

Local veterans speak of lessons learned while serving country

By Sam Odrowski

Canada has been instrumental in peacekeeping missions around the globe and the many veterans who fought to protect the country's interests are top of mind for many Canadians as Remembrance Day approaches.

But remembering and honouring their sacrifices is a focus 365 days a year for local veterans and Royal Canadian Legion Orangeville Branch 233 members Chuck Simpson, Barry Kimber and Bryan Goustos.

The Citizen recently spoke with these veterans, who shared some of the important life lessons and values they learned while serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. Lessons that have carried on with them to this day.

Simpson, who served for a little over 37 years in missions across the Middle East, including Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Cyprus, said serving in the military set him on the right path in life.

"I was straying," he told the Citizen. "Let's just say I wasn't a nice kid and I was working towards being an even worse kid, but the military saved me."

Simpson said he learned the importance of being physically and mentally fit, respect, the value of hard work, discipline, and comradery.

"It was an eye-opener," Simpson said. "That hard work doesn't hurt, respect is good to have, and to treat people as you would like to be treated yourself."

From day one, you learn about the importance of teamwork, said Kimber, who served for three years on a radar base.

"You grow up very quickly because you find out about the realities of the world. You learn to respect each other and the capabilities of each other, and you're always preparing for the day when you're going to be called upon in order to do something special," Kimber remarked.

Goustos, who served for 25 years, going on tours in Cyprus, Iraq-Kuwait and Bosnia, said he learned that you can push yourself a lot harder than you realize.

"You don't always need eight hours sleep," he noted.

His son, who's a combat engineer, has also learned that lesson firsthand. In his training as a combat engineer, he did exercises that would go for roughly 28 hours before getting 20 minutes to sleep and doing it all over again, Goustos told the Citizen.

Kimber, Goustos and Simpson say they never regret the day they joined the military and would encourage young people to join if they have an interest.

"If people are not sure what they want to do in their lives, or they just want to experience some life lessons. It's a marvellous way to find that out," said Simpson. "I can tell you right now, the military is looking for people, they're advertising like crazy."

The Orangeville Legion, which has 276 members, is important to Simpson, Goustos and Kimber, especially as veterans themselves. They say having an organization that's dedicated to helping others who have served, in addition to supporting the community at large, is critical.

"I think the Legion is an organization that does a lot of marvellous things for veterans and their families," said Kimber. "I'm currently also the service officer so I directly work with veterans in the area, and even during my lunchtime today, I had somebody call me about getting some help for somebody that requires help, who's a veteran, through social services and things like that. It's an amazing, gratifying thing to help somebody who served our country, and we're here to support that."

Money raised through the Poppy Campaign directly supports veterans and their families, and Simpson, who is chair of the campaign. He told the Citizen he encourages veterans to reach out to the Legion for any assistance they may need.

Other ways the local Legion supports the community is by donating to not-for-profit organizations like Family Transition Place, Big Brothers and Big Sisters Dufferin, Alzheimer Society of Dufferin, Orangeville Food Bank, Headwaters Hospital, and Orangeville Fire Services.

Sadly, some Royal Canadian Legions had to close permanently through the pandemic due to a lack of volunteers and funding, creating a hole in the communities they previously served for several decades.

The local Legion was founded in 1935 and has grown significantly since its inception, but compared to a couple of decades ago, membership is a fraction of what it once was.

Kimber said when he first joined the Legion 35 years ago, there were over 1,000 members and now there's about a quarter of that number.

Anyone who would like to join the Orangeville Legion is welcome, you do not have to be a veteran or related to one.

Anyone who is a Canadian citizen in good standing is welcome to join.

To learn more about joining, email rcl233@rogers.com or call 519-942-4895.