

Learning from the past to protect our futures

by BROCK WEIR

It's a very fine balancing act between looking forward and looking backward ? particularly when one can invariably lead to another.

On Monday, most of us took a moment on the eleventh hour to pause and reflect on the lives of those who answered the call to protect our freedoms.

While that two minutes of silence every November 11 is intended to remember the men and women who paid the ultimate price for King, Queen and country, and that is undoubtedly at the core of our reflection, there are often shades to one's own simple act of Remembrance depending on your life's journey, that of your forebears, and even your own unique areas of interest and expertise.

Standing at the Cenotaph in years past, I've thought of my grandfather, a pilot in the Second World War, who was shot down over Norway in 1941 and served as a Prisoner of War until Victory in Europe was won.

I've thought of his parents, my great-grandparents, who both served in the First World War, as a doctor and nurse respectively, and how they somehow found love in that very brutal situation, lighting a spark that eventually burned its fuse in my general direction.

I've thought of her brother, a young man who signed up for the army just days before his sister did likewise, who paid his ultimate sacrifice in the Battle of the Somme, lying in an unmarked grave somewhere in the vicinity, represented only by the Unknown Soldiers in Ottawa and Westminster Abbey, and by a small addendum to his parents' gravestone in out-of-the-way cemetery northeast of Uxbridge.

This year, I couldn't help but think specifically of the many men, and some women, veterans all from the Second World War, very few of whom are still with us today, who entrusted me to share their stories with the community. Despite their individual roles in the war effort, whether they served at home and abroad, their similarities struck me almost as much as their differences.

While I was initially trepidatious about the very first of these interviews more than a decade ago, knowing that many veterans wear that moniker with a bit of unease, reluctant to open up old wounds, I needn't have worried. All were very eager to share their stories and welcomed me into their own spaces with warmth.

Again, while their individual stories of service varied widely, they almost spoke as one on two things: the importance of sharing their often-raw experiences with their communities. They often paid particular attention to youngsters in the hopes they would carry the torch to prevent the circumstances leading up to their respective conflict from ever happening again. As the decade from that initial interview wore on, I noticed a slight shift in the messages they wanted to share. There was concern, even alarm and fear, that these very circumstances that led to their service were rearing their ugly heads once again.

One such veteran, now nearing his centenary, has presented an unvarnished view of war, and what the Second World War was all about, to countless students over the years. He never glorified the realities of war; he's been very real about not only of his personal experience, but how he's seen rhetoric shift in recent years.

Just over four years ago, the last time Americans went to the polls to elect a person to their top job, I was at a local retirement home to chat with two remarkable veterans whose love endured in times of conflict. We sat down quite literally moments before Joe Biden was finally declared the winner after days of counts and recounts, and both were on tenterhooks for the news they wanted, as was their daughter.

They made clear that what the other party represented flew in the face of what they stood for, drawing a particular line under the candidate's own professed views of the fallen. As I had been up for days to hear the results in real time, with a few catnaps as

necessary, I asked my mother to accompany me to the residence so she could blow her car horn from the parking lot when news broke ? two honks for the Republican candidate and three for the Democrat.

I let my interview subjects in on the signal, just in case I seemed antsy, and about 20 minutes into our interview we heard one blare. Then another. After the second, I locked eyes with the D-Day veteran, eyes slightly cloudy with age but with another degree of clarity that can only come from what they witnessed, and saw the relief that passed behind them when the third horn was heard. This flash of relief was punctuated by a slight sag of the shoulders as if a huge weight had been lifted.

As rhetoric continued unabated over the subsequent four years, I was at another retirement home to interview another D-Day vet, his wife, and, once again, their daughter. As it was already clear by that time that the genie of inflammatory language was not about to get back in its bottle any time soon, the elders couldn't even bear to utter a certain name, although they had no shortage of alternatives to choose from!

?We have to learn from one another, and we have to care about each other, and we've got to set an example for kids in doing so ? whether we're 90, 97, or whatever age,? one Mr. Williams, a veteran of the Korean War, told me in 2021. ?You need to set an example for your children and your cohorts.?

Many of them might be gone by now, but they have left behind legacies we can all learn from ? if only we'd sit up and listen. In some ways, it now feels like society has failed their American counterparts and the very principles they fought for.

In the United States, we've all had our fill of ?Make America Great Again? and this sentiment has trickled over our side of the border in recent years and ?Make Canada Great Again? merch is getting easier and easier to come by. But, if we have to have an ideal to strive for, why must it be regressive.

While many of the veterans we honoured on Monday were lauded for what they achieved in the past, to hear them tell it, they took up arms to ensure a better future for their families back home, their future children and grandchildren, and looking backward was the last thing on their minds. And it remained so with decades of hindsight.

It was a matter of protecting what they had and making sure they had the ability to build upon it and move forward ? and building on their legacies is the best way we can pay tribute.