

2014 Remembrance Day Memorial Address

2014 marks the centennial of the beginning of the First World War: a conflict which was considered to be, at the time, the “war to end all wars”. However it sparked the beginning of the most violent times our world and Canada has seen. The threats to our values and way of life have varied during that time, and subsequent generations of Canadians have stood up selflessly to these challenges, and many paid with their lives in doing so.

When we think of those who are willing to do this on our behalf, we might consider them to have superhuman qualities and to come from extraordinary circumstances. Such admirable personal backgrounds do not seem to resonate with our definition of Miramichi: a quiet, rural community of hardworking men and women. As easy as it would be for us here to ignore the dangers of the world, Miramichiers have always stepped up when Canada called. Our people were there at Vimy Ridge, and Passchendale. Miramichier’s fought in the North Atlantic; in the skies over Europe; on the hills of Hong Kong; the valleys of Italy; and against the enemy’s best at Juno Beach and Carpique. Our people were at Hill 677 in Korea; kept the peace in Cyprus, Somalia, and Former Yugoslavia. We were there for the liberation of Kuwait and Afghanistan; and most recently stood our ground in the hallways of Parliament. This is by no means a glorification of war and conflict but, rather, it exemplifies that even though our heroes do in fact come from humble backgrounds, they accomplish feats of amazing personal strength and valor.

This part of Miramichi’s history, as virtuous and noble as it is, is rarely a topic of everyday conversation. Why is this the case? I believe this is promoted by our community members’ quiet modesty in the reflection on their courageous acts. This was personified in October by the Sergeant at Arms and his stoic demeanor during an unprecedented applause given in the House of Commons. Ask any local veteran, as I did my grandfather as a child, “Why did you risk your life to serve?” You will get the same selfless answers, “It was a job that needed to be done; I did it for my family, my friends, my home, and my country”. I am not necessarily supporting the notion that we should brag of their accomplishments, but we need to be aware of what these people have done and remember and admire their preservation of their sense of duty over their own well-being.

As a teacher of history, I want students to know the patriotic duties that were asked of men and women their age in previous generations; to know the trials and tribulations they faced, and the loss and sorrow felt by those at home. I have had the opportunity to take students to Canadian War Cemeteries in Europe. I have accompanied a group to Beny-Sur-Mer Cemetery near Juno Beach. The loud silence was deafening as each person explored the cemetery in their own personal remembrance; not a word spoken just a collective, stunning reflection. As we looked over the gravestones and found those of men of the North Shore Regiment, there was an eerie sense that far from home in the middle of Normandy, we were seeing the names of the

fallen that were as familiar as looking through our local phone book; Names that resonated thoughts of home, friends, and family. You could read in the students' faces their feelings of sadness as they connected with the fact that the people buried there before them had died at an age not much older than theirs and who had been denied the same future opportunities to which they were looking forward.

A year ago on this day, I stood at Holten Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands with Canadian and Dutch students, along with colleagues, in a ceremony of remembrance. Our project began the year prior to our trip and required the Canadian and Dutch students to work in pairs to research the 30 soldiers from the North Shore Regiment buried at Holten. Through the soldiers' war records and contacts with relatives, they learned about their soldier and created a eulogy which they then recited at the soldier's grave site on Remembrance Day. The students worked tirelessly to pay tribute to each soldier and by the end of the project they felt a connection to these fallen men. It was an emotional rollercoaster which included them finding old letters from mothers with broken hearts pleading to know how their son had died; of sweethearts who hoped the dreaded telegraph was wrong and that they would yet get to walk down the aisle with their love; and of wives with children whose worlds had collapsed expressing the anguish of not knowing how to put the pieces of their lives back together.

As part of the project, I helped the students by calling family members of the soldiers as a courtesy to the families to inquire if there was anything special we could do on their behalf to honor their loved ones during the ceremony. These men were killed during the last month of the war, which gives these stories an added touch of sadness as they were so close to getting through to the end. One of the first phone calls I made was to a man who was one month old when his father died on April 8th 1945 in the Battle of Zutphen in the Netherlands. What he shared with me was a heartbreaking story in which he explained the pain of growing up without a father while watching other children with theirs. He described how he had worked hard all his life and never had an opportunity to see his father's resting place and now, retired and on a fixed income, he didn't see the likelihood of this ever happening. When I asked him if there was something we could do on his behalf during the ceremony, he answered, with a pleading in his voice, that all he wanted was for me to bring him home some blades of grass from his father's grave.

This is an example of how time does not erase the scars left by war. Many here today are fortunate not to have those scars, but there are those who have dealt with this pain for a lifetime. I believe one of the most important things we can do today is attempt to share their burden and pain with a theme of humble gratitude and sorrowful remembrance. It may be 100 years since the trenches of Flanders and subsequent conflicts, but the hurt of those conflicts is still, and will always be with us. It is something we share with those who died and their families; those who came home and never stopped serving as they dealt with their own demons and nightmares; and by the rest of us who try the best we can to support them. It is not much to ask that we dedicate one day in remembrance of them.

I have heard it said in the 21st century that in the years to come the observation of Remembrance Day will fade away. Based on my experiences with today's younger generation I say to that.... Not a chance! How beautiful is it that we still honour those who fought in the First World War, a century later? 100 years from now our country will continue to hold the torch high, and reflect silently during the last post. It is my wishful hope that even then, Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent and Corporal Nathan Cirillo will be the last of the fallen. We will remember them..... we will remember all of them.