

BROCK'S BANTER: Strength Over Time

By Brock Weir

Is it unusual to have the odd pang of jealousy around Remembrance Day commemorations?

This is a relatively new feeling for me, but I have a hunch that the answer is, ?Yes. Yes, it is.?

I say this not with my tongue firmly embedded in my cheek, but almost in unadulterated seriousness. Each year, when I attend these events I am moved, as I'm sure all people are, to hear stories of war firsthand from the people who lived through it. It doesn't matter whether they were in the trenches, in the air, on a ship in either the Atlantic or Pacific theatres, donning scrubs or nursing uniforms, or manning a desk, regardless of gender, during the Cold War, each individual has a story to tell and it is one that should be treasured.

While it is heartening that year after year more and more younger people are turning out to pay their respects to the people who fought and fell for the things we all too often take for granted today, this changing demographic can only mean one thing and it underscores the fact that these stories are becoming increasingly rare commodities.

So, why do I feel these pangs of jealousy? While my own family has more than its fair share of men and women who served King and Country during the two World Wars, I was never so lucky as to have the opportunity to hear their stories firsthand. Nor did they, to the best of my knowledge, leave behind a written record of their time served, with the exception of very brief written snapshots of a particular time.

As I have written previously, one of my great-grandfathers served as a doctor in the First World War, where he subsequently met and married my great-grandmother. Love evidently blossomed in the theatre of war and their son, my grandfather, was proof positive of this when he was born just two months before the Armistice.

Perhaps it was the stories he heard firsthand from his own parents, or the pride they instilled in him themselves, or the fact he was most likely conceived in the theatre of war himself, but whatever the contributing factor, he followed in their footsteps, joining the Royal Canadian Air Force shortly after war broke out in 1939.

All of these three individuals died several years before I was born, and aside from stories passed down orally from one generation to the next, stories most often tethered to a particularly memorable event or experience, but very few details on what they themselves might have considered the mundane. However, things they might have never given a second thought, such as the very reasons they signed up in the first place, are really the bread and butter of what this is all about.

Around this time last year, I wrote how I uncovered one detail in my great-grandmother's story that shed more of a light on what might have made her tick. Unknown to the living members of my family, she had a brother who signed up and fell on the battlefield, where he lies today. While this gave me a very personal link to the true meaning of Remembrance Day, an entrée of sorts to a club to which no one really wants to belong, what fascinated me most was there was less than a week between his enlistment and that of my great grandmother, his sister, who joined the nursing corps. There was no doubt left in my mind on why she gave up her reasonably comfortable existence to do what she could to help save her brother and his brothers-in-arms.

That leads me to another pang; and that is the numerous stories that have cropped up over the past 12 months, and as recently as last week, of DNA testing being able to positively identify Canadian soldiers that were lost to time, and anyone who wasn't actively seeking closure.

It is surreal to try and get into the minds of those families who are actively participating in this project. Nearly a century later, families of missing soldiers reliving the experiences of renewed hope. This hope might have been experienced by their mothers or grandmothers, clinging to the uncertainty of letters saying that their husband or son was merely missing, but not necessarily dead. Eventually, all hopes faded to black, but that lingering doubt undoubtedly inspired many comforting day dreams of what the next knock on the door or mail delivery might be.

It seems to me that these descendants might be experiencing something very similar today, providing their DNA samples in an effort to bring closure to these past wounds, only to be let down if testing comes back negative. For the lucky ones, they can rest easy knowing that they have achieved a repatriation of sorts for their fathers, grandfathers, and uncles ? but the others can only continue the process of daydreaming, hoping that someday their inbox would bring the news they, and their predecessors, had been waiting for.

ADDED POIGNANCY

It was heartening to see so many turning out for this year's series of Remembrance Day collaborations. This year, of course, had

extra poignancy on many fronts. For some people, it was the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War that truly resonated with them ? and the sight of the mounted Calvary unit standing guard at the Cenotaph this year was a particularly evocative sight. On the other hand, it could have been the 75th anniversary of the Second World War, something still in living memory, which made many people stop and pause with a bit of extra effort this year.

For many, however, the recent events in Quebec and Ottawa, the deaths of Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent and Corporal Nathan Cirillo added an extra layer of meaning to the proceedings, a layer which was almost unfathomable a month ago.

Whatever the reason, people came out in droves and it is a trend that seems to be working its way around the world.

Take, for instance, the wildly successful installation of ceramic poppies at the Tower of London, each one representing one fallen soldier from throughout the Empire fighting on behalf of Great Britain. Spilling out from the side of one of the ancient turrets, over time each ceramic flower filled the long-dry moat of the monument with a sea of red, an attraction which brought millions to take it all in, demanded an extension of the exhibit by several weeks to accommodate the visitors, and raised a huge sum of money for the British Legion after each individual flower was sold in advance to buyers from all over the world.

Personally, after a brief trip to New York City at the end of the week, I was quite pleasantly surprised to see the number of people, practically around every corner, sporting the evocative poppy from the Royal Canadian Legion on his or her lapel. South of the border, it seemed like a tradition which had lost traction, but this year it was alive and well.

Wherever you remember, and however you remember, one can take comfort that although all our First World War veterans are gone, and our Second World War veterans are becoming increasingly rare, the power and capacity to Remember is stronger than ever.