JIM RANKIN / TORONTO STAR

PROUD DESCENDANTS: Claudette Wright, flanked by children Lynne and Brian, stands yesterday beside a plaque on Queen St. W. to World War I hero Filip Konowal. He was Claudette's grandfather.

Legion honors Victoria Cross winner

Filip Konowal remembered as a war hero

BY JIM RANKIN
STAFF REPORTER

Filip Konowal was fed up with the waist-deep water he had been standing in during a battle for a piece of land in France, so he climbed out of the trench, destroyed some enemy installations and became a hero of World War I.

Claudette Wright never knew much about Konowal the war hero.

To her, he was just Grandpa.

But yesterday, Wright, and her two grown children, Brian and Lynne, learned about the Ukrainian-born soldier's military achievement.

Konowal was honored post-humously with the unveiling of a bronze plaque on the wall outside the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 360, on Queen St. W.

"He never talked about the war too much," said Wright, standing near the plaque where more than 100 members of the Ukrainian community, war veterans and politicians gathered to honor Konowal, who died in 1959.

In August, 1917, in the battle for Hill 70 near Lens, France, Konowal, who had volunteered for service with the 47th Canadian Infantry Battalion, stepped out of the trench, stormed forward and mopped up enemy machinegun installations with his rifle and bayonet.

Bullets whistled by his body as he charged. He took out three enemy soldiers holed up in a basement and took on seven more attempting to move a machinegun.

His exploits led to a visit with King George V, and a Victoria Cross award for bravery — the only one handed to a Ukrainian-Canadian. The king was so impressed, he told the soldier he was one of the most daring in his entire army.

"When we were young, I don't remember him ever talking about it ... He was a very quiet man," said Wright.

Konowal joined the war effort with hopes of making money to provide for his wife and daughter he left behind in Ukraine.

They were killed in the war, and Konowal settled eventually in the Ottawa area, where he married a Canadian.

Konowal was a humble man. After his military career, he took on a janitorial job at Parliament Hill.

When Prime Minister Mackenzie King discovered he had a war hero mopping the floors, he appointed him caretaker of his office — a position Konowal held until he died at the age of 72.

Ironically, while Konowal and 10,000 other Ukrainian-Canadian soldiers were fighting in the war, the Canadian government was labelling their families enemy aliens and detaining them.

"People are going to be interested that he (Konowal) was one of us," said James Moysey, 73, a World War II, Ukrainian-Canadian war vet and Branch 360 member.

"It's quite pleasant to know that one of us is a deserving son."

Branch 360, which has long held Konowal as its honorary patron, plans to establish the Konowal prize — a scholarship that will give students from Ukraine a chance to study at Kingston's Royal Military College.