

The merits of leaving a paper trail

by BROCK WEIR

Just before I left to work overseas for a time in 2007, I was given a small wad of \$5 bills by my grandmother.

As I was bound for East Africa, I wasn't sure at first what her intention was in handing over a fistful of Wilfrid Laurier portraits, or how far they would get me over there, but it wasn't too long before she explained her idea.

I now had one more task before packing my bags: to get a travel diary.

Of course, this was before the days of Instagram, so we were still some ways away from being able to update our visual 'travel diary' in real time with the results instantly accessible to friends and followers wherever they might be in the world.

A physical diary would have to do and by the time she offered her suggestion and the cash to make it happen, I became familiar with the red and navy diaries she had filled with every detail of her trip through the Alps more than a decade before.

For this particular job experience, part of the assignment was to write blog entries illustrating our experiences for people back home, so heaping another task on my plate wasn't exactly at the top of my priority list.

'You'll want to look back on it later,' she said with a decisiveness that came with age.

I could see her point, so I did what was asked of me, found an appropriately compact volume in which to set down my experience, thoughts, and feelings, and used the change to get a couple of pens that just might be more reliable than the free swag we were offered as part of the trip.

As the trip commenced and continued, I found myself often writing in the book, recording thoughts on the people I met, the places we visited, and some of the work that was done. Revisiting the book more recently, however, I was dismayed by some of the observations. Don't get me wrong, they were valuable insights, if only for me, but I found I recorded the broad strokes of the experience rather than what I may have considered 'mundane' at the time.

I was disappointed by my lack of detail, gaps on some of the people I worked with or simply encountered on my travels, and the fine details of the places I visited above and beyond just what I felt and places of joy and, in some instances, places of unspeakable tragedy.

15 years on, I was left with more questions than answers.

Memories are funny things. Some might be accurate in your mind's eye, others might have been clouded by other experiences, or sometimes even conflated with different events. These memories might be more reflective of what you would have preferred happen rather than what actually did, or maybe recorded with personal biases you may have had at the time (such as perspectives on one or two people on the trip that, given the benefit of time, no longer hold true).

But, once these memories are gone, they're gone.

The rediscovery of the diary is not the only factor that prompted these thoughts; it was never far from my mind this year as we marked Remembrance Day in many ways in the lead-up to November 11.

On the Saturday before the eleventh day of the eleventh month, I was honoured to attend the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion's first Remembrance Dinner since the start of the global pandemic. Always a poignant evening in which bread is broken with

friend and neighbour for a common cause with a guest speaker to share their own personal stories of service, there was a marked shift in the crowd this year.

While we sadly lose veterans, particularly those who served in the Second World War and the Korean War, all too often due to the ravages of time that none of us are immune to, the intervening weeks, months and years of COVID-19 made the loss all the more felt this first time we had been able to gather since.

The ones who departed since the last dinner in 2019 are in their well-earned rest, but, although they often say you can't take it with you, they took with them their memories of conflict, the all-too-real and indelible emotions that came as a result, and the wisdom that comes with hindsight on the true cost of war and what we must do to never allow it to happen again.

With so few veterans of long-ago conflicts now either gone or unable to share their insights on such pivotal efforts in human history, the very real costs of war might feel that much further removed from our contemporary lives ? but, as we see today in Europe and other parts of the world, this is far from the case.

We can all be grateful that many historical societies and heritage-minded bodies took on the task of spearheading oral history projects with these singular individuals before it was too late; recording their insights, some still raw despite the passage of time, for generations today and for generations to come.

We often hear that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, but thanks to these efforts, the everyday, the seemingly mundane, and thoughts bottled up for generations just waiting for someone to ask have been kept for posterity and we're all richer for it.

But, for the rest of us, what are the lived experiences, singular to each and every one of us, that we should set down on paper? Big, flashy current events like how we saw each other cope during the height of the pandemic might be felt as something worth preserving, but I'd hazard a guess that generations will be more interested in the everyday, the things not necessarily committed to history through the pages of a newspaper or magazine, online archives where old websites go to die, or committed to a limited number of characters on a social media platform that will undoubtedly be seen as a relic by the time future generations are prepared to care.

What's important to you now?

What do you want your children, grandchildren, friends and other loved ones to know about you when they're unable to ask?

What are the experiences that helped shape you for better or worse? What's worth leaving a paper trail?

If you stop to think, the answers might surprise you.