

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Remembering their families, too

By Chris Ballard, MPP
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When this column is published it will be well past November 11. All the poppies will have disappeared and the wreaths at the Cenotaph put away for another year.

I debated writing about Remembrance Day, fearing another column could contribute to an overload of commentary about how we should feel and what we should do to honour both those who have served our nation in the past and those who serve today.

This time of year I think about relatives who served our nation. Too many did not return to loved ones. Others came home maimed in body and mind. Come Remembrance Day, I think about the affect their sacrifice had on their mothers, fathers, siblings, friends and communities.

The world is rightly in uproar over the attack on citizens in Paris. With the thoughts of possible future conflict in mind, I decided to write about Remembrance Day. I am sensitive to the thought of sacrifice, knowing the involvement our local reserve unit, the Queen's York Rangers, has had in recent world conflicts. War is no longer an abstract idea when you have got to know many of the young men and women who could be involved.

This column is courtesy of MPP David Zimmer, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. He wrote this tribute and delivered it in the House as part of the annual all-party tribute to Remembrance Day. I was moved, and felt it needed to be shared with my community. I had the honour of reading it at the Aurora Legion Remembrance Dinner and was asked for copies.

Here is my column, courtesy of Minister Zimmer:

November 11 is Remembrance Day. Tributes are offered throughout the country and in this room. We recognize veterans' sacrifices. We talk about defending democracy and freedom, and those are noble ideals, but on another level, sometimes I think we forget to ask ourselves the very important question: What did their sacrifices actually mean in terms of the individuals, their families and their friends?

I think there is an obligation on us to try to understand their sacrifice in these very personal ways: what it meant to them, what it meant in their minds and what it meant in their hearts. I think we have an obligation to try and feel the pain and the grief of their mothers, their fathers, their siblings and their friends.

Friends, it is impossible to comprehend, in the safety of our homes, in the safety of our careers, in the safety of this room, exactly what that meant. How are we to understand what it must have felt like to be shot at and bombed, to suffer grievous wounds, to die from grievous wounds or to be maimed? But this is the visceral reality of what it is like to serve in defence of these noble virtues of democracy and freedom.

All of their names are chiseled on the various cenotaphs throughout the province of Ontario: in small-town Ontario, villages, big cities, rural communities and high school remembrance plaques, all over the province. But how many of us, passing a cenotaph, passing one of these high school plaques, take a moment to pause and just look at the names on those plaques and ask ourselves: ?What did it mean to them and their families at the very personal level??

I think that our obligation on this Remembrance Day is to try to feel that reality, that danger, that fear. Each of those individuals faced horror, fear, danger, and then all of those emotions must have also been felt by their parents, their siblings and their friends. Our obligation is to understand the magnitude of their risk and their sacrifices, and to respect them for that.

Let me tell you a very human story to drive home this point. Mrs. C.S. Woods of Winnipeg, Manitoba was invited by the Canadian government to the national Vimy monument unveiling in the late 1920s. There's a picture of her in a magazine of the day that covered it. She is standing there quietly, saluting in a very frail, dignified, but brave manner.

This is what the caption under the photograph says: ?Among the Canadian pilgrims who attended the unveiling of the Vimy...memorial was Silver Cross Mother Mrs. C.S. Woods of Winnipeg, who lost eight sons in the war.? That day she wore all their medals on her jacket. Just let that thought sink in: a mother, a father, a family?eight sons.

I did a little bit of research into the background of Mrs. Woods. She had 12 children, 11 sons, all of whom enlisted; two were underage, and eight never came home. Need I say more? I think we have an obligation to ask ourselves how we comprehend that sacrifice of her sons, and of her husband and of their siblings. How do we honour it? How do we remember it? That's our challenge. That's our responsibility on this day of remembrance.

I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. I look forward to hearing from you.