

BROCK'S BANTER: The 200 Club Revisited

By Brock Weir

I had wondered if it would lose its impact this year.

New initiatives sometimes lose their lustre after the initial period of buzz, the novelty wears off, it becomes more or less 'white noise' over time.

These thoughts were in my mind a few days ago as I strolled from our office just south of Yonge and Wellington to a meeting a block or two away at the Aurora Public Library.

Municipal employees were hard on the job, their hands working in a flurry from the top of a cherry picker as they removed the celebratory 'Aurora' banners, complete with multicoloured fireworks, from downtown lampposts, replacing them with banners depicting Canada's servicemen and service women, a tribute spearheaded by the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion as well as the Town itself.

Some are faces I have never seen before, often sponsored in place by families who have lost a loved one in a theatre of war, grief never dulled by the passage of time.

Others have been sponsored by families extraordinarily proud of the service their grandparents, parents, siblings or gave to this country and lived to tell the tale with an equal measure of pride.

Still more are honoured by local companies and organizations for whom their valued employees are either recent veterans or still-serving members various branches of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Each banner has a story to tell, and each story packs its own unique punch.

After the initial year, however, I wondered if this would be a 'living' documentation of our community's association with service. As mentioned above, once programs like these are in motion for a year or two, they tend to lose traction and become static, trotted out for all too short a time, one small window in just one month, with fading glimmers of recognition.

I am glad to say this is not the case as the initiative has lost none of its powerful message and continues to add new faces.

One particular face this year caught my attention.

Although the face of Albert Arcand graced the banner program in its inaugural year, my eyes were drawn upwards for different reasons this year.

A regular fixture at Aurora's various Remembrance Commemorations over the years, be it the annual Remembrance Dinner hosted each year by the Aurora Legion (this year's event was held this past Saturday) or the services at the Cenotaph, his passing earlier this year leaves a noticeable hole in the proceedings.

As someone who regularly covers these events, it was always such a pleasure to speak with him.

He was one of the first local veterans I wrote about when I joined The Auroran back in 2009, speaking with him at that year's Remembrance Day services as he helped a young girl place her poppy pin on the monument right after the commemorative service. The sight of this nonagenarian who had served his country so proudly interacting with so young a child for whom the very concept of war was a blessedly foreign one, moved me. It wasn't just the sight of an intergenerational exchange, but the way they seemed to have an immediate connection. Although the concept of war was still too complex for her to fully understand, her sense of gratitude was clear.

And it was palpable.

The scene unfolded year in and year out with Mr. Arcand and the growing band of young admirers he encountered each year, regardless of venue.

Each year, at the Remembrance Dinner, I had my own little quirk. I took particular pleasure in grabbing a photo of Mr. Arcand along with Allen Griffiths, the Legion's two eldest veterans.

From my perspective, in addition to their extraordinary service, having these two gentlemen together represented something else extraordinary to me: with each passing year zeroing on 200 years of collective experience they were able to share with the community.

We finally got our shot at the 2015 dinner when Mr. Griffiths was a spry 103 and Mr. Arcand a sprightly 98.

Along with Mr. Griffiths' death this past summer, that unique chapter is now closed and the number of veterans who are able to share their firsthand experiences within our community have dwindled down to a handful or two.

Every time I had the occasion to speak to the family of a veteran, they always marvelled over how their father, grandfather, mother or grandmother rarely spoke at home about their wartime experience, if ever. Yet, put them in a room full of young people who are

going to be the torchbearers in the next generations, these stories flowed easily and had an indelible impact.

But these interactions, thanks to Father Time, are becoming increasingly rare.

In recent years, the Legion has spoken of the reluctance some comparative youngsters ? veterans and service personnel from recent conflicts ? have in becoming actively involved with the Legion.

I hope the veterans of today soon recognize the need to become involved and tell their stories.

There will come a day when schools will be hard-pressed to find someone to share the always timely message of ?Never again? with the kids who can realise that dream.

But that doesn't have to be the case.

I leave you with what I wrote this time last year when Mr. Arcand watched his banner be hoisted anove Yonge Street:

Paying no attention to the chilly weather, Arcand was joined by his son Claude, daughter-in-law Brenda Braendel, and grandson Stephane, all of whom looked up to the same spot: a photo of Albert, dapper in his Canadian Army uniform, looking down at them.

?It is really wonderful,? said Albert. ?I didn't expect anything like this. It is thoughtful of the Legion to organize this, but I don't know if everyone will appreciate seeing me young on the street!?

His family, however, are full of appreciation, having sponsored his banner.

?My father has always been a role model for me,? says Claude. ?He was a career soldier who served for over 20 years. I remember when he was away for an entire year in Laos as a child I missed him terribly, now I just want to honour him wherever I can.

?This is to honour this great individual who has been an exemplary person with not only his professional life and serving our country, but also his personal life and his family,? added Braendel. ?He has been a role model for myself and our children.?

Stephane said he agreed, noting it was a celebration of the past and present.

?It just makes me so happy to see it and that other people get to see it too,? he said. ?I hope people really get to understand how many people are really involved. Even if this is just a small community, there are people out there, and some of them are still here like my grandfather, and they should be honoured. We should be grateful to these people.?