

# An Untold Story

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Great-Uncle Nelson never existed. His was a name never spoken; his faded picture stood, immovable, unquestioned, on a shelf amid Grandma's cherished china.

*He was a kind-hearted young man, a caring older brother with a gentle temperament.*

*He loved being outdoors and would pick fine mushrooms for our family to enjoy. He worked on a large dairy farm, where he met your grandfather. Your grandmother moved to be close to him when she began teaching. That's how your grandparents met; Nelson introduced them.*

I went hunting to find the untold story of a soldier in a Mennonite family. Who was this beloved brother of my grandmother? I searched the attic of the old farmhouse for his letters, and I came up empty-handed. I sorted through keepsakes that had been sitting in untouched boxes for over a decade. I found his page from the Books of Remembrance:

P/O Groh, Nelson Hagey RCAF

Pilot of a Halifax bomber.  
Killed during a training accident, cause unknown.

But there has to be more to his story than a single line on a page, or an overseas grave among thousands.

*He loved to collect butterflies, and had a marvellous collection. Fascinated with nature, he belonged outdoors, discovering plants. Perhaps your father reminds me of him in his love of horticulture.*

I wanted to know more. I made regular visits to my great-aunt, the remaining member of Grandma's generation. We watch my infant son play and she tells me about her brother. She was young when he left, with only the memories of a child. But there are memories. Stories silent for some 70 years.

*When World War II began, Mennonite communities sent leaders to Ottawa, who negotiated for our boys to be exempt from conscription, known as conscientious objectors (COs), but theirs is another story.*

*Nelson trained for his pilot's license. Sometimes for fun he would fly over the school where your grandmother was teaching. When he joined up [he was] already a pilot. He was selected for the Air Force, which he had wanted. He*

*trained in Winnipeg and we saw very little of him.*

*When his training was complete he had a final furlough, three weeks of leave before traveling to England. He came from Winnipeg to be on the family farm with us. Those weeks were terribly pleasant for us children. No one spoke of Nelson leaving for the war. I was young, and if there was tension between him and my parents, I didn't know. We all believed he would come home.*

*I vividly recall Mother weeping. The man delivering the telegram told Father, "You and your family can be very proud of your son."*

*I remember Father responding, "No, we're not."*

His parents were ashamed of him. My great-aunt says before they died, they came to believe in a necessary war, and found peace with Nelson's death. However, the memories my dad and his sister share regarding their grandparents are certain they disowned him.

*Whether or not you choose to agree, remember he was a man of strength. He could have been a CO; his community and family expected him to stay home, but he chose to do what he believed was right. I suspect he felt a debt to England, for allowing our people to settle in Ontario*

*and practice our faith without persecution.*

Perhaps I'll never understand, but I will not let him be reduced to simple facts. I find myself bound to the recovery of his memory. Did he wrestle with the morality of killing? Was he proud of his service? Nelson had family who dearly loved him, yet they silenced his memory. Was their shame so deep, a statement of the extent they shunned him? Perhaps they didn't know how to address their own moral confusion and grief.

Visits to my great-aunt are precious. She holds my baby and shares her memories. She thanks me for asking about Nelson. There is no one left who knew her brother, but in sharing with me his memory, he is allowed to live. And as I am bound to his story, my son will grow up knowing he spent hours with his great-great-aunt. My son will grow up knowing of Uncle Nelson. **END**

