

BROCK'S BANTER: Living Memory

By Brock Weir

As a child, I always used to watch Remembrance Day services from Ottawa with no small sense of wonder.

I was awestruck not only by the service the men and women saluted each year gave to preserve what we hold so dear today, but also by the individual nature of the stories and lessons each had to impart on us.

The service itself was pretty routine: dignitaries laid wreaths, followed by the veterans themselves. It's very much a pattern that exists today, but there is a missing element.

In the early 1990s, the first such ceremonies seared into my memory, this procession was led by veterans of the First World War. Each of these men and women, invariably nursing sisters, 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.

Canada's chapter of the First World War ended in the late days of the winter of 2010 when our last surviving veteran joined his comrades.

There is always a danger when the last survivor goes the singular stories of a generation will fade from living memory. 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.

It seems silly and completely illogical to say, but I have been slightly melancholic in the lead-up to this Sunday's milestone, the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice, that the conflict, the end of which we are now celebrating, is no longer in our collective living memory.

This feeling was swept away, however, while walking down the main street of Port Perry on Sunday. Eager to take advantage of a rare burst of sun, I was fully prepared to window shop. Instead, I was struck by how this community has taken the 100th anniversary of Armistice to heart, with almost every storefront paying tribute to some facet of the war, whether laden down with artefacts from the conflicts, original or replica uniforms of the day, or heartfelt displays telling the stories of local veterans.

While the First World War may have receded from our shared story, it is alive and well in the hearts of Scugog, and communities across the country should take note.

Adding poignancy to these displays from a personal perspective is the fact that a memorial to my great-great-uncle, a young Canadian soldier whose body was lost at the Battle of the Somme, lies just a stone's throw away.

This was, as I wrote in 2013, a fact I hadn't known until that moment. No one spoke about him when my mother was growing up. She couldn't pass along that information to me, and, without a few pieces of information that happened to fall into my lap by chance, he was almost lost along with living memory.

I keep the memory alive by excerpting a portion of that column here:

Last summer, after months of digging, I finally uncovered the burial records of her parents. Since then, I've had a burning desire to track them down and 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. He and his comrades remain at rest, presumably near where they fell, but nearly a century on, the forgotten memory of at least one soldier has been firmly repatriated.