

D-Day veteran honoured with Jubilee Medal



By Brock Weir

As a young man growing up in St. Thomas, ON, Les Pengelly says he and his fellow youth simply did what they were told.

After hearing a broadcast of Hitler on the radio in 1941 promising his people 'Europe today, tomorrow the world?', they didn't necessarily have to be told anything more. They took this as a call to arms and swiftly volunteered to defend King and Country.

Joining the Royal Canadian Navy, his tour of duty eventually took him to serving in the English Channel when they got the call to head to Normandy on June 6, 1944.

As a veteran of D-Day, Pengelly, who turns 94 this Friday, was honoured by York Regional Police in a ceremony in Aurora on Thursday, receiving the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal from former police chief Julian Fantino, now Minister of Veterans' Affairs.

Now living in Innisfil with his granddaughter, Pengelly's attendance at Police Headquarters was indeed the result of doing what he was told, being brought to Aurora under false pretenses believing he simply had a meeting with Police Chief Eric Jolliffe. That was technically true, but they were joined by a crowded atrium of friends, family, and current and former officers.

'For the first time in my life, I was caught by surprise,' said Pengelly. 'When I was a young fella in 1941, when Adolf Hitler stood up in the Reichstag and said 'Europe Today, Tomorrow the World,' we young fellas working on farms said, 'We've got to go, or they are going to come here.' That is why we joined up. And we didn't know any different in those days.

'When I came home from service to my home in St. Thomas, I went to the employment office looking for a job every day for two weeks. Nothing. One day, I went down and the man said, 'How would you like to be a policeman?' I said, 'Well, I'll take any damned job!' He said, 'Go across the street to talk to the Chief of Police.' If you were a big guy who could handle yourself and look after things, you were a policeman.'

Times certainly have changed, but going across that street at the employment office's suggestion sent him on the lengthy second phase of his life of public service. From St. Thomas, and after a stint in Ingersoll, he arrived in King Township in June of 1964, serving as Chief of the department.

The King department was eventually merged into the York Regional Police in 1971 and he retired from the force in 1980.

That wasn't the end of his public service career. Looking for ways to keep busy after his wife's death in 1984, he answered the call

for bylaw enforcement in Richmond Hill before eventually retiring in March of 2011 at the age of 91.

For Jolliffe, Pengelly's 70 years of public service is a prime example of the YRP's motto "Deeds Speak."

"It would be impossible to repay you for everything that you have done for our community, but today we hope to show you in some small way how much we appreciate what you have done," said Jolliffe, paying tribute to his service on D-Day and to the York Region community.

Assembled police gathered to illustrate how they have paid tribute to Pengelly over the last year. Thursday's ceremony was originally scheduled for June 6, the actual anniversary of the D-Day landings, but had to be postponed due to illness. Now back in good form, he listened intently and was visibly moved by how the YRP made the trip to Juno Beach to lay a wreath in his honour and install a commemorative brick in his name as a permanent reminder of his service.

One of those was Constable Rob England who, along with his daughter, resplendent in a dress decorated in poppies specifically for the occasion, presented him with some of his original artwork depicting memorials at the Juno Beach Centre.

It was then up to Julian Fantino to present the man of the hour with the Diamond Jubilee medal.

"I am amazed by your tireless dedication and your commitment to public service," he said. "Having been a part of our history through your role in the Royal Canadian Navy, you have continued to selflessly serve your community through your many decades with the York Regional Police and beyond. The fact that some of your colleagues travelled on their own time and money to ensure that an engraved marker with your name was at the Juno Beach Centre speaks volumes about your character but even more so about the esteem and respect in which you are held by your colleagues, friends, family, and even those who do not know you personally."

After receiving his medal, Pengelly had a presentation to make on his own. After thanking the police for the ceremony, he presented Jolliffe with the handbook presented to Pengelly himself upon being sworn in as an officer in King over four decades ago.

"You might learn a few tips from that," he said to the Chief with a laugh.