

From the Rhine to Ontario's highways, veteran Wilkes promotes storied tradition



By Brock Weir

Aurora resident John Wilkes was just 19 when he signed up at the age of 19 to be part of Canada's fledgling 23rd Field Regiment.

It was an exciting time for this young man, growing up in Galt. He attended school at Lakefield College near Peterborough and was in his first days of University when he decided to make a leap.

The Regiment, he says, later became one of just three Regiments given a self-propelled gun in Canada and, with their guns on tracks, they were able to go anywhere the tanks went.

'We supported them and my job was to sit in a 10-foot hole about 30 feet behind the guns with an artillery board and calculate the range,' he recalls. 'You got coordinates back from the Forward Observation Officer, so I would plug those in and get in the line of range. We always went forward, and I don't think we ever went backwards!'

Mr. Wilkes came by his leaning towards the military honestly. His father was a major in the First World War and his grandfather was a Company Commander in the Royal Winnipeg Rifles during the Northwest Rebellion in the 1880s.

'To avoid joining the forces was something I never thought of,' he says. 'I wasn't so anxious that I did it at 17 or lied or anything, but I was there when the artillery Regiment was being formed. I just thought it sounded like a good place to go, so that is where I went.'

What happened after that is a story which has enthralled future generations, not the least of which have been his own children and grandchildren. One of his grandsons is a teacher and Mr. Wilkes took the time to write down his story so his grandson could share it with his own students and it left them wanting more.

'In 1945, we chased the last Germans across the Rhine in the Spring and we went to celebrate a little bit so we celebrated!' he says. 'The next morning, our Troop Sergeant Major said he thought his hangover was worse than mine, so he asked me to ride his motorcycle. Going along the road next to the Rhine, I noticed that our Signal Sergeant caught some barbed wire and was dragging it along. I thought I would do a good turn and put my food down and the only trouble was putting my foot down, the barbed wire left his, caught in my back wheel, and I had to stop and get rid of the damned thing.'

'That put me behind the Regiment, so I was zooming along trying to catch up and a shell came across, landed in the ditch, and a piece went through and took half my tibia.'

Less than 36 hours later, he was back in England. Several operations later, he was back in Canada and still ready to serve.

This lifetime of service will be recognized next week when Prince Andrew, Duke of York ? a fellow student at Mr. Wilkes' Lakefield College ? comes to Town. The Queen's son will attend a lunch for the Queen's York Rangers at Oakview Terrace, just over the border on Leslie Street and Bloomington, to pay tribute to Aurora's Regiment.

Here, he will unveil a plaque dedicated to Aurora residents who received the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal.

These honours are not unique to Mr. Wilkes, having also received the Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 for both his work at the Canadian Royal Heritage Trust and the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

Mr. Wilkes interest in heraldry was something also inherited from his father and Mr. Wilkes the younger was instrumental in helping establish a Heraldic Authority unique to Canada and independent from the United Kingdom.

Although heraldry is something steeped in tradition, Mr. Wilkes still sees a value for it in today's society.

?It is a very honourable way of identifying yourself,? he says. ?There is a feeling of pride when you apply and it is granted.?

He has served in multiple capacities with the Royal Heraldry Society, including acting as its de-facto leader when there was a vacancy.

He takes particular pride in his own arms, which incorporates symbols related to his family's farming routes, a cannon to represent his time with the Artillery, white lines representing Mr. Wilkes works engineering Ontario's King's Highways as part of the Ministry of Transportation, the traditional ring of engineers, and symbols borrowed from that of an earlier ancestor who was Lord Mayor of London.