

Royal Salute for centenarian Griffiths



By Brock Weir

They say that every life tells a story ? and Allen Griffiths' is no exception.

It's a philosophy the 100-year-old veteran's grandson, Alex Broughton, takes to heart.

Alex sees him in a slightly different light. As the award-winning local filmmaker watched his agile grandfather move from table to table, greeting friends, family and well-wishers, he marvelled at his grandfather's journey.

?When he finds other people and energies to connect with, it rejuvenates him,? says Alex. ?He loves being able to share his life and share with others. That's what we should do with everyone who has experienced more than us. There is always something to learn from everyone.?

These are not mere words. As Allen basked in the glow of well-wishers and greetings, Alex's film crew kept Allen firmly in focus, capturing every move made and nearly every word exchanged.

If Alex has his way, Allen's story will be available for the masses. It's a story he wants to record not just in documentary, but also in drama.

?He was in submarines and only two per cent of submarines survived the war,? says Mr. Broughton. ?Every ship he was on was sunk and the odds of him even being alive is crazy. The fact that I'm here ? it is almost like I owe it to him to tell his story.?

He says he is always amazed listening to the humour and candour in which his grandfather speaks of his experiences. Where some people might dwell on the horror and destruction of the time, he discusses them with a smile and a laugh.?

?It is almost the best way to deal with it,? says Alex. ?You can't look at the past and hold onto it and let it drain you. You have to see it almost as an exciting adventure.?

This was indeed the case when The Auroran sat down with Mr. Griffiths ahead of the party. In the first part of our interview with Mr. Griffiths, last week, we left off with his ship being greeted back in the United Kingdom by King George V and the Royal Family.

He didn't have time to rest. His work continued with the Royal Navy, taking him through Malta, Gibraltar, Tobruk, and Benghazi, all the way down the West African coast and back up to Norway and Sweden.

Their trip to Scandinavia coincided with Europe teetering on the edge of the Second World War. He and his crewmates were on a minelayer and after they had finished their job placing the weaponry underwater, Neville Chamberlain infamously flew back to Britain from Germany with a statement not worth the paper it was written on.

'We had just laid the mines when Chamberlain came home and said we had 'peace in our time,' Mr. Griffith recalls. 'We had just laid 80 mines and we had to go and pull them all in again. In 1939, we were in Norway and Sweden and we got hammered terrible. We didn't have any guns, didn't have any planes, and the guns just hammered the s--- out of us.'

Mr. Griffiths' active service during the war saw him on a number of vessels, particularly on submarines. After being wounded in battle, he was patched up and sent on another vessel bound for southern Italy near the city of Taranto. The plan was to torpedo their way through laid nets to take out enemy ships, but the Italians got the better of them.

'The nets caught around our propeller and we had to dive,' he recalls. 'When we dived, we fired the torpedoes to go ashore and we heard the explosion. We sat on the bottom for a while and we ran out of electricity. We had to surface and come out to sea. When we got up there was a ship on the port bow coming full speed ahead.'

'I had been all through this not once, but two or three times. [The officer] came running through and said, 'abandon ship!' and I thought, 'Oh, Christ!'

After accidentally vaulting himself right out of the water into the air after overfilling his oxygen bag, he came back down to service and floated with his other crewmates until they were eventually picked up by the Italians as prisoners of war.

'I had quite a time for a number of years,' he says of his time staying in officers' camps after a promotion. 'Then Mussolini got hung and threw the entire country into a state of chaos.'

After being transferred around, he and his fellow prisoners were picked up in Germany, freed by British servicemen, followed by three weeks recovery in hospital because of their rough shape.

Luckily, he had Marjorie Mutter, his wife whom he married in 1939, waiting for him. They knew each other well before the outbreak of war.

'I was a real jazzy guy,' he says with a chuckle. 'She was always at these dances and when the music started up, the guys used to tear over there and choose a partner. If she saw you coming and she liked you, she would give you a dance and away we went. We used to dance every night and we got really chummy ' but all we were was chummy! I didn't want to marry anybody.'

There was a bond, however. Allen became close with Marge's family ' her father served on submarines as well ' and when absence made the heart grow fonder, she took her chance

'She said, 'I want to marry you,' and I thought, 'Oh, s---!?' She was already engaged to another guy and I had come back on the scene.'

They were married that April, he was back in service in May, and they barely saw each other for the next seven years. By the time he was a free man, the marriage endured, producing two daughters once they immigrated to Canada in October 1951. They were happily married for 71 years until her death in 2010.

Canada was a natural choice for the couple. During the war, Marge's family took in Canadian soldiers and she was impressed not only by them, but tales of their homeland.

Once in Canada, Allen, by then a plumber in trade, undertook a six month course at Ryerson to get his Canadian qualifications and he made a career for himself at the Ford plant in Brantford, and then at Massey-Ferguson.

?The wait for this over the past couple of weeks seems so long!? he said of the lead up to his 100th birthday, noting he had no major complaints other than he would like to be able to walk and see a bit better.

?This has been his big goal ever since I can remember,? said daughter Jane Broughton. ?It's been his big goal to live to be 100 and he's pretty fit. He comes to euchre and bridge at [the Seniors' Centre], he gardens, and likes to go out and about.?

Whatever his concerns over his legs, watching him cut a rug at the Legion on Saturday afternoon proved he's still the ?jazzy guy? that caught Marge's eye 75 years ago.