

Bill Rea ? I've never known war

Tomorrow (Friday) will see people pausing to remember the millions who have fallen in wars.

In Canada, Remembrance Day is a time for remembering those who fell for this country in two World Wars and other conflicts. In recent memory, many Canadians have lost their lives serving in places like Afghanistan.

But as I have added years to my outlook, I have come to believe that those on the other side also must be remembered.

My grandfather, the man after whom I was named, was a young Irish lad, barely in his 20s, when the First World War began. He fought, but did not die (I think I'm living proof of that). I don't believe he fought against evil men. He was one of many thousands of pawns who was up against a comparable number of other pawns, following the orders of men who were marching to the orders of men above them (in the early 20th century, there weren't many women issuing orders).

Pope Benedict XVI was a member of Hitler's Youth when he was a kid. He had no choice. He was under the authority of men who were answering to those above them. At the top was something evil, but that repulsiveness didn't filter all the way down. Our German allies and trading partners today are the children and grandchildren of those who Canadians fought against in two World Wars.

I think it has to be acknowledged in these days that war is something of an abstract to most people; something that takes place in other parts of the world. But have not terrorists demonstrated their acts of war can happen just about anywhere? That lesson should have been driven home with 9-11. And it's a little more than two years ago that a man attacked the Parliament of this country. None of us are immune.

But there are still some who wonder why we must have our proverbial guard up.

I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that many of us in my generation don't understand what war is really like. Perhaps things might eventually change as immigrants who have escaped such conditions start having more influence on our society. Because it has been many, many years since major battles have been fought on this continent.

I was born in Canada. On my father's side, I am the grandson of immigrants. The line in this country goes back much farther on my maternal side ? I genuinely don't know how far, although I do know one of my mother's grandmothers was born in Switzerland.

Thus for people like me, war is something we have only heard about. We learned about it in history class when we were in school. I always enjoyed history as a student, so I like to think I learned something from the classes. But they were just stories.

There have been lots of movies made about war. I have watched many of them. Some of them have been excellent, others have been garbage. I have seen war films that depicted Roman legionnaires on the march, Napoleon commanding his troops, the utter brutality of the American Civil War, the carnage of two World Wars and the hideous situations that young American men faced in Vietnam. But too often, those films deal with good guys versus bad guys even if they might be on sides that differ with history's judgement. I have seen the movie *The Blue Max* many times, realizing I was relating to men who would have gladly killed my grandfather in a strafing attack.

But again, they were just stories.

The closest I have come to the reality of war is not very close.

My father joined the Air Force during the Second World War. Owing to his age, he joined up rather late in the conflict. While his training saw him getting time in the air as a navigator and bombardier, he never left the country or saw combat. After the war ended in Europe, he made himself available to be sent to the Pacific. That notion was put aside when Harry Truman, one of my heroes from history, ordered the use of the Atomic Bomb and brought the war to a rapid conclusion. Had the war continued, my father might have found himself putting his hide on the line. It's quite possible that I owe my very mortality to Truman.

My dad's views of the experience, at least those he related to my brother and myself, represented something of a paradox. His reasons for joining up were rather practical. He figured the Nazis were invading countries and killing people, and he wanted a chance to strike his own blow first. I don't think he regretted the experience. Indeed, there were times when he lamented that I never had to go through it. He said, and I believe with considerable justification, that the disciplining he had to go through would have done me a lot of good.

But most people in my position, who had fathers in some branch of the service or another, would have been regaled with stories about buddies, and in time would have been introduced to some of them. That was not the case with my dad. He never introduced me to anyone from his Air Force days. Indeed, I don't think there was anyone from those days with whom he kept in touch.

He often told stories about his time in the service, but seldom had anything positive to say about the men he served with. I don't think it was a case that he had some bad or traumatic experience. Until the day he died, he never discouraged me from asking questions about that time, although some of his answers were somewhat light on detail.

I once saw a picture, sort of a class photograph, of his squadron. There were about 30 young men there, and I had no trouble spotting my dad. But front row centre, there was seated an older man, probably in his late 50s (how well I can now relate) who was obviously a senior officer. I asked my dad who he might have been.

?Some guy they rolled in for the picture,? was my old man's very dry response.

I think I can grasp what it might have been like to be in a war, but only because I have been interested enough to read and learn a bit about it. I know there are many out there who could hardly care less. It's hard to blame them, unless they have experienced something like war. I've always believed one of the reasons men like my father and his father before him joined up was to try and make sure their children never had to go through something like that.

To a certain extent, it looks like they succeeded.

