

A life well exceptionally well-lived

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

There was excitement in the air this particular April morning.

It was a glorious, cloud-free day with the air just crisp enough to temper the beating sun.

By the time people began to assemble on the lawns of Queen's Park, it was clear a lot of preparation had gone into what was set to unfold. But, perhaps not. Events of this kind were not exactly unique in the Greater Toronto Area, but they weren't exactly routine, either.

What they had been preparing for was steeped in tradition. Where you needed to stand, where you needed to move, what you needed to say probably followed more or less the same formula over the preceding 200 years, yet each individual role was rehearsed nonetheless and everyone was determined to ensure things went off without a hitch.

Perhaps the only wildcard of the event, a military parade held at Queen's Park on April 27, 2013, was the presence of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who at the remarkable age of 92 was set to make a 24-hour visit to the city. Here, as Colonel in Chief to one of the regiments due to demonstrate some of their military manoeuvres in front of the Ontario Legislature before they paraded down University Avenue, the Duke was set to preside over official ceremonies commemorating the bicentennial of the Battle of York.

As the clock ticked down to the appointed hour, more and more people began to find their place behind the crowd barricades. Some came out just for the pomp and circumstances such parades offer, but many more were eager simply to catch a glimpse of the guest of honour, whether in his own right, in his role as long-serving consort to our Head of State, or, in the words of one teen I interviewed, to see "William and Harry's grandpa."

Amid the excitement was a feeling this was not your average royal visit, but a potential farewell. After all, despite apparently having the stamina at his age to make a quick transatlantic hop for just a few hours, the reality was he was well into his tenth decade and the likelihood of it happening again didn't seem particularly likely.

As we waited for the royal arrival, I couldn't help but cast my mind back nearly three years earlier, standing in a very similar position "this time there out of solely my own interest rather than personal interest tempered by work responsibilities" to the last time the Duke of Edinburgh was at the legislature.

Then, on what would ultimately turn out to be their last joint engagement on Canadian soil, the Queen and Prince Philip were there to meet with the Lieutenant-Governor, Premier and cabinet of the day before unveiling a plaque outside before jetting off from Pearson bound for New York City where the Monarch was due to address the United Nations.

From my vantage point well removed from the reddish-brown façade of the Legislature I had ample time to see the couple, accompanied by the then-Governor General, Prime Minister and their respective spouses make their way slowly in our direction towards the run-of-the-mill unveiling which attracted tens of thousands.

It was clear we were collectively watching the most iconic double-act in the business doing what they did best.

Dividing the crowds between them, the Queen took one side, the Duke the other, each keeping an eye on one another as they worked the crowds, sometimes trading off when Prince Philip met up with one of the many people eager to hand his wife flowers, occasionally lifting bouquet-bearing kids over the barricades himself so they could toddle over to present their gifts. All done with a

zest for each other ? and for life.

This wasn't my first time seeing the ?team? in action. What I witnessed that day was just as I remembered from my first time seeing them in 1997, again in 2002, and three more times in the days leading up to their departure in 2010. As it was for my mother when she saw them in New Brunswick in 1959. As it was for my dad who saw the then Princess Elizabeth and Duke in 1951 on their first trip to our shores.

This time, however, was going to be markedly different; the Duke of Edinburgh was flying solo and, whether or not the idea made him cringe, he was due to have the spotlight firmly and singularly on him.

It could be argued that during his remarkable 73 years of public service ? 81 if you factor in his pre-marriage wartime service ? such moments of being the centre of undivided attention were few and far between. It was, in my opinion, due time. This was evidently a sentiment shared by the Government of Canada and Rideau Hall which took the opportunity to appoint the Duke of Edinburgh the very first Extraordinary Companion of the Order of Canada.

?[He] has long embodied dignity, loyalty and service to others,? read his citation. ?He has known eleven Canadian Governors General and eleven Prime Ministers, and has been present at events which have shaped our nation, including the signing of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. His Royal Highness has a keen interest in the personal development of young people and, through the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards, has helped to advance the community engagement and personal achievements of young Canadians. In addition, he has long held close ties with Canada's Armed Forces, which have recognized his service with the unique ranks of Honourary Admiral and General. Through his many visits to Canada, both on his own and with Her Majesty the Queen, he has shown his lasting concern for our country and for Canadians.?

It was fitting that his last engagement on Canadian soil was an opportunity for Canada, in turn, to show its collective appreciation for him and, as it transpired last week, provide him a fitting send-off.

Only time will tell how The Duke of Edinburgh will be remembered in Canada, the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and around the world, but I feel his legacy is secure. One only has to look as far as his unwavering devotion to Queen and Country, his steadfast work in and for the Armed Forces, and his tireless dedication to improving the lives of young people, some of whom are still in their early days of high school.

Now, as this remarkable chapter of history draws to a close this Saturday at St. George's Chapel, I look back with pride at the rapturous reception he received that April day in 2013 ? and, yes, I very enthusiastically participated in that; and I'll also look back at the pride I felt seeing that brand new Order of Canada badge hanging around his neck ? in recognition of contributions I don't think we can even begin to fully appreciate at this point in time.