

Continuing to stand together

by BROCK WEIR

As the grandchild and great-grandchild of women and men who served King and Country in the First and Second World Wars, and as a descendent who was born too late to hear of their exploits firsthand, I've had to rely on second-hand accounts of their heroism.

I'll never know for certain what propelled my great-grandfather to set out from his shopkeeping family in a small community in what is now Durham Region to medical school, which ultimately led him to the front. Nor will I be able to tell for sure what spurred his future wife, a nurse, to don her uniform and head overseas for what was already being dubbed 'The Great War,' although the date of her enlistment aligns intriguingly with that of her brother.

I'll never be able to ask them how love blossomed on either the battlefield or in the medical tent, nor will I be able to ask my grandfather how much his parents' service influenced his own decision to become a part of the Royal Canadian Air Force when the need arose in 1939.

All I have are photos, documents, and second-hand stories - too many puzzle pieces to fit together into a cohesive, narrative whole.

I suspect many of us, unless we've seen active service ourselves, will always have a lot of questions that couldn't possibly be answered by anyone who hasn't walked that proverbial walk. That's why it's so important that we take advantage of every opportunity we can to hear these real-world experiences, absorb them, and do our absolute best to make sure it never happens again.

Yet, here we are, marking the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, a war which has galvanized so many members of our community to step up and support Ukraine against the aggressors.

As terrible as this senseless conflict has been, the community's response has been, in my observation, the one silver-lining.

Over the course of the last year, we've seen students galvanize their school communities to support both aid organizations on the ground as well as the persons displaced by conflict who are now calling Canada home.

We've seen kids who are a bit too young to be fully immersed in the school fundraising experience do what they can on their own time to make a difference, whether it be a lemonade stand on the corner, bracelet-making fundraisers, and even bottle drives.

We've seen seniors residences come together to make a difference and seniors' centres engage not just in fundraising efforts but in spurring dialogue

We've even had cases of business owners who have taken time off to, quite literally, be an extra pair of hands on the ground in the theatre of war, and others have developed helpful apps and opened up their homes to foster four-leggers who may have been caught in the crossfire.

Newcomers to the community hailing from Kyiv and other parts of the nation have also done their part when absolutely nothing was being asked of them in this time of trauma. They've expressed themselves through art, taken on the task of educating us on some of the nuances of Ukrainian culture and the traditions that keep them vibrant, and have found the time to volunteer for organizations that are helping back home.

It's a remarkable testament to the human spirit, and hopefully a sign that, come what may, we'll continue to be poised to do our parts to foster a better future.

A year ago, Russia began the unconscionable, full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since that time, too many have suffered and are

suffering still. Yet, we have also seen the strength of humanity," said Governor General Mary Simon in a speech last week. "Brave and resilient Ukrainians willing to fight for their freedom and the freedom of the world. Citizens standing firm and pushing back against their aggressors. People from many nations offering help in defence of democracy and the rule of law. And the Ukrainian community in Canada – one of the largest Ukrainian diaspora populations in the world – has been steadfast in raising support for their families and friends in the heart of great danger.

"As the attacks continue, the humanitarian crisis deepens. We need to take every opportunity to support Ukraine. We need to help people find safety and moments of normalcy amidst the chaos. We need to support Ukrainians as they rebuild their country, even as they fight for their country's future. We must face this crisis together, across borders.

"My thoughts go out to the Ukrainian people: to the child whose only wish is to go to school; to the soldiers who only want to be reunited with their families; to the teachers, nurses and community leaders who are trying to maintain a sense of normalcy, when everything is all but normal. From the first day, and through all of the devastating days since, Canada has stood firmly alongside the Ukrainian people. And we will continue to do so."

And we will continue to do so even when sometimes it might feel that the little we can do as individuals won't make a great difference; but together, they and we can bring about a great deal of good. Even when it might feel disheartening.

Unlike earlier conflicts when in order to get a real account of what's going on we had to ask people to share difficult, even traumatic memories well after the fact, this is a war that is, for better or worse, right at our fingertips.

We not only see videos direct from the conflict on the news each night, but first-hand accounts and journalism are available to us all the time, and, as difficult as it is, sometimes in real time via social media – reality unvarnished, unfiltered, and there for all to see.

And, as much as the reality is there unvarnished and unfiltered, so too is misinformation and downright lies ready to potentially spread like wildfire, making education and vigilance essential as always.

While we have seen many worst-case-scenarios presented in recent weeks as the first anniversary approached, we don't truly know what the next twelve months will entail. But, until then, it's incumbent on all of us to stay informed, engaged, continue to keep our arms open to the displaced and contribute where we can.