MEALS CREATE COMMUNITY

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GROWING UP ON GROVE

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For Okill Stuart the D-Day landing was just the beginning of a long and distinguished life.

For King & Country
The moments before D-Day were ticking down, and all Okill Stuart could think about was his next hand of cards. A few hours earlier, he had opened his sealed orders, a map of Normandy dotted with landing sites and gun positions. A few hours later, he would be landing on Juno Beach, fighting in one of the bloodiest invasions in history. Yet for the time being, all the young soldier from the Third Canadian Infantry Division wanted to think about was poker.

“I got into the largest poker game of my life,” Stuart recalls today from his home in Saint-Lambert, Quebec. “It was called Red Dog, and it was dangerous stuff. It was winner take all. I was the winner and I took all.” He laughs. “By the time the game was done, I had won around $3,000, which was really a lot of money in those days. So if I had been killed, I had a lot to lose.” He pauses again. “We played right through until around 6 o’clock (the next morning) when the orders came in: ‘Come on, you guys, we have to start firing.’ And then we quickly finished our game, got to our posts, and went out to fight a war.”

The memories of that fight still burn for Stuart — a man who, at age 91, possesses the vigor and spunk of someone in his 50s. He can describe his part in history with intricate detail, the tone of a man with decades to reflect on it. Every year, with more D-Day veterans departing from this world, that story becomes more precious. And Stuart, now a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor, knows how to tell it. Every syllable, witty or somber, arrives with crackling strength and perfect diction. The man who was educated alongside royalty — Great Britain’s Prince Philip was a classmate at Scotland’s revered Gordonstoun School — has retained his lessons about dignified, gentlemanly behavior.

Including the dignified, gentlemanly behavior of what Stuart calls “doing your duty for king and country.” Born in Canada and educated mostly in private schools, Stuart was studying overseas in 1939 when he received a cablegram from his father: “Catch the next ship home. It looks like war.” As it turned out, the prediction was premature. So Stuart’s father sent the 18-year-old boy to work for a friend in the northern Quebec town of Chicoutimi, serving as a surveyor for the friend’s paper mill. It was during this period that the war began without Stuart even knowing it.

“I was in the brush with my surveying gang,” Stuart remembers, “and we ran into this lumberjack who said, ‘There’s a war going on in Europe. They’ve been fighting for about three weeks now.’ And I said, ‘What?’ I got back into Chicoutimi and bought a battery radio. That was where I heard the news of the war for the first time.”

Back home, his father refused to let him seek an officer’s commission. “(He) said I was too young,” Stuart says. “He didn’t mention ‘wild and inexperienced.’” Instead, Stuart and his father went to Montreal’s recruiting station so the teenager could enlist with the Third Canadian Infantry Division’s 81st Battery. “When I joined up, Father put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Good boy,’” Stuart says, “and Mother wept, and that was how everything began.”

During basic training in Montreal, Stuart’s superiors quickly seized on the adolescent’s superior education. Many enlisted men had little more than a third or fourth grade education. Stuart’s advanced schooling, particularly his facility with mathematics, impressed the officers. “That was how I was assigned to be a surveyor,” he explains. “It wasn’t anything more complicated than that.” Among other things, Stuart was charged with studying the maps and ascertaining the best location for his battery’s gun positions. All of that surveying work for the paper mill in Chicoutimi was about to pay off in ways he had never expected.

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When his unit left for Europe, Stuart recalls, the men were anxious for action. He still remembers every word to his battery’s song, a homespun tribute to their certain victory: “Cheers for our Major Lane/He’s got the battery on the brain/He may rant and he may rave/But he knows we’ll make old Hitler a slave.” The rousing ditty ends with the battery storming into Berlin, capturing Hitler personally. Thoughts of anything going wrong simply didn’t exist — at least not when they were around their fellow troops. Private fears were smothered by bravado.
“We were all young,” Stuart says. “We didn’t know any better. We were not going to die. It was always ‘the other guy’ who was going to die.” He stops for a moment. “And furthermore, we felt very strongly that this was our duty. Mind you, some young men were unemployed, and the $1.30 per day in spending money looked pretty good. But by and large, we were doing this because it was our duty.” Then he laughs. “Of course, when the invasion was happening and the shells started to land and the bullets came whizzing by, we all had second thoughts.”

The first whiffs of that invasion came with the gear. Self-propelled American guns replaced the battery’s usual 25-pounders. Then came the training maneuvers, periodic trips on their landing crafts — flat-bottomed boats that could hold up to six vehicles — into the English Channel. Years later, Stuart learned the real motivation behind those seemingly benign exercises. “They were hoping that the Germans would fire on us so we could learn where their guns were located,” he says. “Fortunately for us, the Germans were smart, and they never fired on us once.”

Yet the real indicator that the men would be going into France soon came on June 4, 1944. That was the day when each soldier was issued a limited number of French francs. “Invasion money,” the officers called it, its value guaranteed by the Bank of England. If any of the men were captured, the francs could potentially be used for negotiations. In June, though, Stuart realized that the money would only be useful if they made it through to when we took our posts. Then, when the fighting actually began, we were so busy doing our jobs that we didn’t have time to stop and worry about what was going on around us. If one of your buddies was killed, you didn’t stop and kneel and give last rites. You thanked Heaven that it wasn’t you, and then you moved on.”

Stuart witnessed death virtually from the start on that morning of June 6. Positioned inside a Sherman tank, his vehicle was second in line on his landing craft. In front of him was an infantry Bren gun carrier. Behind him were four self-propelled 105-millimeter guns. And when the landing craft was nearing Juno Beach, it struck an underwater mine and sank. Within minutes, Stuart’s tank was submerged in six feet of water, with the top barely sticking above the surface.

