

On the horizon

by BRIAN LOCKHART

It was July 1, 1916 ? the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The morning started with several thousand artillery guns unleashing their fury on the other side.

By the end of the first day, the British Empire recorded almost 60,000 casualties.

At the end of the battle on November 18, the Empire had almost 420,000 casualties, including 24,000 Canadians. The Australians took around 23,000, and even Newfoundland, a small colony at the time had 2,000 casualties. The French lost around 434,000.

The German Empire lost somewhere between 465,000 and 600,000.

Think about that for a moment. In the space of just over four months, 1,666,000 men were killed or wounded. And that was just one battle.

It was a time when going off to war and fighting for King and country, or in the case of the other side, Kaiser and the Fatherland, seemed glamorous and honorable. Young men signed up for the adventure en masse on all sides. Both sides were certain they would be victorious.

They found out the harsh truth in the trenches and in the mud where disease and horrible living conditions caused many more deaths.

They found out there is no glory in seeing the friend beside you lose his entire head to an incoming round. And there is no honour in finding yourself laying in the mud with your legs blown off by an artillery shell or having your lungs burned by toxic mustard or chlorine gas.

Those young men soon found out they were in for a harsh four years if they managed to survive it all.

Discipline was also harsh as commanders wanted to make sure their soldiers kept fighting. Deserting the ranks was a sure way to find yourself in front of a firing squad.

There was a good documentary recently on a family in the UK, who are trying to clear the name of their long dead relative. The man was remembered by his younger sister, who has since now passed away as well.

His crime was 'cowardice in the face of the enemy.' He faced a firing squad and was shot to death by his own comrades.

So why do they want to 'clear his name' if he was a coward?

It turns out he and his unit were ordered to hold their ground against advancing German soldiers. His entire unit had been killed, one by one, until the young soldier found himself alone and overwhelmed by enemy soldiers. He pulled back ten yards to save himself.

That ten yards cost him his life as his commander said he abandoned his post. That was the harsh reality of that war.

In just over a month, November 11, it will be Remembrance Day.

It is a day that recognizes the day and time, 11:00 a.m. that the armistice went into effect and the fighting stopped in the First World War.

There may not be a Remembrance Day this year. There may not be parades, the playing of The Last Post, and the reading of In Flanders Fields.

But that doesn't mean we should not remember.

Remembrance Day isn't held to celebrate wars. It isn't held to celebrate victories.

In fact if you look at the statues at cenotaphs around the country, none of them depict a soldier as victorious and gloating over his enemy.

Remembrance Day is held to remember those that stepped up and volunteered when needed.

It is held to remember the sacrifice of individuals. And ultimately to reflect on what could have been, if so many had not died.

Take a look at the local cenotaph the next time you're in a really small town. It is astounding how many names are carved into granite from towns that only had a population of a few hundred people.

Our Second World War veterans are aging rapidly and not many remain. Korean War veterans are even harder to find.

Now we also remember those that died in Afghanistan.

If Remembrance Day services are indeed called off this year due to restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, you can still make an effort. You can fly a flag, hang a banner, something to recognize the sacrifice made.

Even if services are given the go-ahead, you can still proudly fly the flag to show your support.

For just one hour each year, we should all make the effort to remember our fallen soldiers.