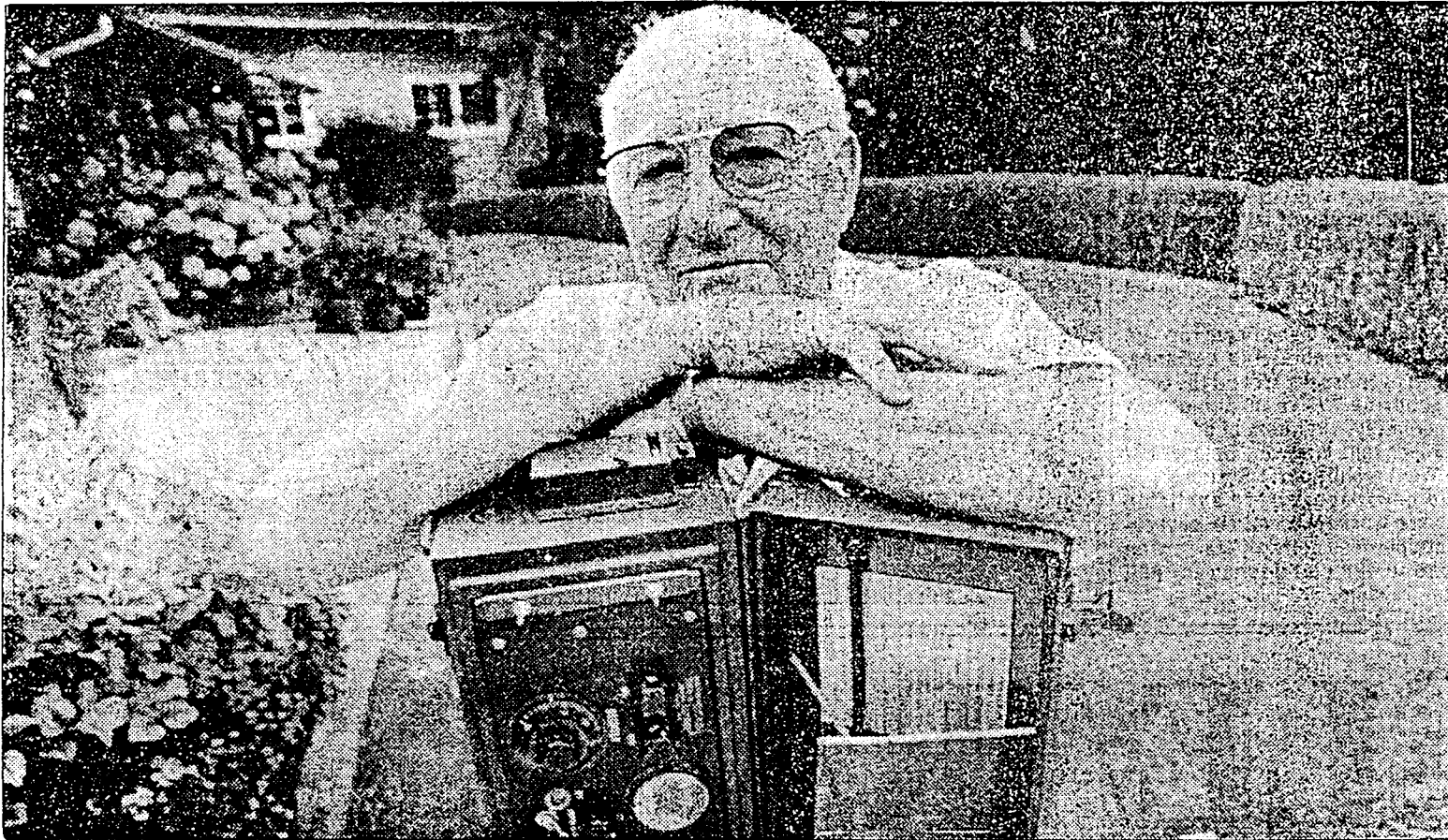


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COMINCO INVENTION: 80-year-old Donald Hings with the walkie-talkie that he developed in 1937

B.C. inventor of walkie-talkie saluted

By HAROLD MUNRO

Donald Hings' invention started with radio waves at Cominco smelters in Trail and saw service on battlefields in northern Europe during the Second World War.

Hings, now 80, developed the walkie-talkie in 1937 when he was the communications and geophysics expert for Cominco in southeastern B.C.

The Burnaby resident is one of several Canadian innovators being saluted at the Bravo Canada Pavilion, an initiative of the federal government, at the Pacific National Exhibition.

Like many inventions ahead of their time, the walkie-talkie impressed few people apart from the Cominco pilots who used them on flights over northern B.C. and the Northwest Territories.

With the flip of a switch, a base station in Trail could communicate with an airplane crew 1,600 kilometres away in the Northwest Territories.

But nobody south of Trail was listening until the Second World War came along.

Hings was on one of several trips to Spokane, Wash., in 1939 to have his creation patented in the U.S. when the war began.

"I remember walking out of the patent chamber and there were these kids waving newspapers and saying that war had been declared," Hings recalled.

Suddenly the army envisioned portable two-way radio transmitters on the backs of Canadian soldiers.

Hings was lent to the National Research Council in Ottawa by Cominco, which continued to pay his salary throughout the war.

"Just after Dieppe (in the summer of 1942) we introduced the first model in England," Hings said. "Of course the vets from Dieppe were tough boys."

The aluminum-cased models could not withstand the battering by Canadian troops crashing through an obstacle course.

Hings and his researchers went back to the drawing board and came up with a durable steel casing to protect the tangle of delicate electronic components and tubes. In the next five years the research team developed 12 models.

"By the time the army got through with them, they had to be built like tanks," the inventor joked.

About 18,000 walkie-talkies, with a range of up to 16 kilometres, were assembled during the war at a factory in Ontario. The transmission unit was also adapted for use in tanks.

When the war ended, Hings settled in Burnaby.

At normal rates of royalties the invention should have earned Hings hundreds of thousands of dollars and allowed him to live out his life as a wealthy man.

But Hings had to sue the government for royalties, and after spending years in the courts the commissioner of patents awarded him \$15,000. The amount was nearly enough to pay his legal fees.

Still, Hings said the walkie-talkie and 22 other electronic patents he holds have given him more satisfaction than money could buy.

"The war years were exciting times to be involved in communications," Hings said.

Today the little-known inventor tinkers in his backyard with gadgets that measure atmospheric pressure and substances, just a poke or prod away from another discovery.