



The Last Man Standing



On November 11, long-time resident Okill Stuart, 95, will face a class at Saint-Lambert International High School. He'll attempt, as he has done in past years, to give

them a sense of what a page in their history books is about. Because the Second World War is more than words, it is about people who died in battle, and those who survived the war, but are no longer with us. And while this was a World event, it was also very much Saint-Lambert's. Okill is almost the last man standing in Saint-Lambert. Of some 800 Saint-Lambert citizens who fought in the Second World War, very few are still living. "You can count Saint Lambert's veterans on the fingers of one hand," he says. He, and Wally Charron, used to go as a team to the school for many past Remembrance Days, to talk about their experiences. Both were students of the first Saint-Lambert high school, and on graduation they enlisted in the armed services, so there was a connection for everyone. But three years ago, Wally was ill — unable to lecture or lead the veterans at the city's the Remembrance Day Parade, a responsibility he took on for many years. Then he died a short while later. Although they never met on Juno Beach, they both had served in the D-Day landing operation — the biggest battle of the war. Wally was in the Navy steering a landing craft, while Okill was with an artillery unit. Wally remains alive in Okill's memories. "I'd go to Wally's house and ask him, 'Wally, what are you going to talk about this year?'" Okill remembers. "Both of us talked about how we weren't much older than the children at Saint Lambert High School and why we went to war. (We'd tell them that) you children aren't doing the Goose-Step (German military march) on Victoria Avenue today is because we went to war." They explained to the students, and Okill will say it again to them on Friday, why this country volunteered to fight a war far away. "The youth of Saint-Lambert, it was instilled in us to do our duty in life. You knew to tip your hats to a lady, help her across the street. We sang, "Onward Christian soldiers!" in school. We didn't have to be told," Okill says. "We were patriotic and it was our duty." Serving in the war was by no means easy for anyone. "I was afraid every moment I was in action — 11 months. We were scared stiff. Yes we were," Okill says. "Anyone who says he wasn't is suffering from 65 years of memory lapse." To get over the gripping fear, Okill tried to convince himself that it would always be the other fellow that'd get killed — not him. Luckily it worked. * * *

Okill Stuart will be driving himself to the school. He attended the city awards ceremony last Wednesday, and was delighted that his driver's licence has been renewed for another two years. After a certain age, you'll get tested every two years, but this is unlikely to be a worry for most of us for a while.

The article above recently appeared in the Saint Lambert Journal