

BROCK'S BANTER: Tough as old boots

By Brock Weir

When I walked into his Aurora apartment last year, my eyes were immediately drawn to John Wilkes' feet. Comfortably ensconced in his wheelchair, he still let his feet do the work, helping him move along the floor of his condo with ease and precision.

These were not slippers used to padding along cushy carpets. These were old boots that had done their fair share of heavy lifting; comfortably broken in, battered, more than a little bruised, and visibly repaired more than once.

He simply didn't see the need to replace his shoes very often. They did what they were supposed to, they got him from point A to point B. He wasn't there to make a fashion statement; he was just there to get the job done. In fact, he had worn the same style of footwear since the Second World War, only seeing the need to order a new pair once or twice.

Evidently, they built things tougher back then. And that goes for both man and boot.

After meeting Mr. Wilkes several times over the years at various events around Aurora, I finally had the chance to sit down for an in-depth conversation with him early in the spring of 2014. It was the lead-up to the Duke of York's visit to Aurora (or close enough) and he was one of a handful of veterans slated to have the opportunity to meet the Queen's second son.

As a long-time monarchist, he was tickled pink to have the opportunity to meet Prince Andrew, but the excitement didn't just stem from the fact the Duke of York was the son of the sovereign, both men had something else in common: their education at Lakefield College near Peterborough.

As I discovered in our conversation, Mr. Wilkes received his education there in the late 1930s before heading off to University. It was at University when the Second World War got in the way.

With a father who served as a major in the First World War and a grandfather who served with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles during the Northwest Rebellion in the second half of the 19th century, young Wilkes didn't hesitate to follow the lead of his forebears into battle, but he didn't exactly leap at the opportunity either.

?'Joining up was the only thing to do. To avoid joining the Forces was something I never thought of,' he recalled. 'I wasn't so anxious that I did it at 17 or lied about my age or anything, but I signed up when I was 19 and the artillery regiment was being formed. It sounded like a good place to go.'

'We were in the 23rd Field Regiment SP (Self Propelled) RCA and we made part of the Fourth Armoured Division and there we supported the tank regiments. Our guns were on tracks so we could 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 line of the range. You got coordinates back from the forward observation officer, so I would plug those in and get the line in range.'

Having been enlightened by his story last spring, there was a degree of added poignancy meeting up with him at the Legion reception following last year's Remembrance services. There he was, once again, lined up with those comrades and, yes, still wearing those tattered leather boots.

Despite the wear and tear of time, both kept step moving forward. This past Sunday, however, Mr. Wilkes was not among the ever-shrinking band of local veterans enjoying the late autumn sunshine at this year's Remembrance Day parade.

Those boots almost seemed like a metaphor for the man: despite the wear and tear of time, they too would keep moving forward. Leather met the road one last time on October 7 when Mr. Wilkes died at the age of 93, survived by his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and their families. Outside of his family, his legacy includes Aurora students who, over the years, were enthralled with his story.

You might think his statement, 'I just thought it sounded like a good place to go, so that is where I went,' was a bit blasé but I chalk that up to his generation. They didn't think they were doing anything particularly special, but we know otherwise.

'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 said. '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 foot 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.

As his boots carried him through what was ultimately his final year, he confided he was just beginning to appreciate the, well, appreciation others had for his service, recalling a couple of weeks before we met up at his condo that his grandson, who happened to be a teacher, shared with his class a few notes his grandfather had prepared about his service.

He was reading it about halfway through and asked his students if they wanted any more, and they all shouted yes! said Mr. Wilkes, with a twinkle in his eye, before resuming his matter-of-fact way of speaking. So, on he went. There is some interest. After the war, his service continued as a key engineer with the Ministry of Transportation, helping to develop Ontario's networks of King's Highways. His fascination with military and military history also led to him being an instrumental figure in the establishment of the Canadian Heraldic Authority, the official body designing official heraldic symbols for Canadians independent of the United Kingdom, as well as the Canadian Royal Heritage Trust.

He was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 for his service and, 10 years later, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal, his name now on the official plaque at Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park unveiled by Prince Andrew on that spring afternoon last year that was so memorable for Mr. Wilkes.

Some interest indeed, and we can all be thankful people like Mr. Wilkes took the time to share the stories to pass the torch, and perhaps some of the sturdiness embodied in his footwear, onto future generations.

Godspeed, John, and to everyone who served.