

Day in the Life of the Soldier campaign wraps with 'Home for the Holidays'?



By Brock Weir

When local residents pooled their creative resources and planned a year-long celebration of 'A Day in the Life of a Soldier,' their mission wasn't just to raise funds for the Queen's York Rangers, Aurora's home regiment, but also to build awareness.

As the date for the third and final event rapidly approaches this month, organizers of the Traditional Mess Dinner, slated for the Royal Canadian Legion on Thursday, November 21, will be able to look back assured their mission has been accomplished.

'A Day in the Life of a Soldier' kicked off with breakfast at Cardinal Golf Club in March, and continued with a family and community lunch in May. The series culminates at the Royal Canadian Legion with a traditional mess dinner. For the uninitiated, this is not going to be anything close to a black tie affair, but a way to get up close and personal with current serving and veterans from the local regiment in a simple, but time-honoured style.

'Our mission this year was to bring awareness to the Queen's York Rangers because up to now people just see them walking up and down the streets of Aurora with their backpacks on and they might just think they are going camping or playing military,' says committee member Kim Kerr.

Any misconceptions will be quickly dispelled at this event, which will feature firsthand accounts from current Queen's York Ranger Graham Sherman, who has done a tour of duty in Afghanistan, Bruce Monker who survived getting caught in the line of fire, and others who will be able to speak of their experiences.

In putting together these events over the last year, the organizing committee has been struck by the professionalism of the regiment and their willingness to share their experiences, added Ms. Kerr, noting they truly want to share with the community what they do.

'They are an amazingly professional group of people who take their jobs very seriously and are very proud of who they are and what they have done,' she says.

'They are a hidden gem of Aurora,' says fellow committee member Brian North.

Inspector Gary Miner of the York Regional Police knows what it means to serve. When Canadian regiments were seeing their soldiers coming back home after their recent Afghan tours to little or no fanfare, he wanted to do something to buck the trend.

'To me, they were welcoming home the repatriated soldiers who had been killed, but not the ones who were coming back alive,' says Insp. Miner. 'Once we started doing that locally and getting into the fact we have a regiment in our area, we found they didn't want to be front and centre. They just want to do their duty and carry on.'

As most of the Queen's York Rangers are back at home, this event will also serve to provide another welcome moment of appreciation, they say. There will be 15 members of the Regiment on hand sitting amongst the ticket holders. There are also opportunities for members of the public to sponsor tickets for individual soldiers.

'We're also going to have a chance that evening to write the Queen's York Rangers a 'thank you' note,' says Ms. Kerr. 'I think it is important to know we appreciate what they're doing,' adds Ms. Kerr. 'On that evening, an attendee will get a note and it will be distributed to them throughout the year whenever they need a little pick-me-up.'

'Attendees will really feel involved in it. They're not just going to come to a stuffy dinner; they're going to come and meet and have a chat and walk away with some things.'

After the attendees walk away with their thoughts, memories, and what they have been able to glean from the soldiers, the organizing committee will have a moment to assess. They set an ambitious goal this year to raise \$40,000 for the Queen's York Rangers Regimental Assistance Fund, a benevolent fund to provide a helping hand to returning soldiers and their families adjust back to civilian life, whether it is providing them monetary assistance or practical help like skill building. While that was their main goal, when asked why they decided to devote so much of their time for their cause, there is a common thread running through each committee member.

'My dad was in the Navy after World War Two right up to the Korean War and he never talked about what happened,' said Miner. 'I'm now learning it vicariously. A lot of veterans, in my experience, are tough people to get stories out of. If you have the privilege of sitting down with today's soldier and yesterday's, you're going to hear stories you're never going to otherwise experience just by walking up to them and shaking their hand. We lose about 1,000 World War II veterans every week in Canada and that knowledge is lost to us.'

Adds Steve Hinder: 'In our generation, we've heard tons about veterans. My father was in the Second World War and we have been to about umpteen Remembrance Day services, but I think we forget today we have soldiers who are serving abroad. Our most recent veterans, we don't think of them as veterans necessarily because they have served us.'

'I think this puts them in the spotlight and gives us another opportunity to say thank you.'