

The Meaning Of Remembrance

By Sara Pluta

If you asked me the meaning of Remembrance Day, I would not have a concrete answer. Twelve years ago, I'd say something about poppies and appreciating veterans. While this may be true, Remembrance Day is not quite as simplistic as my 5-year-old self believed. Today, I would tell you Remembrance Day means, "To remember our fallen, to honour the sacrifices others have made for our country, and to thank those who remain." At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, Canada celebrates Remembrance Day. Every year, on the same day, at the same time. Despite the uniform setting, each year is different because I develop a greater understanding of remembrance as I age.

I remember my mother stuffing me into an oversized winter coat that fit too tightly with the extra layers she made me wear underneath. As I rushed out the door, my father mounted a poppy sticker on my left side because he was afraid I might poke myself if I wore the real thing. I did not understand why we would spend the next hour outside in the frigid weather. Besides, I had already attended a ceremony during school with my classmates, many of whom were enjoying their day off. We had coloured poppies in class and completed word searches with light-hearted words like 'bravery' and 'honour'--wasn't that enough? For the next hour, I tried to comprehend the words of the venerable people in uniform, but all I could think about was how I couldn't wait to get home.

The crisp air indicates another November would soon fall on the calendar. I'd attend the same school ceremony as always; I practically have it memorized by now. I braced myself for the shrill sound of the bagpipes while the teachers scolded my peers for plugging their ears. I listened to the familiar laments and poems, recalling the statistics we discussed in class: "*over 600,000 Canadians enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces during the war, with almost 60,000 never to return home.*" I stared at the floor because it was too arduous to stare at the weary faces of the veterans standing across from me. Looking back, I realize I was too immature to bear the melancholy mood.

In 2018, my Remembrance Day was unlike any other. Instead of attending my local ceremony, I represented the Youth of Canada in Halifax. Standing amongst the veterans, I experienced Remembrance Day from a different perspective. Looking out at the crowd, I saw my past self in one of the many children too uncomfortable to hold eye contact with the heroes before them. During two minutes of silence, I felt a palpable sense of sorrow weighing above the air. I've never heard silence quite so loud. The extraordinary Canadians that I met that day solidified a connection to the human face of war. I witnessed the everlasting camaraderie between veterans who made the same sacrifice decades ago. It became clear to me that 600,000 is not just a statistic you memorize for school, but it was the number of Canadians who risked their lives for our country's freedom.

Last Remembrance Day, I had a deeper knowledge of Canada's war record, thanks to a required class I would have never opted to take. Canadian History class taught me about the triumphs and tribulations of Canada at war. I learnt about the soldiers who spent months withering away from diseases in the trenches, the prisoners of war in Hong Kong who were starved and tortured, and the Canadians who knowingly marched towards their death. From the victories, like Vimy, to the defeats at the Somme, Canada owes an immense debt to our veterans.

Though we observe the same traditions every year, my appreciation of remembrance is constantly evolving. The older I get, the more I learn about the brave Canadians who shaped our country into the great nation it is today. Remembrance Day is not just a time to commemorate the past; it is about reflecting on the future. So, if you asked me, again, the meaning of Remembrance Day, I'd say, "Ask me next year. I'll have a different answer."