

Writing the stories of tomorrow

by BRIAN LOCKHART

As I stood next to the Aurora Cenotaph at Saturday's Remembrance Day service, I found my thoughts pulling up to a three-pronged fork in the road.

In my role as editor of this community's newspaper, I have stood in close proximity to this monument on November 11 just about every year since 2009 watching the time-honoured ceremony unfold.

The general format of the Remembrance ceremony might be ingrained in a lot of us, but no ceremony is ever exactly the same.

From my vantage point near the focal point of the Peace Park, a place which sometimes lets you survey the crowd while you're talking photos, you see years with larger attendance and some years with smaller, but still mighty, crowds. In some years, the crowds swell due to events elsewhere, such as important anniversaries in our national history, or even due to particularly good weather. The crowds often retreat when the snow is flying or the rain beating down; but, by the same token, you can often see some of the same faces appear year after year, meteorology be damned, determined to be there for this poignant moment in our collective year.

Each have their own reasons for being there, many of them very personal and inter-generational. They don't need to explain why they are there to the person next to them. It's unspoken. They know why.

As I glanced over at some of these familiar faces, I found myself going down that first prong in the fork ? towards the dedication of this stately war memorial in the 1920s and the power of community that came together in order to raise what is, in my opinion, one of the most impressive monuments to the war dead we have in this country.

About a century ago, the men and women who gathered at what's now known as the Peace Park to see Sir William Mulock inaugurate this hallowed space of remembrance, probably did so out of sorrow for their son, brother, husband, neighbour, friend who paid the ultimate sacrifice for King and Country; their names now immortalized in stone, along with the names of the many battles where they fell.

There must have been a wave of collective grief in that crowd. No matter what status they held in society, they were united by that grief, loss being one of the inarguable levellers. They shared communal experiences that were all but unthinkable a short decade before. They knew the universal feeling of devastation that war brought, but were likely proud that their son, brother, husband, neighbour, friend did not die in vain ? and, thanks to this monument, their names would endure.

These feelings were likely shared again when the community gathered at the same spot some decades after the end of the ?war to end all wars? when the Altar of Sacrifice, a striking stone block paying tribute to community members who paid the ultimate sacrifices ? some picking up where their fathers and grandfathers left off in previous conflicts ? in the Second World War.

The second mental prong took me back to the early 1990s when I first encountered the landmark.

My school at the time was very big on local history and historical walking tours around the area were at the heart of that. It inspired me to cast a bit of a wider net with local history beyond the confines of my hometown of Newmarket.

So, my mom and a friend of hers took me ?south of the border? to take in the Aurora Peace Park.

The grandeur of the Cenotaph, more than anything else at the time, struck me. As a youngster, although I grew up hearing the names of some of my own family members who participated in the First and Second World Wars, the names before me meant precious little. The gravity of what those names represented only hit me a couple of years later on a return visit ? and, over my years here of

helping showcase the stories behind the names, and, in some cases, even the faces, the resonance I feel each year couldn't be stronger.

Then there was that third fork in the road.

Each year, I typically stand near the north side of the Cenotaph where a converted Light Armoured Vehicle stands as mute testament to the men and women who took part on the Afghanistan conflict, but this year was something different.

Standing on the south side for a change and paying attention to the parade filing in in front of me, I did not notice at first the hearty group of Beaver and Cub Scouts filling in the space behind me. When I turned around to see the source of a small bit of rustling, I saw many of these kids looking up at the top of the Cenotaph where a lantern burned bright in the dim, overcast Saturday morning.

If this was their first visit there, I wondered if they were as awestruck as I was when I first took it all in, and which elements would stick with them down the line.

As a man with some 30-odd years on the vast majority of these kids, I had the benefit of learning more about what these symbols represent at a time when so many of our Second World War veterans were still with us to gently, but powerfully, underscore that very thing.

That is not an experience these kids will be lucky enough to have.

What were their takeaways from Sunday? How will they evolve over the years?

We're living in a time when the world sometimes feels like a tinderbox, with so many conflicts raging around the world threatening to spark into something much larger.

How different will these ceremonies look for them 10 or 20 years from now? How will war and conflict be defined? Who will they be remembering? A century out, how many more monuments will have to join the extant memorials to the fallen of the First World War, the Second World War, Korea and Afghanistan?

"Today, I ask you to listen to our veterans, and preserve their history and experiences," said Governor General Mary Simon in her Remembrance Day message this year. "They are entrusting us - all of us - with their stories. We must all shoulder the responsibility to look after our veterans, to ensure that they have safe spaces and the resources to stay healthy in both mind and body.

"And let us never forget: we all have a duty to remember. This duty falls to young people who will learn from our past to create a bright and positive future. If each of us remembers one story, shares that one story, passes on that one story to someone else, we will have fulfilled our responsibility."

But let us not also forget, as we go forward, we need to use what we've learned to write the stories of tomorrow.