

Lest we forget...

How the Legion came into being

Although the Great War finished in 1918, its effects lingered long after—especially for veterans. In Canada, as elsewhere, economic difficulties presented problems for many returned men. Mutual distrust arose between officers and other ranks. The existing legislation and the administrative machinery could not solve the problems of those who had served. Many veterans' groups thus sprang up, but the circumstances demanded a united organization.

Field Marshal Haig, Commander of the British Empire's forces on the Western Front, and Sir Richard Turner, a Canadian soldier, helped inspire the creation of such an organization. A unity convention met at Winnipeg in November 1925, and most existing groups merged to form the Canadian Legion which, in 1960 by royal assent, became The Royal Canadian Legion.

The founders decided to stand for peace with strength and for loyalty to Canada, the Empire and the Monarchy. The Legion was to safeguard veterans and their dependents, to protect the families of the fallen, and to make sure that wartime sacrifices would be remembered.

Despite these intentions, certain individuals believed that because the group denied membership to anarchists and communists, a strong-armed, fascist movement was in the making.

However, the rumours did not persist and, with Saskatchewan veterans in the vanguard, the membership of most former servicemen's groups flocked to the legion.

The Legion's prime concern has

always been veterans and their dependents. Money from poppy sales aids such people when they are in distress. The organization has helped thousands to press claims for government benefits and has lobbied for improved veterans' legislation.

As early as April 1926, the group sought amendments to the Pensions Act, the Soldier Settlement Act, and the Civil Service Superannuation Act. Such efforts procured assistance, unheard of following the First World War, for people being discharged after the Second.

The Legion tried to make military life more pleasant. During World War II, Canadian Legion War Services provided members of the forces with recreation, personal guidance and opportunities for education. The educational programs produced better soldiers, sailors, and airmen, prepared military personnel for civilian life, and prevented "boredom in the long winter nights." Some credit this program with raising literacy rates in parts of Canada.

Beyond concern for the veteran, the Legion has a sense of public duty. In 1928 the organization offered child rearing advice. The Legion's first national convention wanted to develop a "spirit of Empire" to offset dangerous foreign activities. Before and during World War II, the organization fought complacency.

More recently, the group has sought reform in various fields and has provided many community services; for instance, there are hundreds of places in Canada where the Legion Hall is the only social centre.



Remembrance and the poppy

Last November, six and a half million poppies bloomed in Canada. Dotting the lapels of almost one-third of Canada's population, the symbol of Remembrance made its 38th appearance in this country.

Although everybody knows what the poppy means, nobody is certain of how it all began; of how the poppy became so closely associated with remembrance of the war dead.

The association was certainly not new when the poppy was adopted in Canada in 1921. At least a hundred and ten years before that time, a correspondent wrote of how thickly poppies grew over the graves of the dead. He was speaking of the Napoleonic War and its campaigns in Flanders.

But a Canadian medical officer was chiefly responsible for this association, more so than any other single known factor.

John McCrae was a tall, boyish, 43 year-old member of the Canadian Medical Corps from Guelph. An artillery veteran of the Boer War, he had the eye of a gunner, the hand of a surgeon, and the soul of a poet when he went into the line at Ypres on April 22, 1915.

That was the afternoon the enemy first used poison gas.

The first attack failed. So did the next and the next. For 17 days and nights the allies repulsed wave after wave of attackers.

During this period, McCrae wrote: "One can see the dead lying there on the front field. And in places where the enemy threw in an attack, they lie very thick on the slopes of the German trenches."

Working from a dressing station on the bank of the Yser Canal, Lt.

Col. McCrae dressed hundreds of wounded, never taking off his clothes for the entire 17 days. Sometimes the dead or wounded acutely rolled down the bank from above into his dugout. Sometimes, while awaiting the arrival of batches of wounded, he would watch the men at work in the burial plots which were quickly filling up.

Then McCrae and his unit were relieved. "We are weary in body and wearier in mind. The general impression in my mind is one of a nightmare," he wrote home.

But McCrae came out of Ypres with 13 lines scrawled on a scrap of paper. The lines were a poem which started: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow . . ."

These were the lines which are enshrined in the hearts of soldiers who heard in them their innermost thoughts. McCrae was their voice. The poem circulated as a folk song circulates, by living word of mouth. Men learned it with their hearts.

In the United States, the poem inspired the American Legion to adopt the poppy as the symbol of Remembrance.

In Canada, the poppy was officially adopted by the Great War Veterans Association in 1921 on the suggestion of a Mrs. E. Guerin of France. But there is little doubt that the impact of McCrae's poem influenced this decision.

The poem speaks of Flanders fields. But the subject is universal: the fear of the dead that they will be forgotten, that their death will have been in vain.

The spirit of true Remembrance, as symbolized by the poppy, must be the eternal answer which belies those fears.

"In Flanders Fields"

*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead, Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from falling hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

John McCrae