

Learning from the past and changing the direction of the future

by BROCK WEIR

You always try to keep a few steps ahead in a newsroom, whether it's an upcoming event or a hot community topic on the horizon, so you're not completely unprepared for what the future might hold.

Often the landscape changes significantly from the laying of the groundwork to the unrolling of the story, but being prepared, whatever the eventuality, saves crucial time.

Some plans are easier to make than others.

It might sound morbid, but I think it's common knowledge that when it comes to certain notables of a certain age obituaries, eulogies, and other forms of tribute are compiled well in advance so as to be ready to go, with a few tweaks, with the push of a button.

Other areas of preparation are decidedly less macabre, such as writing in advance of Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee, even if there was a degree of uncertainty over how active a role the Monarch would ultimately be able to play in the celebrations or, close to home, myriad ways new and time-tested our communities commemorate Canada Day.

Elsewhere, fixed election dates, wherever possible, give us enough lead-time to have a bare-bones framework ready to go once the writ is dropped; prominent ?feast days? like the Thanksgiving that was, gives us, sadly, a real-time snapshot of food insecurity in our towns and cities; and now that the colder weather is rolling in, as has become the new rhythm of our new normal, we're on the lookout for stats related to the triple-barrelled threats of calamity that are influenza, RSV and, of course, COVID-19.

With Thanksgiving now behind us, and despite what the early arrival of Christmas-themed commercials and ads will have us believe, many are turning their attentions to all the weird and wonderful traditions Halloween has to offer.

It's a time of amassing candy for the onslaught of pint-sized neighbourhood ghouls and goblins to come, of letting creative juices flow through an array of crafting ideas limited only by your budget, of getting hands dirty with pumpkin guts in the request for the perfect jack-o-lantern, and of ingenuity when it comes to the creation of eye-catching costumes.

At home, things are no different. Work, on the other hand, is a very different story.

In my efforts to stay just a little bit ahead of the curve, my focus is now shifting towards Remembrance Day coverage.

Every year in my role as editor I strive to interview at least one veteran who has seen active service in a theatre of war, in peacekeeping, or in smaller but significant conflicts around the world, to share their stories, memories that are often troubling and terrifying, honest accounts of their struggles on the frontlines, and of their journey of re-establishing their lives as civilians.

These are, I believe, the histories we need to embrace, warts and all, but with each passing year it is getting harder and harder to find those who are willing and able to talk ? and we're all the poorer for it.

Just a few short years ago, there seemed to be, perhaps optimistically, a bevy of veterans of the Second World War and Korean War eager to share their experiences, both good and bad. Not everything they shared was bad; there was no shortage of laughter when it came to sharing some of the more ribald off-duty antics of themselves and their comrades; but, most often, when the laughter died down, their message was serious ? not a single degree of shyness in sharing their views on the true costs of war, but sometimes a pregnant pause before they answered whether they would do it all over again.

Few, if any, ever tried to sell the 'glories' of war. They lived it. They knew it.

Yet, the more they shared, the more galvanized they were to spread the message, particularly in connecting with younger generations to make sure that the up-and-comers learned from history so that it wouldn't, they hoped, ever happen again.

As time marched on and their ranks became fewer and fewer over the last decade, to just a handful of Second World War and Korean War veterans still active members of our Legions, I noticed that many veterans began shifting their messages.

They shared that they were dismayed with the direction the world was going in. They had seen this kind of division and rhetoric before. They knew what they meant. They were damned if they were going to let it happen again without putting up as much of a fight as they could muster.

But, nature being what it is, these voices have been largely silenced from expounding further.

They have been stifled by the sands of time and veterans who served in more recent conflicts, like Afghanistan, often seem to be reluctant to wear the mantle of 'veteran' and, truth be told, they have myriad reasons why not, including a lack of support to help them address the costs of war they live with every day in their post-war civilian lives.

But these voices are needed now more than ever.

History can be cyclical and it often feels that without the voices of the men and women who stood up to walk the walk for King, Queen and Country, those who were inspired to give so much of themselves to a common cause, to fight a common threat, and, in many cases, went in with the full knowledge that this particular sacrifice might be their last, we're veering dangerously close to a rerun.

In a time where it might feel that every day our world is at a different, more perilous crossroads we can all do well by talking to and truly learn from the veterans of the Second World War still with us and able to share and they do have plenty of insight and real worries about our current trajectory and we would all benefit from younger veterans with lived experiences to pick up the mantle of those who are now gone and to continue the advocacy work of what Tom Brokaw so memorably coined 'the Greatest Generation.'

When we look at the turmoil that is now a hallmark of our world, it feels as though we've heard this story before and might have a good idea of some of the outcomes. They sure do, and we need to take every opportunity to listen.