

Frank's Early Years / WWII

Bell Island is a rugged, but stunningly beautiful big rock off the coast of Portugal Cove, not far from St. John's in Newfoundland. My father's family emigrated from Wales to Bell Island in 1792. To strengthen the gene pool, my ancestors would travel to Nova Scotia to find suitable brides, (thank goodness). The family grave markers in the cemetery in Lance Cove where many of my early family members were laid to rest, includes one woman who died in 1823 with my own full name!

When the iron ore mine was opened in the 1890s, prosperity came to the Island. As a child, I recall visiting relatives there in the 1960s and wondering why all the dogs were pink. And most of the houses were pink too. Turns out the iron ore turns dog hair pink, but the pink houses were the result of the government giving free paint to the residents of the island in fuchsia, of all colours.

My father Frank, the first son of Julia and Leslie, was born on the second floor of his grandfather's house on Bell Island, with a shock of red hair and supposedly weighing in at over 13 lbs.

But Newfoundland was hit hard by the depression, and when he was five the growing family moved to Toronto in 1929, settling in the Danforth / Pape area.

Frank went to Danforth Tech, and in 1942 at the age of 18, he joined the Air Force. I was listening to him give a talk to some high school students at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa and one of the kids asked him why he chose the Air Force rather than the Navy or Army. He replied that at the time his feet hurt and he thought it would be better to stay off them.

He was sent to Saskatchewan for flight training and then to England in 1943. He was a Navigator of Mosquitos – a small “British twin-engined, shoulder-winged multirole combat aircraft” that was made primarily out of wood to avoid radar detection.

Frank (or Red as he was called) was in the 409 squadron called the Nighthawks. It was the first night fighter squadron to cross over to Normandy following the Allied landings and operate from the Continent, and the first to be stationed in Belgium and Germany.

He returned home in 1945 at the end of the WWII, with the rank of Pilot Officer. Years later, when concerned about chronic neck pain, Frank's family doctor inquired if he had been in any accidents. Frank hesitated and then asked, “Do plane crashes count?” He survived three; one in Saskatchewan, one in Lille, France in 1944, and one in Germany in 1945.

Frank was on the troop ship on the St. Lawrence Seaway in August 1945, still in wartime blackouts, coming home after VE Day for a one month furlough before being sent to the Pacific war, when the lights came on in the ship. The Japanese had surrendered and he could come home for good.

His beloved fiancée, Peggy, whom he met before he went overseas, was waiting for him in Exhibition Stadium when they were marched in. He broke rank and ran into the stands to embrace her, much to the chagrin of his mother who was also anxiously waiting to see her boy returned to her.

The rest is history. My history, actually. Frank and Peggy were married in September 1945 and over the next nine years had a boy and a girl. They lived a comfortable life in Don Mills and had been married for over 65 years when Peggy passed away. Frank lived to be 96, sore neck and all.