

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Clifford Gambell ? An Update

By Stephen Somerville

I was on a business trip last week when I received an e-mail on my private account.

It was from Andrea McKechnie, the daughter of Cliff and Pat Gambell.

I had interviewed them back in 2007 following a column about a Remembrance Day display at Devins Drive. I wrote about meeting them in their home in Barrie and reading about their dad's experiences in the war which he had written down by hand.

Andrea had moved out of Aurora in 2017 but she comes back to Town on a regular basis to visit friends and she noticed that I was still writing this column.

She reached out to let me know that her dad passed away on February 27 at the young age of 99 and that her Mom had passed away in August 2014, after having been married for 71; yes 71 years.

Meeting Andrea's parents has been one of the great pleasures of this volunteer columnist position.

Cliff was a great story teller and you could tell how much he adored Pat.

They both lived long and fulfilling lives surrounded by the ones they loved, which I think is all that one can hope for.

Below are excerpts of the two columns that I had written about Clifford back in February 2009.

On voting day during the 2007 provincial election, I was situated at Devins Drive Public School as an election scrutineer.

I subsequently wrote an election notebook column about the six hours that I spent at the school.

The last item in that column had absolutely nothing to do with politics.

I reproduced the cute poem done by a young student named Kyra about her dog Bailey.

A friend of mine who has a daughter at the school called me and said that my column was pasted on the door to the office, just above the

original poem.

I was obviously flattered by this and thought to myself
that at least my column is meeting a better fate than that sought by some of my
literary critics (and certain family members) who continually suggest a more
appropriate employment for this column would be at the bottom of a bird cage or
in the wrapping of old fish.

In addition to telling me about the poem, my friend wanted
to tell me about the amazing Remembrance Day display at the school.

She had attended the Remembrance Day ceremony at the school
the day before and one of the Veterans present stated to her that the display
was the best that he had seen in his ten years of doing these things.

She went on that each piece of memorabilia in the displays
had a direct connection to a particular student.

She said that I should go and see the exhibits as they
won't be up much longer.

So I did. And I was not disappointed. I was amazed in fact.

I therefore wrote a follow up column about the Remembrance
Day displays.

I wrote at the time that there were lots of things to view;
but one small exhibit caught my attention.

Student's Name:
Tyler McKechnie

Teacher: Mrs.
Taylor

Name of Veteran
(Soldier): James Smith (Tyler's great uncle)

Date of Birth: May
6, 1915

Date of Death:
1975

War Served: World
War II

Position: Private
with British 8th Army in North Africa and then Italy.

It also noted that
he was a 'Desert Rat'. There is also a picture of Mr. Smith.

Tyler's mother,
Andrea McKechnie, saw the column, cut it out of the newspaper and passed it on
to her mother, Pat Gambell, who, after reading it, gave me a call.

Ms. Gambell said
that she enjoyed my column and told me that she had also provided their
grandson Tyler with some of her husband Clifford's war-time memorabilia, which
had also adorned the walls at Devins P.S.

Pat asked if I
would, as a favour to her, read her husband's brief manuscript of his World War
II experiences, and see what I thought of it.

I automatically
said, 'sure'.

So, late last
fall, I went to see Pat and her husband, Clifford G. Gambell in Barrie. They
were so nice and you could just feel the love between the two of them (they
have been married for sixty-five years). I had a most enjoyable couple of hours
with the two of them.

Cliff regaled me
with his many war stories and Pat told me about the first time they met, while
Cliff was stationed in England.

Cliff said that
his family had asked him to write down these experiences; which he did in a
thirty-one page manuscript.

I did not have the
opportunity to read Cliff's work until an extremely cold and snowy Sunday this
past January; once I picked up the manuscript, I did not put it down until I
was finished.

It was absolutely
fascinating reading.

In my next column
I plan to share some of these experiences with you, offer a few thoughts on why
and how we need to preserve the lessons and experiences of our noble freedom
fighters and lastly provide some of the uplifting words of tribute that Andrea
made at her father's funeral.

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