BROCK'S BANTER: Putting the Puzzle Together

By Brock Weir

People say it's weird, but I simply don't understand such people.
When the opportunity presents itself, I am not ashamed to say I enjoy a stroll in the odd cemetery.
Those naysayers often cite some sort of ?creepy? factor, as though they expect the hand of some long-since departed Sissy Spacek fan grappling through the dirt, reaching up and grabbing onto their ankle.
Others simply think its dangerous, as though a cemetery is some sort of magnet for all varieties of ne'er-do-wells.
But, I don't think it's particularly weird. On a nice day, perhaps best in the cooler early autumn, there are fewer places more relaxing for a walk. It's not only a step back to nature, albeit nature that is manicured within an inch of its life, but it can, if done right, be a step back in time.
Each memorial is unique. Some are very generic markers of a life one hopes was well lived, but others can tell a pretty full story through a few well-placed details.
Some stones feature photos or engravings of those they are placed there to remember. Some have heraldic symbols that represent their family ties, or First Nations symbols reflective of their heritage. One example I saw over the weekend showed a boy taking aim at a net, evidently a permanent reminder of a passionate, promising young athlete whose life was cut far too short. In the end, however, his legacy lives on not only for his family and friends, but anyone who passes by.
At the end of the walk, I feel like I've satisfied an unusual sort of hunger, one for people's stories, perhaps even a quest for truth, and I feel all the richer for it.
I was thinking about this on Sunday afternoon at the annual Aurora Legion Drumhead Service held at the Aurora Cemetery. This Tuesday, September 18, would have been the 100th birthday of my maternal grandfather, William Parr. Sadly, he got little more than a half century under his belt when he died suddenly at home just a few days after his 52nd birthday, so I never had the chance to know him. But, in some ways, I feel I already do.
Despite his death almost exactly 15 years before my birth, he has been a constant presence in my life.
Photos of him in his most dapper duds always abounded in our house, as well as that of my grandmother. Hardly a family occasion went by without someone bringing up a funny memory or simple anecdote about him. There were tales of his youth, the child of two veterans of the First World War. It was a youth filled with no small share of struggle following his own father's early death, but sometimes these instances of angst gave way to amusing, scrappy stories.
Through these stories I considered myself an expert on his exploits on his own field of battle, or, rather, in the air as a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force, who was later taken Prisoner of War after being shot down over Norway in the first years of the Second World War.
Glamour shots of my grandmother, mother and aunt illustrated his post-war life as a fashion buyer for Eaton's, letters sent back home on his international buying trips helped illustrate the man and help me decipher his voice, even if it is a voice I never had the chance to hear with my own ears.
Yet, despite his being lionized within the family, there has always been something that felt just out of reach, missing pieces to the puzzle that only he could share. Somehow I felt cheated and maybe even a bit jealous of those who actually knew him.
His memorial stone in Toronto's Prospect Cemetery reveals very little about the man, aside from the vital stats, but the internet has, in some instances, helped fill in some of the gaps I've yearned for.
His wartime experiences, for example, were always told to me second hand, which added a certain mythological patina to what I had heard.
Enter the Flight Safety Foundation, who has dedicated a great deal of valuable time for preserving these kinds of stories. I was thrilled to find detailed accounts through their service, provided by the men who were in that plane flying over Scandinavia.
?As they flew up Trondheim fjord, the aircraft descended to 150 feet and entered Fættenfjord where the Tirpitz was moored. John Morrison, 1st Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, describes this as entering what appeared to be the entrance to hell. The aircraft was in the German smoke screen and was being fired at by what seemed to be every single weapon in the immediate vicinity.
?Reg Williams shouted that Tirpitz had been swung round 90 degrees. The Canadian Pilot, Johnny Roe, calmly told his crew that they would go round again and have another go. Almost immediately there were sounds that indicated the aircraft had been badly hit in several places. Bill Parr, the Tail Gunner, shouted to Johnny the Pilot to try and make it to Sweden. However, Johnny Roe must have been aware that his aircraft would not make it that far and ordered the crew to make for the ?rest? positions and prepare for a

crash landing. At this, Reg Williams immediately jettisoned the mines that they were carrying.
?The aircraft crash-landed in flames near the small farms, Elverum and Sørmo, just east of Lake Movatnet coming to rest in a small wood. The Canadian Pilot, Johnny Roe had escaped from the front of the aircraft, and had met up with Parr on the Starboard side of the aircraft. Both men were relatively unscathed after the crash and they set off together in an eastward direction hoping to reach Sweden. Two brothers, Gudmund and Petter Trætli from Trætlia Farm recall assisting two airmen that night who had badly burnt hands. They helped to bandage the wounds and also gave the airmen food before giving them directions for the Swedish border. It's most likely that the airmen assisted by the Trætli brothers were the Canadians, Johnny Roe and Bill Parr.?
What followed was a harrowing story of capture, years in POW camps, and the journey home. After that, I knew how to fill in most of the gaps, but these firsthand stories were invaluable in bringing this almost mythical figure back into my life and this resource put me in touch with some of the men who survived the crash, allowing me to hear their recollections in their own voices.
So, in a sense, finding this detailed account was something of a Welcome Back for my late grandfather, and he has been here to stay ever since. After 100 years, the puzzle is almost complete and I will still look for clues wherever I can.
For those of you still lucky to have your grandparents, do your damndest to make sure your puzzle pieces are all present and accounted for while you still have the chance.