

# Uxbridge's John Van Kessel revisits the war every two years

John Van Kessel still remembers the first three words of English he learned after coming to Canada from his native Holland 41 years ago - no, yes... and whiskey.

And while the likable Uxbridge area resident has managed to upgrade his English vocabulary considerably since then, he has also held onto the memo-



From Where I Live

Bruce Stapley

ries, some of them painful, of his early twenties spent in the Dutch Army. John was a truck driver from 1947-50 with the Dutch Army's 511 Regiment

Infantry, a battalion made up of some 1,000 soldiers, all of them born in 1927.

After a training period in their home country, 777 of these boys were deemed fit for duty in Indonesia, a group of islands in the Far East that were known in those days as the Dutch East Indies.

The Dutch were attempting to restore some sem-

blance of order among the rival factions of that country after it was abandoned by the Japanese, who had occupied it during World War II.

John's regiment was assigned to the north part of the large island of Sumatra. He still recalls every man who went down - 17 in all - and that 14 were killed in action, two died of

dysentery, and another man drowned.

He also remembers catching the dreaded dysentery himself, and how he had to endure needles the length of chop sticks, to his posterior region, on the road to recovery.

John immigrated to Canada two years after obtaining his discharge.

He caught on with General Motors in Oshawa almost immediately, working with the giant automaker until his retirement in 1983.

With a job to guarantee his sustenance, he was able to sponsor his fiance Diana's immigration to this country, and the two were married in 1953.

The Van Kessels bought a 50-acre hobby farm just outside of Uxbridge, where, according to John, they now grow sweet onions the size of grapefruits - something to do with the fertilizer applied to the garden all those years by the pigs who were using it as a pen.

But after all these years away from his native Holland, John has still managed to maintain his ties with the battalion with which he endured such difficult conditions in the late 1940s.

Since 1978, he and Diana have made a pilgrimage of sorts every two years, joining his old army mates in his native land.

Last September, 415 of the remaining 500 or so members gathered. John recognized each and every man. Along with two other former regiment members and their wives living in Ontario, John and Diana made an 18-day side trip, returning to Sumatra.

The men walked the same ground upon which they had been forced to tread so stealthily back in the late '40s. They just stood silent as they reached the river-side where two of their mates had been brutally killed and thrown into the water.

They also ventured into other parts of the island, where they saw women up to their knees in the rice fields while the men plowed the fields with water buffalo, stomping through the mud barefoot. They also visited tea, coffee, pineapple, and rubber plantations.

