

BROCK'S BANTER: The Good Old Duke

By Brock Weir

While some people might like to get their birthdays over and done with, putting the annual reminder that time marches on well in their rear view mirror, others like to extend the party over a few days.

Then there are some people who have multiple birthdays foisted upon them.

A couple of weeks ago, many Canadians loaded up the car for the May Long Weekend, conscious of the fact it was Victoria Day but, in reality, were probably far more concerned with getting the unofficial start of summer off on the right foot, or get the pool finally open after a long stretch of ridiculously unpredictable weather. Yet, it was still officially Victoria Day and, in Canada, the Queen's Official Birthday.

It was hot on the heels of a pretty spectacular, yet relatively homey, celebration near Windsor Castle on the anniversary of the actual day The Queen made her debut, complete with a walkabout and a drive through the crowds in a spiffy new open-topped electric vehicle that allows the monarch to be seen by a maximum number of people, all without having to worry about members of the public being gassed out by exhaust fumes from her sweet new ride.

Victoria Day in Canada was marked by statements from dignitaries, a congratulatory message passed by Aurora Council, and fireworks in local backyards and spectacular municipal displays in other communities.

This week, however, is the main event of the celebration.

On Friday, the Queen and the indomitable Duke of Edinburgh are set to drive through the streets of London for a special celebratory service at St. Paul's Cathedral, kick-starting a series of parades, street parties, and other fun stuff set for the rest of the weekend to make the Queen's milestone 90th Birthday one to remember.

However, few will take stock of the fact that, as the Queen makes the ride to the iconic London landmark, the gent sitting next to her, on that very day, will be celebrating his own remarkable milestone: his 95th birthday.

Although there have been a few mild health scares for Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, over the last few years ? including as recently as last week where, on doctors' orders, he was unable to make a trip to Scotland's Orkney Islands to mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Jutland, he has always struck me as a man of remarkable vigour for a man of his years.

Just over three years ago, I had the privilege ? along with Mayor Geoff Dawe ? of seeing Prince Philip in action from relatively close proximity on his whistle-stop visit to Toronto to mark the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of York, a presentation which included participation from Aurora's own Queen's York Rangers.

He might have had a black eye, but he was brimming over with energy and seemed particularly engaged with the people he met. His contributions to the Commonwealth and, indeed Canada, are always brought home to me in ways that are sometimes unexpected.

Take, for instance, the Aurora Street Festival this past Sunday.

While going past a long series of booths set up by the Region of York near the south end of the Festival route, I had the chance to chat once again with Aurora High School student Chen Liu, whose organizing committee so recently hit the heights of fundraising with the school's second annual Relay For Life.

He made an aside that I was a ?busy guy,? but I pointed out that he is no slouch in that department either, organizing the Relay, balancing life with school work, and working on completing the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, which was founded by Prince Philip over 60 years ago to provide students from around the Commonwealth with an opportunity to learn outside of the classroom and achieve their best in sports, fitness, contributing to the community, and getting off their duffs for an adventurous journey.

Chen proudly told me he had completed his Gold levels ? the pinnacle of the Awards Program ? and is now just waiting for his save-the-date to receive it. He's hoping it might be presented by the former Kate Middleton, now Duchess of Cambridge, but, really, who wouldn't?

Back in 2012, as The Commonwealth was gearing up for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, I wrote a piece called ?In Appreciation of the Duke,? pointing out that while the Queen was rightly the focus of the international celebration, it too was the Duke of Edinburgh's Diamond Jubilee, his 60th Anniversary of being the Royal Consort and second in command.

?Unfortunately, instead of focusing on his contributions to society, his role in the Commonwealth, or even his celebrated and derided ?gaffes?, we heard mainly about his recent health woes and whether he would be able to celebrate the anniversary in grand style alongside his wife,? I wrote at the time. ?All too often the Duke of Edinburgh is dismissed almost as simply an added attraction to his wife.

While the Duke of Edinburgh has been by the Queen's side for each of these sixty years, he has also had to walk at least one step behind her for the duration. On her sudden accession to the Throne, he was all but thrown into the deep end. Fully expecting to carry on with his naval career, he then had to carve out a role for himself as there was no specific constitutional role set out for him.

Since that time, he has spearheaded innumerable projects ranging from architectural and design initiatives, educational programs, and efforts with the World Wildlife Fund. He is the patron of innumerable groups and organizations ranging from the College of Family Physicians of Canada to Upper Canada College, and from the Naval Officers' Association of Canada to the Dawson City Museum and Historical Society.

Above all of these roles, his greatest achievement may just be found in the award which bears his name.

At the time of the publication, over 500,000 teens and young adults had achieved the award at various levels, and that number has only grown through people like Chen.

The summer before the Diamond Jubilee, Aurora residents Sarah Knowles, Augusta White, and Jade White received their Duke of Edinburgh Gold Awards from Prince Edward.

It was clear speaking to these recipients shortly after receiving the award from the Duke's son that they came away from the experience not just with the unique memories that stemmed from their own personal experience, individual experience, and life lessons from their activities and involvement as a collective.

After the Duke of Edinburgh, I am going to continue on in my community service and just show how much it helps people that are less fortunate or helps the community," said Jade. "I am definitely going to carry that on through my life and try to convince other people to get more into community service and continue that through high school."

Even if a fraction of the 500,000 Canadians that have participated in the program, let alone the seven million worldwide, share Jade's sentiment deriving from the idea that the Duke of Edinburgh has fostered and cultivated over five decades to what it is today, Prince Philip's contribution to Canada, the Commonwealth, and the World is incalculable.