

Living Memory

by BROCK WEIR

As we prepare to gather this Saturday on the eleventh day at the eleventh hour, the day is approaching, as least as far as I am concerned, with a heart a little bit heavier than it usually is at this time of year.

In this job, it has always been such a great pleasure when veterans – that is, those who were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice but mercifully came home – have sat down with me to share their own stories.

This year, however, few of those men and women who were so generous of their time are still here with us to experience, in tangible ways such as through Remembrance events, how much their sacrifices were, and still are, appreciated.

While many of the ‘fixtures’ of our local ceremonies may have joined their comrades in whatever awaits us on the other side, or might otherwise be unable to attend in person, we will still do so, our hearts filled with the memories of what was, for better and oh-so-worse, and also with the hope that history is not repeated.

From my earliest memories of Remembrance services, a small but mighty band of First World War veterans were still here. But that generation has, sadly, been behind us for more than a decade.

Each of these men and women who served in the conflict shared poignant stories of the horrors experienced on the front, journeys which, for most of them, started off with a sense of daring and adventure, a chance to see some excitement and maybe even sightsee in Europe, sure in what turned out to be false belief that this was just going to be another quickly-settled skirmish.

Although these stories were shared with us comparatively recently, they seem so distant today.

Learning from a textbook just doesn't have the same impact of learning from those who walked the walk and were prepared to make the sacrifice. And, of course, if no one is around to tell the stories and help future generations understand what led to conflict, there is always the danger that they can be repeated.

In the lead-up to the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice, I shared my thoughts on this feeling of disconnect that some might feel of the living memory lapsing into history, but while in the process of doing so, I unexpectedly had that connection restored in a very personal way.

It really started on a chance walk down the main street of Port Perry just before the anniversary itself.

This was a Town that went all out in marking the occasion with scores of storefronts paying tribute to some facet of the war, with many incorporating genuine artefacts that were potent reminders of how far we have come, but also how much we haven't.

What added poignancy to these displays, from a personal perspective, is that a memorial to my great-great-uncle, a young Canadian soldier whose body was lost at the Battle of the Somme, lay just a few kilometres away.

This was a relatively recent discovery for me, one that was something of a scavenger hunt thanks to scant details on genealogical websites and the fact that, for whatever reasons now lost to the sands of time, his name was never spoken within the family – at least as best as I can recall:

‘Last summer, after months of digging, I finally uncovered the burial records of her parents,’ I wrote in 2013 after finding a lead through researching my great-grandmother – his sister. ‘Since then, I've had a burning desire to track them down and pay my respects. Oddly enough, it turns out they were buried relatively close by, in a town called Greenbank, just northeast of Uxbridge.’

?Time had never been on my side to get out there, but some feeling nagged at me that if I was ever going to go, Saturday was the best day to do it. So, I did ? and the reasons became all too clear.

?Hunting through the Bethel Methodist Cemetery, I found the slightly faded red tombstone of my great-great-grandparents, Elkanah A. Smith and Samantha V. Grant. Below their names listed two of their children who predeceased them and, at the bottom, an In Memoriam marker:

ALLEN LLOYD 15th BTTN C.E.F BORN 1892. KILLED IN ACTION ON THE SOMME. SEPT. 26, 1916 AGED 24 YEARS

?There he was. There was a memorial to my great-great uncle, Allen Lloyd Smith ? a young man I have never heard mentioned, who fell with his comrades in one of Canada's most important and lengthy collection of battles, remembered in Canada only with a footnote on his parents' graves, a memory lost to the sands of time, killed on the front before the birth of any of my closest relatives.

?Preliminary research through the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, an invaluable online resource through Veterans Affairs Canada, confirms the service of Private Allan Lloyd Smith [sic] who indeed died on September 26, 1916, complete with the service number 437858.

?It confirms the details on the grave adding that although his burial is likely unknown and anonymous, his name is among the thousands memorialised on the iconic memorial at Vimy Ridge.

?The Virtual War Memorial produced a small clipping, complete with his photo in uniform, which appeared in the February 4, 1916 edition of the Renfrew Mercury, celebrating his enlistment. The next clipping, dated October 27 of the same year, confirmed his death along with six other young men hailing from Renfrew County.

?This discovery, as discoveries like this so often do, has led to more questions than provided answers. Last week, I questioned what inspired my young great-grandmother, Ruby, then not yet 20, to take her nurse's training, pack her bags, and cross the Atlantic to serve at the front.

?Now, I have a possible answer above the obvious of answering the call of King and Country. Was she inspired by her brother, two years her senior? Did she have a degree of well-intentioned naiveté that if she was on the front as a nurse, she might ? just might ? be able to do her part to keep Allen out of harm's way?

?It can't be a simple coincidence, the article on Allen's enlistment, which he signed while working for the Western Carriage Company in Edmonton, was published on February 4. Ruby enlisted in Toronto on February 3.

?So, this year, rather than simply remembering the wartime service of Dr. Russell L. Parr, his eventual wife, nurse Ruby A. Smith, and their pilot son William R. Parr, I focused my moment of silence on my great-great uncle, Allen, lying anonymously in France, memorialised in a very small cemetery in rural Ontario and, until Saturday, an uncle I never knew I had.?

The ?living memory? of the First World War may have faded into history, but that doesn't mean personal connections have been severed.

If you grew up in a family whose members spoke often of their service, that much is obvious and you don't need me to tell you. It's with you every day.

But, for those who didn't, those connections are there if you just start to scratch the surface.

This Saturday, who will you be remembering?