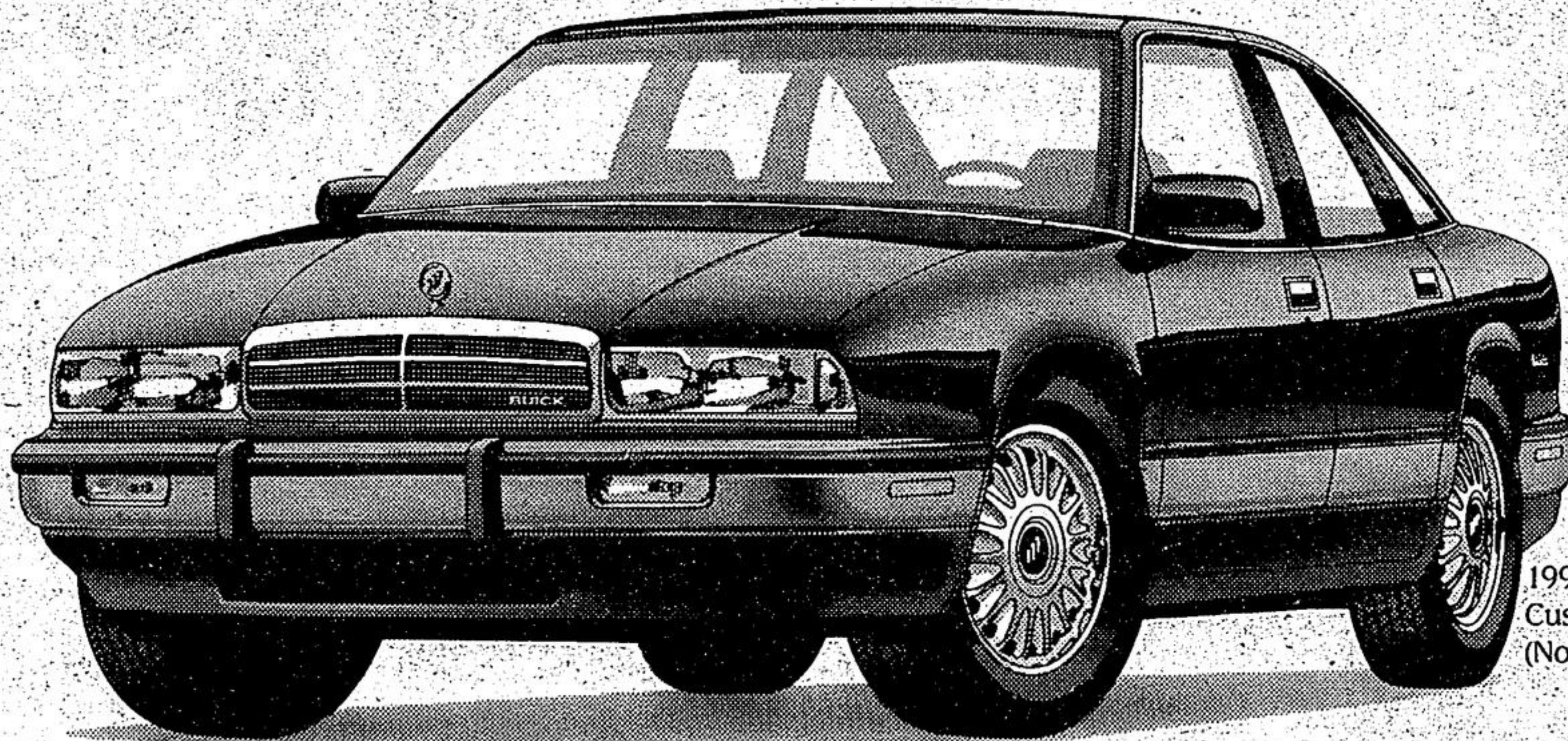
The group even saw steaming hot water being piped out of a still-grumbling volcano. Using a borrowed video camera, John made his first ever travel film, taking a total of six hours worth of film he would eventually edit into a one and a half hour travelogue upon his return home.

John is already looking forward to next year's reunion, counting the days until May 8, 1994.

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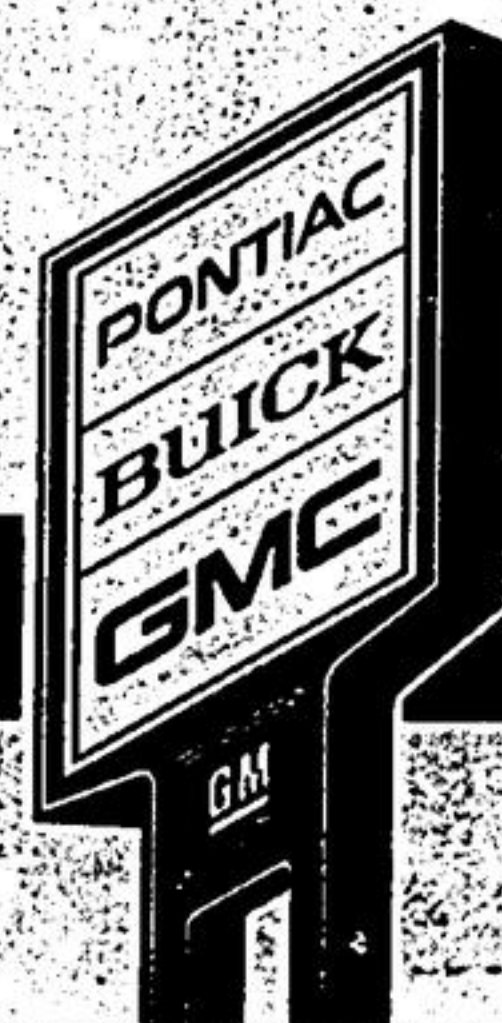
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