

## COLD COMFORT

By Frank Green

For some strange reason, the return of the warm weather takes me back to 1989 and the Ontario college strike that began in late October and dragged on as “the storms of November came early” for the strikers as they had for the unlucky sailors of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

At Fanshawe College in London we striking teachers tried to contend with morale falling as quickly as the temperatures while we picketed at the college’s three blustery entrances. With a fire barrel at each picket line as the only respite from the bitter cold wind from the Northwest, we felt like workers in a Siberian Gulag as we took turns standing around the barrel for a few minutes of warmth. Then it was back to the numbing trudge around the circle of the picket line interrupted now and then by the cry “Heads up, there’s a car coming!”

Unfortunately it seemed that by noon every day the fuel supply of scrap wood from broken pallets would run out.

On Friday of the first week of cold weather, the morning shift was surprised to find a big pile of scrap lumber by each of the barrels. Even the picket captains didn’t know the source of this bounty. From then on every morning saw our fuel supply magically replenished. Where the wood was coming from remained one of the great mysteries of the strike, as much a subject for picket line speculation as the murky schemes of Management, but much more heartening.

One Saturday eight years later old Hal McLary and I were having a beer in the CAW Hall near the college. Hal, a 79 year-old veteran of the Second World War, was telling me about the war for the first and only time. (“I don’t like to talk about it, cuz people think you’re B\*\*\* S\*\*\*\*ing.”)

I learned how, with three friends, he lied to enlist at 16 and after basic training in Canada the four of them were sent to England where they stayed for a couple of years before taking part in the D Day invasion. In England Mackenzie King came to give the troops a supposedly inspirational speech, but “the old bastard was boring, so we booed him ‘til he quit talking.”

In Europe they served under Field Marshall Montgomery. Hal appreciated Monty’s caution, not wishing to lose men in overly risky battles. On the other hand, the fact that Monty didn’t allow them to seek out pubs and whore houses was less appreciated.

Hal told me that after some time he threw away his Canadian rifle and used a German gun that he had picked up along with sufficient ammunition. “It was much more accurate.” Hal was also convinced that the German soldiers feared the Canadians more than any other opposing nationality due to their unpredictability. “They thought we were f\*\*\*ing nuts.”

Shortly before the end of the war, all three of Hal’s friends were killed in combat. In his gravelly voice Hal said, “the nightmares aren’t as bad now.” Then he smiled a sad smile.

Hal then told me that after retiring from his regular job as a mechanic, he had worked as a security guard at Fanshawe College including during the strike of 1989. While working the night shift he had delivered scrap lumber to the picket lines. Mystery solved!

One morning his boss, a young company climber, said, “Hal, one of our half-tons was seen delivering wood to the strikers last night. Did you see that?”

“Yeah, I saw it,” said Hal.

“Who was driving that truck?” the boss demanded.

“Why, I was,” said Hal.

“You can’t do that!” she sputtered. “They’re on strike! It’s against college policy! It’s against the law! Why did you do that?”

“It’s cold out there,” said Hal.

“You know, Hal,” I said, “I’m going to make damn sure that the union at the College learns about what you did for us during that awful strike!”

So it was that on another Saturday afternoon several weeks later at the CAW Hall, I presented Hal with a letter from the union and on behalf of all OPSEU, bought him a beer.

In part, the letter reads: “Please accept our belated thanks on behalf of all the members of Local 110 and of the entire Ontario Public Service Employees Union. All the teachers, counsellors and librarians at the College appreciate your kindness and courageous support at that difficult time. You are a true humanitarian.”

The letter was signed by the President of Local 110, Paddy Musson and by Leah Casselman, President of OPSEU.

Hal was very pleased to receive the letter and his friends were happy for him too. Little Billy Smith, retired carpenter, is going to frame the letter for him free of charge. “No f\*\*\*ing problem, no f\*\*\*ing charge for f\*\*\*ing ole Hal!” said Bill, (the club rule against rude language being more honoured in the breach than the observance.)

Hal, a bit of a diamond in the rough, remained modest in the face of this honour, as he said, “All this fuss just for stealing some f\*\*\*ing scrap lumber!”

But I knew Hal was tickled when he said, “I’ll hang that letter with my medals.”