

Bancroft veteran receives French Legion of Honour



By Tony Pearson

Ewart Wannamaker's first trip to France wasn't exactly a pleasure cruise. He spent nearly 48 hours crossing the English Channel in a small landing craft; in all that time, his total food allotment was one can of soup. When he approached the Normandy coast shortly after D-Day, artillery shells were still flying overhead. As a corporal-craftsman with the Royal Canadian Electrical Mechanical Engineers, he spent the next ten months helping to liberate France, Belgium, and Holland from the Nazis. Wannamaker was in the ?advanced recovery? unit, salvaging damaged vehicles so they could be repaired and returned to action or destroyed.

Now at the age of 92, Wannamaker, a native of Carlow Township, is a Knight in the National Order of the Legion of Honour of France. On Sunday, at a ceremony at the Bancroft Legion, he received his medal and certificate from Lieutenant Colonel Roger Vandomme, Deputy Defence Attache at the French embassy.

The medal was traditionally reserved for French citizens, although several prominent Canadians were honoured for their service to France, such as World War One Canadian army commander Arthur Currie and flying ace Billy Bishop. However, about ten years ago, the French government decided to open the award to those who fought for the Liberation of France during World War Two. Gary Keller Deputy Zone F5 president, noticed the extension, and brought it to the attention of Wannamaker's son-in-law, David McCormick the application. From there McCormick and Wannamaker began working on the application.

Wannamaker, one of 13 children, was born in 1922 in a log house at Fort Stewart. He can remember having to haul water and cut wood when he attended elementary school in a one room schoolhouse. After working in the bush and then for Bata Shoes (for the princely sum of \$7 for a six day week), he joined the Canadian Army in 1942. He married his wife Katie while waiting to be posted overseas; his first child was born after he had sailed for England. The family eventually expanded to four children; there are now nine grandchildren, as well as a number of great grand-children. (It was granddaughter Sonya McCormick who narrated the slide presentation on his life).

Soon after his discharge in 1946, he set up a shoe and harness repair store in Bancroft. In the early days of the store, he also delivered milk, using a horse-drawn wagon. Moving on from horses, he later administered driving tests and licences; Bancroft Mayor Bernice Jenkins recalled her trepidation taking her licence exam from Wannamaker. He also joined the Bancroft Legion, and has been active in it ever since; for his work, he has received both a Certificate of Merit, and a national Meritorious Service Medal. Current Legion branch president Larry Shattraw noted how Wannamaker still attends annual Remembrance Day ceremonies. Lt.

Col. Vandomme, in his presentation, spoke of the French nation's desire to honour young Canadians who left their homes and careers to bring freedom to France. "The medal is but a small token of our continuing gratitude to those Canadians", he declared.

At the ceremony, Wannamaker also received certificates of appreciation from the federal government, the provincial government, the county of Hastings, the town of Bancroft, and the Canadian Legion. He confessed to feeling "overwhelmed" by the award, and expressed his appreciation for all the kind words. He also stopped to remember those who never made it back to Canada as a result of the war. The ceremony finished with a standing ovation for Corporal Wannaker, now a French knight as well as a beloved native son.