

Royal Visit took some stealth planning, and luck, say organizers



(Prince Andrew speaks with event organizers Brian North and Kimberley Kerr near the end of his visit to Aurora on Thursday afternoon. Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Despite bubbling with excitement about what was to come last fall, Aurora residents Brian North and Kimberley Kerr had to keep their secret under their respective hats until just last month.

Prince Andrew was due to visit his Regiment, the Queen's York Rangers, in Aurora and Toronto, and they were asked to spearhead the local festivities. After eagerly taking up the challenge, however, they were surprised at what awaited them.

"Little did we know what a wonderful journey we would embark upon, nor that we would become secret agents with a top secret mission!" said Ms. Kerr. "Starting in February of this year, Brian and I could only tell people that we were working on a very special project. The topics of our weekly phone conferences, hushed meetings and conversations could not be disclosed for such a long time. Friends questioned, but we kept the secret strong. It has been an honour to work with a committee with such dedicated, professional and inspiring people.

"Imagine two civilians sitting in our homes on weekly conference calls using language like '2100 hours!' Sometimes I didn't have enough fingers and toes to figure it out. We took detailed notes and a quick conversation between each other to make sure we civilians were on the right page and knew what was happening."

Both of them, she said, are continually "thrilled" to have the Rangers in Aurora and every time they interact with them, they are left with "more and more appreciation" for their dedication and professionalism. They are, she said, the "gem" of York Region.

In turn, Darrell Bricker, the Regiment's Honourary Colonel, was full of praise for Ms. Kerr and Mr. North, saying he "never ceased to be amazed" for all they do in Aurora and the level of support they have from the community.

"Why are we here today? One of them is commemoration and the other is tradition," said Bricker. "It is commemoration to honour the service of your Queen's York Rangers, your Queen's York Rangers, past and present, and tradition to remind us of what came before and to fulfill our obligation to the next generation. That is to pass down the traditions our ancestors passed down to us.

"Let's start with commemoration. Today we are commemorating the battlefield sacrifice of your Queen's York Rangers. The government of Canada has awarded your Regiment with five new battle honours. These honours are the first awarded to the Regiment since the First World War."

When Bricker met with the Duke of York to pitch the idea of a visit to the Regiment, he explained to the Prince that four were being awarded for the Bicentennial of the conflict between Britain and the United States.

'He said, 'well, that took them a lot of time!'' said Bricker with a laugh. 'I said, 'You're right, sir. That did take them a long time,' and we joked about it a little bit before he stopped me and he said, 'You must understand ? these are very important. These are recognition of the service of the Regiment that you are a part of ? they are sacred. Yes, it took a long time to get them and we must honour them so, yes, I will come to Aurora and I will come to Fort York.'

Fast forward two centuries, and the QYR are being honoured for a conflict much fresher in our collective consciousness and perhaps a conflict which, while oceans apart from the battlefields of the War of 1812, has hit very close to home.

'When we started to plan this day, to plan this celebration, we were focused on the 1812 battle honours, but it seems like things have conspired for history to, in a sense, converge on this day, because it is more than just that now at this point,' said Lt. Col. Phil Halton. '200 years ago the citizens of our communities volunteered to defend our way of life because they thought peace, order and good government was something that was worth making a sacrifice for and I think that is something that still resonates today as an idea.

'While things that happened 200 years ago are perhaps hard to connect with at times, [Afghanistan] was a battle honour that was won by some of the people here in the room today who are Rangers, York Regional Police officers, who are friends and family members of this community. That is something that we can connect with in a very direct way because it is history that is here and now in this room with us.'