

"Our duty was to serve. Your duty is to Remember."



By Brock Weir

They came by candlelight.

They came bundled up against the daytime chill.

They came to remember.

Over one-thousand people descended on the Aurora Cenotaph on Sunday morning to mark not only Remembrance Day, but the 100th anniversary of the Armistice, the formal end of the First World War.

Sunday's service followed just hours after residents, including a number of local cadets, stood vigil at the historic monument paying tribute to the fallen with little more than the flame at the end of their taper to keep them warm.

Under the mix of sun and cloud the following morning, the Peace Park was filled with people young and old as dignitaries laid wreaths of Remembrance, alongside those placed by families in memory of those no longer with us. Whether those wreaths were laid in honour of those who fell on the Western front over a century ago, or, in the case of one young man, by Mike Smith, a student of the Royal Military College, placed in memory of his great-grandfather, Aurora-based Second World War veteran Frank Young who died the previous Sunday, each was viewed with the same reverence.

Sunday's service at the Cenotaph was the culmination of Remembrance Week which in this, the centenary of Armistice, had added significance.

Following the Remembrance Dinner hosted by the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion on Saturday, November 3, a series of events were held across the community to underscore the theme of Remembrance.

Rick Hansen Public School, for instance, covered its lawn in small Canadian flags on November 9 to represent fallen soldiers while, inside, Second World War veterans Seaman First Class Jack Crone and Able Seaman Carl Bedal were given heroes' welcomes in the classrooms they visited.

?We two veterans had an interesting and exciting trip through several classrooms where students greeted us, shook our hands, thanked us for our service, and even asked to hug us,? Mr. Bedal shared with The Auroran after attending the school's assembly with Mr. Crone, an event which paid tribute to veterans of both World Wars, First Nations' Soldiers, and soldiers serving today.

Earlier in the day, Cardinal Carter Catholic High School hosted its own poignant Remembrance Day assembly where cadets stood vigil as they welcomed Master Corporal Dean Turner who served in the Canadian Armed Forces for 22 years.

Mr. Turner, who described himself as the middle child of eleven kids, told students that when he was growing up in Windsor, ON, there was not a lot to be had, including when it came to finding a job. He ventured off to Vancouver looking for work on pipeline projects, but when that didn't pan out, and finding himself without direction, he happened into a recruiting centre.

?I joined the infantry, not really realizing what the infantry was about,? he said, harkening back to a speech made at the event by history teacher John Hebert on the experiences of soldiers in the First World War. ?When John was talking about the soldiers in World War One, the infantry was on the frontline. These are the soldiers that lived in the ditches and fought from town to town to

take the hills. They are the toughest and the strongest, the baddest that are in the military.?

While the men in the infantry during the First World War might have been the ?baddest,? Mr. Hebert took the opportunity to highlight how vulnerable each man was at the front, reminiscing about some of his own experiences interviewing these veterans firsthand, conscious of the fact that each and every person who served in this particular conflict is now gone.

?[In Flanders Fields] is a very stirring poem because it speaks to us of Flanders and the gas attacks,? said Mr. Hebert. ?It was written, of course, after 6,000 Canadians choked to death on the content of their own lungs. You see, they didn't have gas masks in April 1916 at Ypres. Our enemy knew that, and they gassed us. Rather than flee, our boys held the line. They urinated on a piece of their uniform, stuffed it in their mouths and bit down, knowing that their own urine might counteract the chlorine gas and prevent it from boiling their lugs.

?John McCrae wrote this poem to honour them, yes, for their courage, for holding the line, but also so that we can remember what they did then. There, poppies grow in ditches and fields. Every spring, the poppy is everywhere and it is much like the dandelion in Canada. The poppy is a beautiful flower. Like democracy, the poppy is strong and it is also fragile.?

This fragility, he told students, is very much in evidence today.

?Yes, the poppy symbolizes the blood that was spilled for our freedom. Yes, when you wear a poppy today, I am hoping that you will throughout this weekend do the most Canadian thing you can do and wear a poppy over your heart, to say, ?I remember. I have not had to serve. I have not had to risk my life. I remember those who did 100 years ago, 50 years ago, and the women and men who serve our country proudly today.' We think of them all, but when we put that poppy on, think of what they fought for. Why their blood was spilled among the poppies in Flanders. They fought for democracy and it is an ongoing struggle for democracy.

?When you wear the poppies, certainly think of the women and men who have served and continue to serve, but think about what they fought for so you can be free so that you have the right to vote, so you have the right not to be discriminated against, so that you have the freedom of choice to go anywhere you want in our wonderful country; so that you are not fearful when you get out of bed, you are not fearful on the streets, that you feel safe. This is what they fought for. So, when you hear some people yell ?fake news', when you hear some people challenge freedom of speech and freedom of the press, remember ? and Hitler taught us this lesson ? democracy is fragile. So is the poppy. It can be gone as quickly as it arose. Don't take your freedoms for granted; wear a poppy; say to all the women and men who serve today, ?I appreciate what you're doing.'?

While there is not a single First World War veteran alive today, Mr. Hebert told students that one such veteran, Vincent Goodman, told him in 1981, when he was already in his 80s, ?We didn't want to be heroes, we were just boys doing our job, but please tell your students that we would be so honoured that when we're gone, they remember us. Tell your students we didn't fight for glory, we just fought so they might be free ? our children and grandchildren. Our task was to serve; your task is to remember.?