Ahead of him, the Bren gun carrier began moving through the water toward shore. Then it, too, hit a mine. From his post on the tank, Stuart watched the gun carrier explode 10 feet into the air. “Nobody got out of that,” he remembers. “And then I turned to the fellow next to me and I said my famous line: ‘You know, a fellow could get killed around here.’”

Thousands of people did get killed on that day, with around 2,000 casualties on Juno Beach alone. Had Stuart’s tank, rather than the gun carrier, been first off that landing craft, he easily could have been one of them. Instead, maneuvering with heavy fire all around them, Stuart and the other men inside his tank reached the beach unscathed at exactly 9:25 a.m. “Sometimes, I’d hear chug-chug-chug-chug overhead,” he says, “and that would be the 16-inch shell from the battleships. And other times, I’d hear a swish-swish-swish, and those would be the rockets. It’s no wonder that I can’t hear very well today. There was so much noise and chaos.”

And for Stuart and his companions in that Sherman tank, reaching land was only the first part of the battle. From there, they headed toward their assigned gun position, but found that the spot was already occupied by another battery. So they turned the tank around and were about to enter another area when a teenage boy in a black beret ran up to them. “Don’t go in that field,” the boy shouted. “Why?” Stuart yelled back. “It’s full of mines,” the boy responded.

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After more questioning, Stuart learned that the Germans had made the boy place the mines in that field. And after some persuasion from Stuart and his mates, the boy climbed up on the front of the tank and guided the men safely past all of the underground explosives. Without the boy’s intervention, though, a mine could have sent that tank as high as the Bren gun carrier had flown earlier.” Surviving a war,” Stuart says in a matter-of-fact tone, “involves some good luck.”

He had plenty of luck that day, enough to survive the bloody mess on that beachhead. Enough luck to serve without incident for the next 11 months and celebrate Germany’s surrender on May 8, 1945. Enough luck to then be assigned to the Netherlands, where he ran “the best-stocked yacht club in the country” for the soldiers there. “It was like we were God,” Stuart says of the reception that the Allied troops received from the Dutch citizens. “They gave us a true hero’s welcome.”

Finally, space opened up on a boat bound for Canada, and Stuart returned home to Quebec. “After the war, Father said, ‘Okay — off you go to Oxford,’” Stuart says. “But I said no. I had spent five-and-a-half years at war. By this point, my friends had cars and expense accounts and were getting married. I was ready to do something else with my life.”

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A photographer caught this image of the beach at Bernières-sur-Mer, the site of the Canadian landing on June 6, 1944. A Jeep bears the “44” of the 14th Field Regiment. The Bren carrier, capsized by a mine, bears the “60” of the Queen’s Own Rifles. Photo: The Public Archives of Canada.

Stuart to become one of the most active philanthropists in Saint-Lambert. His work ranged from providing Christmas baskets to needy families through the Canadian Christmas Tree League to serving as a founding director of the social welfare-based South Shore Community Services. In his spare moments, he raised a prize-winning pack of beagle hounds, become a charter member of Saint-Lambert’s curling club, and serve as President of the Montreal Chapter of the United Empire Loyalists Association of Canada. Twelve years ago, he married an equally energetic woman named Sylvia.

And he also found time to re-kindle his acquaintance with a celebrated school chum: Prince Philip, now the Duke of Edinburgh. “He was Prince Philip of Greece then,” Stuart says of his days at Gordonstoun School with the now-91-year-old husband of Queen Elizabeth II. “And he let us know it, too.” As Stuart recalls it, His Royal Highness was “middle road” as a student. “He was very proper,” Stuart says. “Mind you, he liked the girls. But apart from that, he was very old school — ‘My word is my bond’ and that sort of thing.”
At school, Stuart says, his contacts with Prince Philip were limited. He preferred horseback riding, while the Prince gravitated toward sailing. And after graduation, the two men went on to move in dramatically different social circles. Yet in 1987, when Stuart began planning a United Empire Loyalists convention, he invited his old schoolmate to come as the guest of honor. To the surprise of everyone except Stuart, Prince Philip accepted.

Since that time, Stuart and Prince Philip have kept in touch more frequently, typically by trading letters across the Atlantic. Yet Stuart and his wife have also experienced the royal treatment first-hand, invited as guests for a number of royal functions. At one reception in Buckingham Palace, Princess Anne, the lone daughter of Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth, asked Stuart about her father’s behavior in school. “I said, ‘Well, I’ve seen him in the shower,’” Stuart gleefully recalls. “That got a laugh.”

Still, Stuart says, he knows his place when dealing with the royal family. This past April, he penned a birthday card to Prince Philip, calling him “Sir” and noting that “at least two of us pre-war Gordonstoun boys are still hanging in.” In June, His Royal Highness responded with a message fretting about how the weather could affect a pageant planned for his wife’s Diamond Jubilee, a nationwide celebration of the Queen’s 60 years on the throne. “I keep to my position when I write to him,” Stuart says. “I always address him with the dignity owed by a humble little colonial.”

Yet for someone who has earned enough honors to sink a battleship — most recently receiving one of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee medals — the title of “humble little colonial” simply does not fit. From the beaches of Normandy to the ballrooms of Buckingham Palace, Stuart’s travels have been stunningly diverse. As Canada celebrates Remembrance Day, he has more to remember than most. “I’ve lived a long life and a full life,” he states. “And I am old enough now that when I talk about things, most people cannot contradict me. That’s a privilege you receive at my age, and I enjoy it.” For the man who set out as a boy to serve king and country, the adventures continue.