

Legion marks two milestone anniversaries Saturday amid transition



By Brock Weir

The world today is very different from the one faced by allied soldiers preparing to storm the beaches of Normandy 70 years ago this Saturday.

Still, it is a vastly different world compared to when the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion moved its nerve centre from central Yonge Street to what was then a remote plot of land on Industrial Parkway North 40 years ago this month.

But, today's Legionnaires are looking to the past while forging ahead into the future this Saturday as they commemorate both milestone anniversaries.

Billed as 70/40?, the dual-purpose commemoration will get underway at 11 a.m. on Saturday morning with a short parade of veterans, Legion members, and bands from the Aurora Family Leisure Complex to the adjacent Legion.

Once there, the parade members and dignitaries will lay wreaths before the solemnity gives way to a full late-morning and afternoon of fun and games for the whole family.

For Dave Franklin, the incoming president of the local Legion, 70/40 goes well beyond those two anniversaries, and also serves to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the First World War, as well as the 75th anniversary of the Second World War.

They have spent the last few weeks putting the finishing touches on their parade, their activities, and the festivities.

While the commemorations of the past are very much contemporary, this is also a time of reflection for Mr. Franklin. A Legion member for over 45 years, with 17 of these as a member of the Aurora branch, he has seen the branch develop and evolve in each intervening year. As he assumes the presidency, however, he is taking the helm of an organization with dwindling numbers and what might be a diminishing sense of purpose.

With Saturday's events designed to introduce people back to the Legion, this dilemma is something he plans to tackle head-on during his tenure.

Franklin's father was a veteran of the Second World War. After the conflict, he got out of the military, opened a flower shop, but when this proved not to be viable, he re-enlisted in the re-mustered Canadian Army, where he served for a further 27 years.

After serving with the RCMP himself in Western Canada, Franklin quickly became familiar with the Royal Canadian Legion both as a community hub but also as a 'safety net' for veterans to go for a couple of drinks 'without being hassled.'

'It was a friendly, comfortable place for us to go,' he says. 'I just carried on because of the association between Legions and the RCMP and wherever you went you were welcomed.'

Questions on what went on during the war, however, often went unanswered. Remembrance Day was when those doors were unlocked, and Franklin says he recalls just sitting back and drinking in the stories he was able to hear of veterans bantering back and forth together.

These days, however, that has become something of a rarity.

'The transition I see happening with the Legion right now is obviously we can't depend on membership being based on veterans,' he says. 'One of the things that bothers me is according to government statistics, which are false, we have 40,000 new veterans coming out of Afghanistan. We didn't send 40,000 different people to Afghanistan. Some of them went three or four times.'

'When I first joined, if you weren't in here by 7 p.m. on a Friday night, you couldn't get back in because the place was rocking. You couldn't see the end of the hall either for the smoke that was hanging in the air. But now, 'quiet' is the only adjective I can think of. We're trying to think our way through a new business plan, a new direction, and trying and bring the Legion into the 21st Century. If we can brighten it up, and bring up its attraction to people, we might get some of those Afghan veterans who are, thus far, kind of shying away because they see it as something for the Second World War veterans. It is not intended to be.'

Among the items that need to be addressed through the business plan is getting access to a line of credit for urgently needed repairs for their roof, the rebranding of their hall from strictly banquets and weddings towards a conference facility, something which has been often been cited as a need in Aurora, and welcoming in the public for lunch from Tuesday to Friday.

He also hopes to get quiet Sundays 'rocking' again by providing opportunities for young musicians to come in for jam sessions.

Everything needs a facelift, he says, but there is not much point in a facelift if the roof is falling in. And it is important to make room for the 20th century 'without losing sight of who we are.'

'We want the people to know this is the community's Legion and we want them to be a part of it,' says Franklin. 'If I only have one year, I want to make sure I have started this. If I get more than one year hopefully we'll get it done. If we don't start making new advances towards new people and younger people, we're on the Titanic and we're slowly going down.'

'It is happening to Legions across the country and we don't want to see it happen here. It is incumbent on the community [to consider] what they think of the Legion and do they want it.'