

Only a tiny remnant know what war's all about

I feel quite hurt this year. Nobody has asked me to speak at their Remembrance Day dinner. I would have turned it down, of course, because I think you can flog the old poppy and talk about throwing the torch from our failing hands only so long, before it becomes irrelevant.

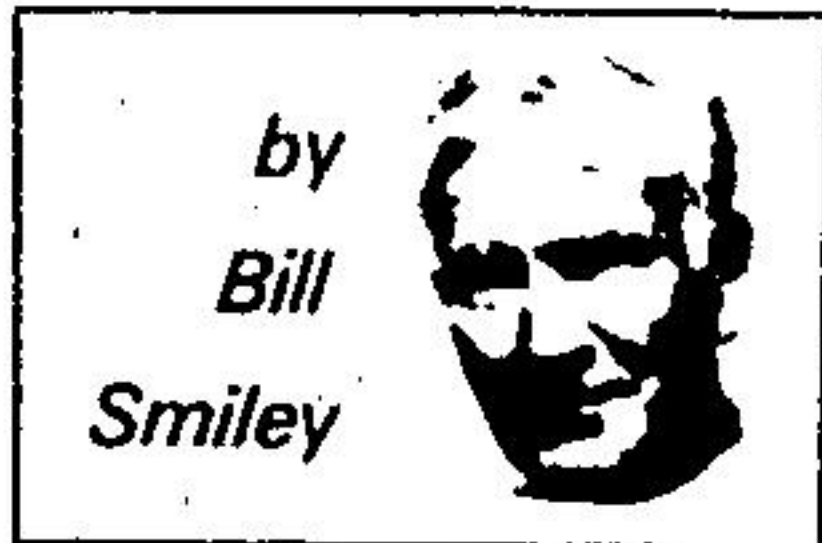
However, I've not been ignored entirely. A teacher asked me to send a copy of a Remembrance Day column I wrote either last year, or the year before, to be read by a Grade 8 student, to the whole school, I presume.

Some order. If I kept a decent file of columns, I could put my finger on it, run off a copy and shoot it to him. But my files are something like my mind: scattered all over the place, confused, mixed up.

My wife, in a fit of pique over some little thing, once stuffed about 200 of my columns into a large plastic bag. It's a little difficult to reach into that bag (it's really a garbage bag, as she implied when she did it) and pull out the right column.

And of course, I haven't been forgotten by the good old administration of our school, which has requested that I write a two-minute thing about Remembrance Day.

My, how that day has shrunk. When I was a kid, the whole school marched to the arena, bedecked with flags, heard speeches about our "fallen" and "our glorious dead." I think we got the afternoon off, to enjoy immediate pleasures. But before we were dismissed, we heard



some haunting hymns, such as "Abide with me," and Lord help us, "Onward Christian Soldiers," and saw some real tears fall from the eyes of people who had lost a husband or father.

After World War II, but not for several years, I joined the Canadian Legion. Not because I wanted to, particularly, but because I was a weekly editor, and you had to join everything to get the news.

Each year we swaggered, with a certain amount of the old flair, down the main street to the cenotaph, followed by a rag-tag of Scouts and Guides and Brownies, to make up a parade, and led by the town band. The names of the local boys were read, a prayers, a hymn, the Last Post, some snuffles in the meagre audience, and some wet eyes and lumps in throats among the Legionnaires who really did remember.

Then back to the Legion Hall for beer and b.s. There was a good feeling between the old-timers of W1, and us young veterans who had never gone over the

top, deloused ourselves, coped with a gas attack, or been under heavy bombardment of artillery as the old vets frequently reminded us.

The native Indian veterans turned out in force. This was before they were allowed to buy any kind of spirits, and they made a day of it.

Now, the tiny remnant of old vets still remember, but they are very old men. And the young vets of that time are rapidly becoming old men.

Then I started teaching school. Remembrance Day was still observed, with the whole school being called for a special assembly, and the old platitudes recalled and regurgitated.

I was asked to speak at one of them. The head of the students' council preceded me, and pulled out all the cliches and hackneyed references. "Sacrifice," "the fallen," and carrying "the torch" were among them.

I didn't mean to, but pulled the rug right out from under him, I pointed out that the dead didn't fall; they were killed; that the sacrifice—made by millions of young men, from many nations, all of them fighting for "the right"—achieved absolutely nothing; that if someone threw them a torch to carry, they should throw it right back, and so on. The kids loved it, but the administration though it was iconoclastic.

These assemblies went on for a few more years, steadily disintegrating as the remembrance ceremony was turned over more and more to students, to whom

both wars were ancient history.

They degenerated into folk songs like "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," juvenile diatribes against war, and maudlin sentiments about peace, far worse than the Legion, which always had a certain dignity, could perpetrate.

Eventually, the assemblies were cut entirely, and yours truly became the goat. His task: to write a two-minute commercial reminding the students that Remembrance Day is not just a school holiday. Try doing that in 200 words that will stir the students' emotions, uplift their souls, and make them want to rush out and defend their country against something or other.

The wars mean almost nothing to them, and the only things they'd fight to the death for are their transistors, motorcycles, hi-fi's, and high allowances. Most of them have only the vaguest idea of the tensions in the world, and small reason. They're sick to death of politicians and are inured to violence by seeing it daily on TV. They don't really care much about abstracts like patriotism, loyalty, sacrifice.

But I get my quiet revenge. There's no teaching, in the usual sense, in my classes on the day before the "holiday."

I show them souvenirs, pictures of "your hero" standing beside his Typhoon, and tell them funny stories about stupid senior officers, and make them realize that if it was 40 years ago, most of them would be in the process of being shot at, or losing a sweetheart. It works.



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