Do we dare forget?

Remembrance Day '90



by Chris Racine

The italicized excerpts are from "Thoughts Under Fire: Memoirs of Captain John P. Clingo 1914-1918."

What are your plans for November 11? Will you be lying in bed trying to survive the night before at the Hilltop/Cos/Rogue/etc?

Perhaps you'll try to get caught up on some reading, long neglected or that paper due at the end of the term? Perhaps you'll spend the day watching American football and listening to sportscasters try to sound knowledgeable and unique in their explanation of a play you've seen a hundred times? Sure. Sunday is a loving day, but you still have quite a few options. Don't you?

Here's an option you might want to think about. Take a stroll down to any commemorative monument in your area and take a good look at what you will see. Perhaps you have already been to a Remembrance Day Ceremony. What did you see? A group of blue-blazered men and women shuffling along a little slowly, but purposefully, toward a stone cairn? Seen regularly but only focused once a year? Perhaps you remember the people lining the parade route or taking up vantage points near the monument where they might see all that is to occur. Young mothers, hurrying restlessly and curious children, older women, perhaps privately remembering a lost loved one. People of all ages brought together to witness the yearly event, quietly and thoughtfully. There is no obligation to show outwardly one's feelings or even to attend, no calls for cheers and applause. Prayer is offered and accepted freely and reverently, as surely those who fought for our freedom and paid the ultimate cost would want it to be.

So why do we celebrate Remembrance Day at all? What draws so many people from their homes and other attractions out into the cold for a seemingly unexciting and boringly repetitive gesture? Do they fear that others will think badly of them if they do not attend? Perhaps some do, but it's not likely. Do they feel that they might be missing something? Well, it's the same ceremony every year, and they can watch the grand daddy of Remembrance Day ceremonies broadcast live from Ottawa if they want the best. There has to be something more substantial to the matter to explain why this phenomenon occurs... Why do so many people come together this one time of the year, and what do they have in common?

From the mud and blood of Flanders to the brooding hills of Korea, Canadian servicemen have fought proudly and bravely for freedom and a return to peaceful coexistence. When we honour our war dead on November 11, we are paying tribute to those who have given up that most precious possession, the spark of life. Canadians are not a warlike people, but they have proven to be warriors of the highest calibre when called upon to do their part. Through two World Wars and a United Nations policing action in Asia, Canadians served voluntarily and risked their lives to protect freedom.

He died as a good man would. Leading his men against machine guns that were playing havoc with his comrades.

In 1914 when the First World War broke out across Europe, Canada had only a minuscule Regular military force barely surviving from one year to the next. The part-time forces, although numerous, were only partly trained and under-equipped, yet they answered the call. These 57,000 militiamen and some 3,000 regulars were the backbone of a huge, (for Canada at least) civilian wartime army, as well as significant numbers of flyers and sailors who served both in Canadian and British units. Ultimately Canada would field a powerful force of four divisions of infantry, cavalry and a machine gun brigade. They were highly and widely regarded as an efficient and hard-hitting body of shock troops. Battles such as Ypres, the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele and Caurcelette proved their bravery and skill but the pay back was expensive. Some 60,661 Canadians died in the First World War. They were volunteers, mostly very young, to achieve a return to peace. They, themselves had already found it.

He had just reached the man he was making for, who was living rather exposed to the enemy, when I saw him stop. His body gave one convulsed shudder and then lay perfectly still, and I knew that another good man had gone.

It is a generally accepted belief, that Canada truly "came of age" through the sacrifices made by the men of the Canadian Corps in World War I. I have no idea what the term implies in this instance, I only know that the men of the Corps were, from top to bottom, acutely aware of their identity as Canadians, and guarded their unique distinction and role jealously. Their achievements are recorded facts, as are their sacrifices.

The peace won in 1918 and regularized the next year at Versailles, was destined to last only two decades. Once again the threat to world peace became reality, and once again Canada answered the call for help. The Second World War although fought on a much broader scale and with more powerful weapons, would cost Canada considerably less in terms of human life than World War I had. Beginning in late 1939, an increasing number of Canadians boarded ships at Montreal, Saint John and Halifax to begin their journey overseas. Again the army would send the largest contingent, but significant numbers of men served in the Royal Air Force and the fledgeling Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Additionally, Canadians served in an ever growing Royal Canadian Navy, (RCN) whose main task was to keep the supply lines to Britain open by defeating the German U-boat menace.

Though Canadian ground troops were not committed to battle in large numbers until later in the war, Air Force and Navy losses were felt almost immediately. Canadians participated in the Battle of Britain, (both in Canadian units as members of the R.A.F) and as the war progressed casualties mounted as Canadian aircrews flew increasingly dangerous missions over occupied Europe.

Their faith in us was boundless, but we could not do miracles. I only trust that they realized that we had done our best.

Overlord, of June 6, 1944 was the commencement of the final phase of the European War. It saw the engagement of all remaining Canadian units which had been waiting patiently in England for their opportunity. The fighting was fierce and the Canadians, unlike their German opponents, were overwhelmed by green troops who had never been in combat before. The Canadians earned their experience the hard way, paying in blood. Total Canadian fatal casualties in the Second World War were 42,042, with the largest share (over half) borne by the Army.

As I look back now I marvel that anybody ever came out of that wood at all.

The invasion of South Korea by North Korean forces in June 1950 saw the involvement of many United Nations contingents, Canadians among them, much as the situation in the Persian Gulf today has unfolded. Fortunately, in the present instance, no hostilities have broken out between the two sides, but this was not the case in 1950. Canadian troops, all volunteers, once again proved their ability and bravery, especially the Second Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (or PPCLI, as they are more commonly known). This unit withheld sustained attacks by thousands of Chinese troops, who appeared to be using the suicidal "bangai" type attack common to Japanese troops in the Second World War.

Over 25,000 Canadians served in Korea as members of the Army, Navy and Air Force. In the various wars of this century (not including the Boer War) over 100,000 Canadians have given their lives for the cause of freedom and peace. In defying aggression through superior strength of arms, they took part in some of the worlds most crucial struggles against tyranny and oppression. In the process, these men and women helped define what it is to be a Canadian, and the way in which others around the globe regard our country. It is unlikely that a majority of them, or even a minority, spent much time pondering the greater issues of world peace and freedom, but their contribution does not suffer for that. As Remembrance Day once again draws near, it may be worthwhile to ponder the value of their sacrifice. How highly do you value your life and your way of life?

Sure, we gripe about taxes and incompetent politicians, but we're perfectly free to do so, without fear of reprisal or censure. You've got to love a system like that, as opposed to one that ships you off to the gulag, or muzzles you with repressive laws! These Canadians we remember helped buy your freedom. They may not have seen it as a crusade, but that is how it turned out. I am constantly thankful that these men, and many others of their contemporaries in British, American, Indian as well as other armies, had the bravery and unselfishness to face the fears and doubts of combat. Lest we forget, dare we forget?