

BROCK'S BANTER: Passing the Baton

By Brock Weir

Wherever you stand in silence on November 11, it is hard not to be moved by the ceremony.

It is a very individual experience and while the main purpose is to come out and Remember, each person stands for their own reasons. Perhaps they come to their respective cenotaphs to pay tribute to their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents who served. Perhaps they themselves are parents of sons and daughters who have answered the call and are presently serving at home or abroad. Others too might come out of no personal connection to conflict or service, other than the freedoms we enjoy today and to give thanks for the same.

For an increasingly rare group who attend the services each year, they saw conflict first hand. They saw their brothers in arms fall in the service of Monarch and Country and they personally know the all-too-real costs of war.

Unless we ourselves served in more recent conflicts, we couldn't begin to understand what goes through their minds on such occasions, but thankfully there are still a number of people from that generation who still give so generously of their time to help us do so.

As I stood at Sunday's ceremony, I watched this ever-smaller band of veterans make their way to their vaunted places just to the side of the memorial and wondered how the 'face' of these services and, indeed, how Remembrance Day itself will change once this generation is unable to participate and help us Remember.

It was a sobering thought given the tumult in the world around us.

This year, of course, marked the centenary of the end of the First World War. When war first broke out in the summer of 1914, many of the young men signing up viewed it as a bit of adventure and a way of seeing the world, the price of admission being fighting in a short conflict that was sure to be over by Christmas.

That, of course, didn't turn out to be the case and before too long, and certainly within four short years, it was popularly known as 'The War to End All Wars.'

When that term was coined, no one could have envisaged that 'The War to End All Wars' was anything but; and only a precursor to decades of conflict that followed, culminating in the unthinkable: a Second World War.

The First World War was still a relatively fresh wound for all those who lived through it, including the countless servicemen and women who enlisted in the conflict, some of whom were still active service personnel, but conflict, as we now realise, was an inevitability.

Yes, the thought of Remembrance Day without the poignant participation of these Second World War veterans was a sobering one, but sobering still was trying to imagine what this solemn commemoration will look like 27 years from now on the centenary of that conflict's end.

I vividly remember the celebrations that took place in this country and abroad on the 50th anniversary of Victory in Europe, including the excitement of turning on the TV before heading off to school on May 8, 1995. There before me was euphoria direct from London, UK; Dame Vera Lynn sang outside Buckingham Palace as the Queen, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret came out onto the balcony, recreating the iconic scene from 1945, standing on the same spot to the jubilation of people celebrating the end of a long six-year war.

The world on May 8, 1995 was very different than the world of May 8, 1945, but, thanks to the participation of those who were there, the lightning captured in a bottle at war's end was released and recaptured half a century later.

That, in my opinion, will be next to impossible in 2045, no matter how concerted the effort we give.

Earlier this month, Second World War Naval Veteran Carl Bedal, now in his 95th year, welcomed me into his home to discuss his wartime service and what Remembrance Day means to him. Settling into his comfortable living room, I noticed he had his muted TV turned to a particular news network which was reporting on continuing disheartening news from Washington, D.C.

Given the state of the world, I asked his opinion on the rise of nationalism and what that might mean for the future.

'I don't know and it is hard to judge,' he said. 'The progression towards the far right is frightening to me. It seems so typical of what happened in Germany in the late 1930s, so similar that it really does worry me. I know I talk to other people my age and they feel the same way. I don't know where this leads.'

Few of us know where it leads, but it is hauntingly easy to imagine.

Amidst these sobering thoughts on Sunday, I was heartened by the sight of a young man in a scarlet tunic making his way through the crowds to place a wreath at the Cenotaph.

The wreath bore the name of Frank Young, a local veteran of the Second World War, who had died exactly a week before, who just happened to be the young man's great-grandfather.

Back in 2014, I met Mr. Young for the first of many times at the same service in the same location. At the time, he was overjoyed to be accompanied by five of his great-grandchildren. Then, he said recent events had driven home the importance of Remembrance Day to up-and-coming generations.

Those "recent events" were the murders of servicemen Cpl. Nathan Cirillo in Ottawa and Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu.

"I think what happened, and the Afghan war, did a heck of a lot to our guys because it brought back memories of three generations ago," said Mr. Young, who served in Normandy, the Netherlands, and Belgium among other locations, driving supply trucks during the Second World War. "I have been back to Holland three or four times and they get bigger crowds every year. Nowadays the kids here are getting a lot better, they are teaching more in schools, and it is very nice. It feels great [that my family] has been able to come here for years. I feel a sense of pride and a sense of sorrow too. I was a very lucky man to get back and have a big family and enjoy life."

Judging by the reflective pride evident on his great-grandson's face as he paid tribute to his forebear on Sunday, he was a lucky man indeed. And, if he was able to share some of this wisdom while passing the torch to him "and I suspect he was" we too are lucky. Let's hope it bodes well for the future.