

COLUMNS

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First World War sacrifices remembered Canadian author of In Flanders Fields will never be forgotten

DEFENCE MATTERS



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John McCrae wrote *In Flanders Fields* at a medical station beside this cemetery during the First World War. (Submitted photo)

Thousands of Canada's First World War dead - the "missing" - have no known grave. They are commemorated on two large, centralized monuments: one in France and one in Flanders.

Most Canadians are familiar with the memorial in France at Vimy Ridge, perhaps the most majestic and inspiring First World War monument of any country. It commemorates the supreme sacrifice made by more than 66,000 Canadians during the war, as well as those lost in France. Engraved on the soaring monument are the names of 11,285 soldiers whose final resting place is unknown.

Imposing monument

The second - and less well-known - memorial is the Menin Gate at Ypres in Belgium. There, the names of 6,994 Canadians lost forever in the mud of the Ypres Salient are carved on the imposing monument, along with 48,000 of their Empire comrades.

Every night since 1929 (except during the German occupation in the Second World War, when it occurred at England's Brookwood Military Cemetery), the Last Post Ceremony has taken place at the Menin Gate. Each evening, as crowds of young and old gather and traffic is halted, buglers of the Ypres fire brigade step out under the great arch and at precisely 8 p.m. play the haunting strains of the *Last Post*.

To mark the 25,000th occasion the ceremony took place - on Oct. 31, 2001 - a new feature was added. Each day for the next year, the life and death of one serviceman who died in the Ypres Salient on that date was highlighted.

The next spring, I was visiting war cemeteries, memorials and battlefields in France and Flanders and attended the ceremony on May 2 when, fortuitously, a Canadian was honoured. Lieut. Alexis Helmer, an artillery officer, was killed instantly on that day in 1915 when a German 8-inch shell exploded at his feet.

When the firing ceased, his comrades gathered what was left of his broken body, placed the remains in sandbags - which they tried to form into the shape of a human body - and wrapped them in an army blanket. A simple burial ceremony was held after sunset to avoid drawing enemy fire, attended by a

few off-duty soldiers.

Also present was a good friend of Helmer's, an army doctor working in an advanced dressing station in some nearby dugouts. The physician tried to recite a few passages from the Order of Burial for the Dead from memory, but was so overcome by emotion that he had to stop partway through.

Sometime within the next 24 hours, the doctor sat down on the tailboard of an ambulance, while staring at Helmer's grave. In 20 minutes, on a slip of paper from his dispatch book, he wrote probably the most famous poem of the First World War.

The doctor was Major John McCrae, a former artillery officer who had served in the Boer War. The poem was *In Flanders Fields*, one of about 30 of his poems published during his lifetime.

In June 1915, McCrae was transferred to the rear, to Number 3 Canadian General Hospital, near Boulogne in northern France. During his off-duty hours he prepared the poem for publication. He sent it first to *The London Spectator*, which rejected it. Then he sent it to another British magazine, *Punch*, which published it anonymously on Dec. 8. The poem became an instant success.

Condition worsened

McCrae continued to work at the Canadian hospital for the next two years. On Jan. 23, 1918 - 90 years ago today - he began to feel ill. The next day, he had such a bad cold that he could not report for duty and stayed in bed. His condition worsened, exacerbated by an asthma attack, a condition he had suffered with since childhood.

By now, McCrae was physically and mentally exhausted from his work. On Jan. 25, he developed pneumonia and was taken to No. 14 British General Hospital for Officers at nearby Wimereux. Two days later, he had a brain hemorrhage.

That same night - Jan. 28 - McCrae lost consciousness and died. He was 45 years old. The next day, he was buried with full military honours in the military section of Wimereux Municipal Cemetery.

Like so many of his friends, McCrae - the man who almost single-handedly made the poppy a lasting symbol of self-sacrifice in war - had not survived the conflict.

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John Boileau has visited the dugouts where John McCrae wrote In Flanders Fields.