

A sombre salute to a reluctant hero

Leading up to November 11, I'm usually on the lookout for a story to remind us of the importance of remembering.

A few weeks ago, my longtime friend and war veteran Shell Lawr dropped by the office to suggest a Remembrance Day story idea.

"Did you ever consider doing a story on Red Asseltine and what he did during the war?" Shell asked. "It's one helluva story."

"Red Asseltine was a war hero?" I asked incredulously, "What exactly did he do?"

Shell explained that he didn't have all the details, but he suggested I could talk to his regiment's commanding officer, since he lives in Toronto. He offered to get the name and address.

For those who never knew Walter "Red" Asseltine, my contact with him was when he was the dispatcher with Halton Hills Fire Department. Many was the time I heard his calm deep voice on my scanner in the wee hours as he sent firefighters to another call.

I liked Red, and enjoyed his relaxed manner as he relayed messages over the radio. I did know he was a veteran, but only because I'd seen him at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day.

At age 81, Red Asseltine died last September.

"He'd never allow the story to be told when he was alive," said Shell, "Hell, he wouldn't even talk about it. I was his friend and he wouldn't tell me. I just know he was quite a hero."

After requesting Shell clear it with Red's family, I set out on my quest to learn what Cpl. Walter "Red" Asseltine actually did in Europe.

An interview with Hon. Lt. Col. Paul La Prairie in Toronto was my first step. A Saturday afternoon listening to dates, locations and reminiscences of Red's heroic act set the stage.

As a member of the carrier platoon of the Irish Regiment of Canada, Asseltine led an attack against 300 enemy soldiers in the Dutch town of Otterloo. Armed with a flame thrower and Bren gun, against incredible odds, he was responsible

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for clearing a section that changed the strategic picture of the town. The enemy retreated.

With 70 dead German soldiers in his wake, Asseltine was a changed man. He received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions—actions that probably saved more of his own Regiment than he was willing to accept.

Two interviews with his kids, and sifting through old Regimental records of the event rounded out my research. The story appears in today's Remembrance Day special section.

The most significant fact was Red's attitude. He felt he wasn't a hero, simply a soldier taking orders and responding to his country's need.

I think a hero is an ordinary person who does extraordinary things, in the face of impossible odds—with no concern for his own personal well-being. After all the data I've waded through this week, I've come to one definite conclusion:

Red Asseltine was indeed a true hero, a person who accomplished great things, against incredible odds, without demanding, or even liking, the attention he received. Perhaps a reluctant hero, but a hero, nonetheless. The world is full of Red Asseltines. Each has a story to be told, each has had a cross to bear as a result.

And each must be remembered.

I salute Red Asseltine, and offer my sincere thanks to his kids for allowing the story be told.

I think we're all much richer for it.



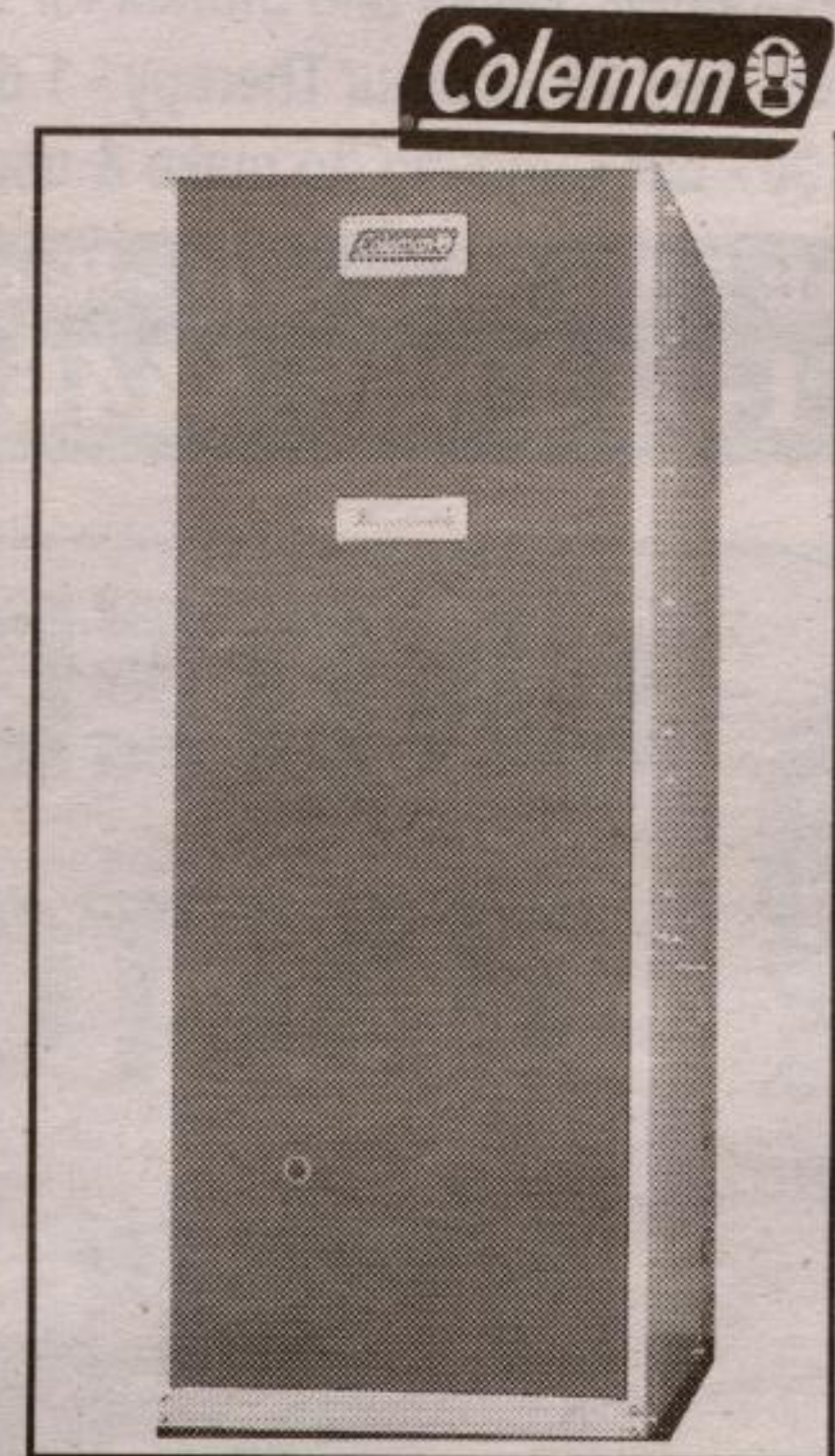
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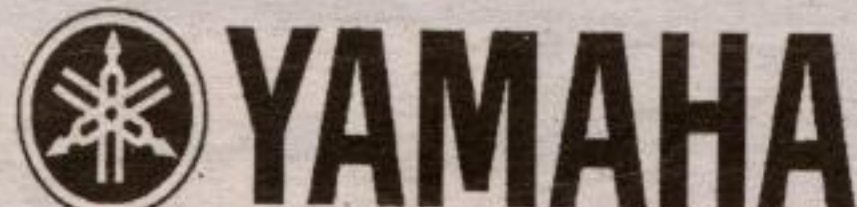
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Join Ean Algar, Halton Region Police Chief, Joyce Savoline, Chairman, Halton Region, Brent Marshall, Chief Administrative Officer, Halton Region and guests Wayne Gould, Emergency Planning Coordinator, Dr. Bob Nosal, Medical Officer of Health, Jim King, Director, Ambulance Services and Steve Thurlow, Chief, Burlington Fire Department for a panel discussion.

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