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NOVEMBER 12, 2009

Fruitvale Girl Uncovers War Vets Story

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Valerie Schillaci photo Fruitvale resident Phil Brooks is proud of his granddaughter, Emma Leslie, who flipped through pages of his mother's diary to uncover facts of late relative Hubert Brooks, a Second World War veteran.

Learning about history becomes more personal when family is involved, an 11-year-old Fruitvale girl knows all too well.

Emma Leslie is reflecting on her hero during Veteran Week – it's been a year since she learned about third-cousin Hubert Brooks, a Second World War veteran.

"He was very persistent, smart and brave," said the Grade 6 Fruitvale Elementary School student.

Last year's school project, where Grade 5 students told a story of a Canadian hero, had Leslie studying her nana's old diary and talking with her grandfather – who has been connecting the family roots for over 15 years.

Phil Brooks never met his hero cousin, as he was much younger than Hubert Brooks and back then, it wasn't as convenient to travel and visit family members.

But the Fruitvale resident began digging through his family past about 15 years ago and continues to do so today.

His quest to uncover old ties has been handed down to his granddaughter, who proudly attached a family tree, copy of her nana's diary and outlined Hubert Brook's life history on a Bristol board, one that continues to make appearances at family gatherings.

Brooks, who died in 1984, is remembered as a flight lieutenant with one of the most unusual tales in Royal Canadian Air Force history.

"He fought for what he believed in, he fought for his country, and had a very interesting experience," said Emma.

The Alberta-born Brooks moved to Montreal where he enlisted in the army and trained as a navigator, traveling overseas in the 1940s.

He escaped the Nazis three times, using volunteer work parties as a way to break out of prisoner walls.

After he was shot down in 1942, an injured Brooks was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in southwestern Poland, where he made his first escape attempt.

Brooks cut through a barbed wire fence, snuck past a patrolled area and was at large for eight days before Poles carrying Nazi favours betrayed him.

He returned to the village known as Lamsdorf, where he was punished with 14 days of solitary confinement. But not long after, Brooks was assigned to a railway repair crew, where he and five others escaped in pairs from the work barracks. They made it as far as Vienna, where they were found hiding on a freight train. Brooks was sent back to Lamsdorf for another 14 days of solitude.

Though he had made two escape attempts, Brooks was put on yet another work crew at a sawmill, where he stockpiled chocolate and other articles from the Red Cross. He and another British soldier sawed through steel bars and successfully fled the camp.

"He escaped the Nazis three times and instead of laying low he joined the Polish Army," said Emma.

Though his remarkable escapes have been noted in history, much of Brooks' efforts with the Polish Army have never been described.

Now sifting through old diary entries, both Emma and her grandfather are filling in historical gaps. Information will be provided to the Legion for further recording.

Also an athlete, Brooks played on the Royal Canadian Air Force Flyers hockey team, which competed and won gold in the 1948 Olympics.

He married a Danish woman, Birthe Grontved, in St. Moritz, Austria, with Olympic gold medal skater Barbara Anne Scott as the maid of honour and Dr. Sandy Watson, coach of the Flyers, as the best man.

“It was between an arch of hockey sticks and with Barbara Ann Scott as a bridesmaid that I married Birthe Grontved, a Danish girl I met in Copenhagen,” it was paraphrased in Phil’s mom’s diary from the ‘30s.

“He was in solitary confinement for days, only eating bread and drinking water, he was taught Polish by an 80-year-old Polish lady who lived right next door to a German spy . . . he was the only Canadian member of the Polish army,” said Emma, citing facts she learned while studying the diary.

Emma started reading before she was three years old and has always loved history.

Her photographic memory serves her well, said grandma Carol Brooks, who continues to support her husband’s passion for genealogy.

“You may find some skeletons in the closet, but you’ll find some heroes too,” she said of uncovering the past.

Remembrance Day is a time of reflection for all Canadians, some of who have particular family members in mind, others who just give thanks to all the soldiers who sacrificed their lives.

Emma will have one hero in mind.

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