

Walkie-talkie inventor hides brilliance in buffer of modesty



Pete McMartin

A B.C. sculpting team will build a snowy tribute to Donald Lewes Hings at a national competition.

We first heard about Donald Lewes Hings from a 35-year-old man named David Billings, who — when he isn't selling electric motors for a living — is a professional snow and sand sculptor.

Billings is a member of the three-man sculpting team named the Sandemons, and he phoned to tell us they had been selected to represent B.C. in the Canada Snow Sculpture Contest in Ottawa Feb. 7.

For the contest, Billings said, teams are being asked to do a snow sculpture of a local legendary figure who has had a substantial impact on their home province or Canada in the last 100 years.

After much research, he said, the Sandemons have decided to do a sculpture honouring the legendary Donald Hings.

We said:

Who the hell is Donald Hings?

He is in his living room, where his bed has been set up. He is wearing pyjamas, and a volume of *The Best of Robert Service* is on the bed beside him. Not a month ago, his wife died in that same room, in her bed. That was where she wanted to die, Hings said, not in a hospital. They were a pair.

Hings is lean in his old age — his skull grown close to his scalp, his skin the shiny translucence of polished stone. He is 93.

His house is on a big lot on the very highest point of north Burnaby's Capitol Hill. He has lived there for more than 50 years. Hings was a 10-year-old when he first saw Capitol Hill; he was on a Boy Scout outing. He stood on a stump and decided then and there that this was where he would live. He would end up buying about 2 1/2 city blocks worth of it. When he and his wife built their home there in the late 1940s, theirs was the only house there.

This is who Donald Hings is: To a very few people in this province and country, Hings is famous for inventing, among other things, the first true walkie-talkie.

Never a self-promoter, he is slow to make this claim himself. He prefers to say his model



HELPED WAR EFFORT: Donald Lewes Hings with the C-58 walkie-talkie that he invented in 1937.

can only be seen as part of a progression of the existing technology. Encyclopedias might concur — American encyclopedias, anyway: They say the walkie-talkie was invented in 1933, by a team of U.S. Army technicians in Monmouth, N.J.

But there was nothing "walkie" or "talkie" about the early U.S. model, Hings says: It relayed only Morse code, and was mobile only in that it drew its power from the battery of the motorcycle on which it was mounted.

Hings' model, which he invented in 1937 while working for Cominco in Trail, could be carried on the back, and sent and received voice messages. He gave company pilots and miners the ability to converse with each other, without benefit of telephone lines, over vast distances.

He called it the "Packset."

It was a Toronto reporter that came up with "walkie-talkie."

"The sensitivity [of his model] was greater than anything they could have dreamed of," Hings said of the U.S. prototype. "And for the first time, you had voice."

"Anyway," he allowed, shrugging, as if it weren't worth speaking of, "it was a new method of transmission."

The Canadian and British governments thought so, too. He patented it, and offered it to the government and the British high command without royalties, as his contribution to the war effort. He was moved to Ottawa to work for the National Research Council during the war years. About 18,000 walkie-talkie units of Hings' design were manufactured during the

Second World War. It would be safe to say their effect on the war was profound, saving untold number of lives and providing soldiers with a reliable means of battlefield communication they wouldn't have had otherwise.

After the war, he moved to Burnaby, built his house and set up a compound on Capitol Hill that included a lab and his business, Electronic Laboratories of Canada Ltd. To keep his staff of 15 close by, he sold them housing lots on the hill for the same price he paid for them. Hings, who had no university education, was self-taught, a research scientist of the first rank. His interests led Electronic Laboratories into geophysical surveys, radar research, television transmission, plastics ... those fields of science a big, half-empty country like Canada needed.

"Dad smoked a pipe," his daughter, Elaine Cramer, told me, "and when he was asked to invent something, he'd be really quiet for a few weeks and read everything he could get his hands on, and then, when he got an idea, pretty soon you'd see his pipe going full steam, just like smoke signals. Usually, it took him about 2 1/2 months to come up with something."

He is a Member of The Order of Canada.

He has more than 50 patents. One of them is the electric piano.

Yes, the electric piano.

During our interview, he conversed about geophysics, the effect of sunlight on radio transmission, the property of gases at high altitude ... he showed a Renaissance-like

hungriness to understand the physical world around him. He did so without a shred of conceit. Like many accomplished men and women of his generation, the overriding impression Hings gives is of a man of overwhelming intelligence wrapped in a buffer of modesty.

"We would say to him," Elaine says, "Dad! Dad! When are you going to tell people you're the man who invented the walkie-talkie?" We as his kids so wanted people to know.

"But my mom was so private, and really liked her privacy, and so did Dad. He kept quiet about his accomplishments. He didn't want it to be invasive of his personal life."

"Anonymity," Hings said. "The way I like it."

David Billings is on the phone. How, he is asked, did he come up with Hings as a subject for a snow sculpture.

"Well," he says, "we needed someone who made an impact. We could have just picked Terry Fox or some of these other guys, but that's not something we wanted to do. We wanted someone who was a little bit obscure, but who had a huge impact."

He is asked about the sculpture he and the Sandemons are planning to do.

"It's 12 feet wide by 12 feet long by 16 feet tall. It'll be a Red Cross soldier from World War II talking into a C-58 walkie-talkie — the one invented by Hings."

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