never struck me as one who yearned for what some people so tritely ? and erroneously ? describe as ?the good old days.? Rather, he was looking to share the lessons he learned in the past, particularly his experience in war, to make sure they never happened again.

In my experience, people of his age often long for that mythical simpler time of their youth ? but not him. His rose coloured glasses were broken in the submarines he served, often in times of extreme peril, and he never bothered, or seemed to want to have them fixed.

And, with that, we can be grateful.

So, I was saddened not particularly by the loss of someone at such a grand and venerable age ? entering this world when Canada was just a young slip of a 46-year-old girl is certainly a life well lived ? but by what he took with him and the lessons we still had to learn.

Back as he excitedly prepared to mark his century, he sat down with me for a lengthy interview, which ultimately turned out to be one of our most popular articles since I joined The Auroran back in 2009.

Here are some excerpts, and Godspeed!

Swathed with scarves around his head and neck, soot strategically placed on his face and arms, and brandishing a sword like a self-described ?vagabond?, Allen Griffiths found himself on shipboard amongst the enemy.

It was the late 1930s, the Spanish Civil War was still raging, the Germans were interfering, but the Second World War had yet to break out.

As a stoker on board the ship, he clearly remembers popping out of his hold and exclaiming, ?Cookie, have you heard the buzz?? Undoubtedly it's a quote that would not be out of place in the middle of a 1930s sea battle and indeed the ship was going down. Water was coming on board and his fellow seamen were quickly jumping overboard to save themselves.

They were not, however, in danger just yet.

While Mr. Griffiths was indeed a stoker on board the ship, actively serving with the navy, this was all in good fun. The filmmakers who had drafted him and many of his other shipmates into ?extra? roles in the 1937 film ?Our Fighting Navy? (later re-titled ?Torpedoed!?) had taken over the HMS Royal Oak and turned it into one of the ?enemy? ships in the film.

Memories around the filming of ?Our Fighting Navy? are some of the happier ones associated with the HMS Royal Oak. Shortly after he moved onto another ship, the Royal Oak was torpedoed by the Germans in the early days of the Second World War, killing 833 people on board.

?She never fired a g?damned shot,? says Mr. Griffiths. ?She was lying up in the north of Scotland supposed to be safe as nobody could get in because of the rocks and the sand, but that all disappeared over the years because nobody had surveyed it. The German submarine came in just as smooth as you like at midnight, fired five or six torpedoes on it and she went down all hands.?

He was born on the border of England and Wales in 1913, less than a year before the outbreak of the First World War.

His father was a policeman who served in the Boer War, while his mother served as a nurse, treating some of the names that would have filled the newspapers of the day. When war eventually broke out in Europe, it was a break felt very much on the home front.

His father was back in service, heading overseas with his wife, back in her nursing uniform. While they served, their sons were taken into an orphanage under the auspices of the local police authority where they were treated to conditions which were commonplace at the time, but would be shocking to today's society.

?I was a bed wetter,? he says with a laugh. ?This Mrs. Murray used to come to us, get me by the hair and shove my nose it, then lock me in a cupboard while she made the beds. I got so scared of going into bed that I would lay on the floor. I would get so cold, I

would have to jump back into bed and then wet the bed again.?

Relief finally came with the Armistice in 1918. When peace was declared, he remembers celebrating by getting dressed up as a soldier, complete with his arm in his sling, to parade for Princess Marie Louise of Schleswig-Holstein, one of Queen Victoria's more eccentric granddaughters who was visiting the village.

Finally, their mother came to pick them up, but she was not accompanied by their father. He was felled on the field in 1916.

?When he was shot, they sent his clothes home in a coffin,? says Mr. Griffiths. ?Three or four coins fell out of his pocket. I still hang onto the farthing. The penny with the bullet hole in it was given to my brother, Jack.?

Settling back with his family, Mr. Griffiths' story turns to village life, heading to his grandfather's tenant farm, which his family had on a 99 year lease from the local ?squire.? From cleaning the squire's boots, he eventually rose through the ranks to become a groom, preparing horses for the local hunts.

Those halcyon days came to an end with the death of the squire. Looking for work, he got a job as an errand boy for a wholesale grocer, eventually delivering sugar throughout the Welsh valleys before he joined his young friends in looking for work with the Navy.

It was at a time when Hitler wasn't yet seen as the threat he would soon be.

After one of his first missions, he and his crew were greeted back in Plymouth in a public celebration by King George V, accompanied by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII and Duke of Windsor), who inspected the ranks. It was a very big deal and looking back, he suspects it was all part of the propaganda machine to face the challenges ahead.

And as someone who had just finished laying a minefield on the seabed with his crew as Neville Chamberlain triumphantly flew back in England waving a piece of paper declaring ?peace in our time?, there were certainly many challenges awaiting Mr. Griffiths. For the continuing story,

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