

2022
SHOWCASE
- AWARDS -

CEA LIEUTENANT
GOVERNOR'S AWARD
FOR DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT



THE SHAPING OF AN ENGINEER

PAUL RUFFELL'S RELUCTANT JOURNEY

EVEN THOUGH IT'S BEEN almost four years since he retired, Paul Ruffell still speaks about his work as a consulting engineer with the bright-eyed enthusiasm of a first-year undergrad.

"If you really, really like being an engineer, consulting engineering is the best place to be," Ruffell says over Zoom, calling from the Vancouver Island property that he has called home since 2018. "Honestly, sometimes I would have done projects for free, they were so interesting."

Ruffell's passion for the profession isn't just infectious, it's also been incredibly hard-won. And that's why he's the 2022 recipient of the Lieutenant Governor's Award for Distinguished Achievement. Although it would be hard to tell by speaking to him now, he certainly wouldn't describe himself as a "born" engineer. In fact, his retelling of his first exposures to the field that would later become his life's work paint the picture of a somewhat reluctant recruit.

"I didn't have a lot of choices when I left to go to university," Ruffell says. Raised in the village of Hythe in the New Forest, England, Ruffell's earliest career aspirations were to join his father in the shipping industry synonymous with England's southeast coast. A surprise acceptance to the University of Portsmouth initially put those plans on hold, but, following a freshman year that ended with a motorbiking injury and a full slate of incomplete exams, he set sail to work as an oilfield worker during Europe's 1970s boom.

"For a year, I worked for a seismic navigation company where I was the lowest guy on the totem pole ... if there was a crappy job to do, I was the one that did it because I didn't have a degree.

"I would sit in my bunk and say, What's going on here? What am I going to do with my life to move up this ladder? The only thing I could think of was going back to school and getting a degree."

Ruffell returned to university with a newfound drive and completed a degree

in engineering geology and geotechnics. His previous experience working outdoors helped him secure a position with Dutch construction company Volker-Stevin, performing site investigations in the Middle East, North Africa, Malaysia and Indonesia. He took another foray into the unknown in the summer of 1981, joining a team of offshore engineers from Edmonton's EBA Engineering working in the Canadian Arctic. Riding a wave of investment in northern oil exploration, the team from

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EBA tackled projects like extracting soil samples from beneath the frigid waters of the Beaufort Sea and building an artificial island to assist with drilling efforts. Ruffell eventually left EBA in 1990 after the Arctic group transitioned to onshore mining projects, but not before a whirlwind decade that reintroduced him to lessons about teamwork he had first learned playing rugby as a schoolboy.

"The thing that I learned from rugby — and I carried it through to my management style — was that it takes a team to win. [Looking at] that group of guys, they were all brilliant at different things. If you can meld that together, you have the best team ever."

Ruffell spent the next four years working with Laidlaw Waste Systems, learning waste management and exploring the intersection of engineering and the environment. But it wasn't long before he would return to EBA — first as the firm's COO in 1994, before rising up the ranks to president and CEO. That move would also prove to be his last, with Ruffell leading EBA through a 20-year-stretch that saw the company quadruple in size and partner with global consulting and engineering services firm, Tetra Tech.

He served a one-year term as president of the Consulting Engineers of Alberta starting in 2002. He also served two three-year terms as a director, beginning in 2000 and 2013, respectively. These positions allowed him to encounter a new side of the industry he knew so well.

"[CEA] is the one place where all of the consulting engineering companies actually work together for a goal and it's a remarkable place. We all compete like crazy for work, but inside CEA, we actually collaborate. Going from competition to collaboration is really hard, but CEA makes that happen and it makes the business so much better."

Now retired, Ruffell spends his days catching up with his wife and indulging in his love for the outdoors in Vancouver Island's much more forgiving climate ("When you're retired, you've got nothing but time," he laughs. "You sure don't want to be sat behind a window watching it being -30 degrees celsius outside.") But, when he looks back on his career as a consulting engineer, Ruffell sees an industry that is remarkable not just for how it shapes structures and landforms, but people too.

"[I want to] thank my mentors and hopefully encourage other people to [become a consulting engineer and mentor] because it's a noble profession. You take raw clay and you mould it into this thing, and it takes time and patience and sometimes perspiration, but the remarkable thing is that person is immensely enriched by what you do." AI

— TOM NDEKEZI