

BROCK'S BANTER: Reclaiming Private Smith

Reclaiming Private Allen Smith

By Brock Weir

It was encouraging once again to see such healthy crowds gathered to remember the fallen this Remembrance Day, and the ceremonies preceding it at the Aurora Cenotaph on Sunday morning.

It is a time to reflect not only on members of your own family who were directly impacted by the wars, the hundreds of thousands of men and women, young and old, the memories of whom have become slightly faded over time, but are no less important.

Chances are, with the same passage of time, their relatives are no longer among us. The descendants they left behind might have moved away and moved on, content with the memories they have or the stories that have been passed down the generations.

As I wrote last week, I am very proud of my family's own military service. I shared how my great-grandparents ultimately, and perhaps unusually, found each other on the front. I recalled their son, born less than two months before the war ended, was my grandfather.

What I didn't mention, however, was my grandfather would go on to serve in the Second World War, this time in the RCAF and the RAF before getting shot down over Norway and captured by the Axis as he and his fellow wounded crew were just metres away from neutrality in Sweden.

He served four years as a POW and, before being liberated, had a walk-on role in what was ultimately rebranded as The Great Escape. While all this was going on, his mother, our heroine of last week, returned to the nursing profession, proudly wearing her Silver Cross throughout the remainder of the war, under the mistaken belief shared with the government that her son was missing and presumed dead.

For her, I can only imagine her relief when she was able to take off the Silver Cross, but thousands upon thousands of mothers were unable to experience the same sensation.

Each year, wherever I happen to be for Remembrance Day, I stand proud in the honour and memory of their service. But still, I stood slightly apart. After all, my grandfather and his parents survived their respective wars. For whatever reason, something was on their side, and they returned from Europe physically unscathed, despite the emotional scarring. It might sound silly, but I almost felt like an interloper.

That changed significantly for me on Saturday, however. Last summer, after months of digging, I finally uncovered the burial records of her parents. Since then, I've had a burning desire to track them down and pay my respects. Oddly enough, it turns out they were buried relatively close by, in a town called Greenbank, just northeast of Uxbridge.

Time had never been on my side to get out there, but some feeling nagged at me that if I was ever going to go, Saturday was the best day to do it. So, I did ? and the reasons became all too clear.

Hunting through the Bethel Methodist Cemetery, I found the slightly faded red tombstone of my great-great-grandparents, Elkanah A. Smith and Samantha V. Grant. Below their names listed two of their children who predeceased them and, at the bottom, an In Memoriam marker:

ALLEN LLOYD

15th BTTN C.E.F

BORN 1892. KILLED IN ACTION

ON THE SOMME. SEPT. 26, 1916

AGED 24 YEARS

There he was. There was a memorial to my great-great uncle, Allen Lloyd Smith ? a young man I have never heard mentioned, who fell with his comrades in one of Canada's most important and lengthy collection of battles, remembered in Canada only with a footnote on his parents' graves, a memory lost to the sands of time, killed on the front before the birth of any of my closest relatives. Preliminary research through the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, an invaluable online resource through Veterans Affairs Canada, confirms the service of Private Allan Lloyd Smith [sic] who indeed died on September 26, 1916, complete with the service number 437858.

It confirms the details on the grave adding that although his burial is likely unknown and anonymous, his name is among the thousands memorialised on the iconic memorial at Vimy Ridge.

The Virtual War Memorial produced a small clipping, complete with his photo in uniform, which appeared in the February 4, 1916 edition of the Renfrew Mercury, celebrating his enlistment. The next clipping, dated October 27 of the same year, confirmed his death along with six other young men hailing from Renfrew County.

This discovery, as discoveries like this so often do, has led to more questions than provided answers. Last week, I questioned what inspired my young great-grandmother, Ruby, then not yet 20, to take her nurse's training, pack her bags, and cross the Atlantic to serve at the front.

Now, I have a possible answer above the obvious of answering the call of King and Country. Was she inspired by her brother, two years her senior? Did she have a degree of well-intentioned naiveté that if she was on the front as a nurse, she might ? just might ? be able to do her part to keep Allen out of harm's way?

It can't be a simple coincidence, the article on Allen's enlistment, which he signed while working for the Western Carriage Company in Edmonton, was published on February 4. Ruby enlisted in Toronto on February 3.

So, this year, rather than simply remembering the wartime service of Dr. Russell L. Parr, his eventual wife, nurse Ruby A. Smith, and their pilot son William R. Parr, I focused my moment of silence on my great-great uncle, Allen, lying anonymously in France, memorialised in a very small cemetery in rural Ontario and, until Saturday, an uncle I never knew I had.

He and his comrades remain at rest, presumably near where they fell, but nearly a century on, the forgotten memory of at least one soldier has been firmly repatriated.