

Lest we forget again



By Nate Smelle

Since King George V first urged all countries in the British Commonwealth to observe Armistice Day on Nov. 11, 1919, Canadians have gathered on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour to honour the service of fallen soldiers, living veterans, and active military personnel. Initially known as Armistice Day in commemoration of the armistice agreement which brought about the end of the First World War on Nov. 11, 1918, the name of the holiday was changed to Remembrance Day in 1931. Although this day of remembrance was established to mark the end of "the war to end all wars," as history has proven time and time again the end of all wars still appears to be a long way away. Keeping up with the news these days - particularly coming out of Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza - one is constantly reminded that the world is still, after more than a century of "progress" and hundreds of millions of lives cut short, at war. In the weeks leading up to Remembrance Day when the plastic poppies bloom outside of grocery stores, shopping malls, and beer stores across Canada, we are repeatedly reminded of the sacred words, "Lest we forget." Intended to help us avoid the risk of forgetting the horror of war, this mantra stresses the value of peace by encouraging us not to repeat the tragic mistakes of the past. The tradition of adorning ourselves with a poppy is yet another nudge demanding that we infuse our actions with a healthy amount of compassion, peace, and understanding. As a symbol of remembrance which stems from the poem, "In Flanders Fields", written by Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in 1915, wearing a poppy signifies our personal understanding of the fact that the relative peace and freedom we enjoy here in Canada came at a cost. If the simple three words, "Lest we forget" and the bright red poppies pinned to our chests each year aren't enough of a reminder, there is no shortage of words describing the cruel and bloody futility of war, written by those who have experienced its carnage firsthand. Having witnessed such bloodshed during the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, and the Second World War, American writer and journalist Ernest Hemingway summed up his impression of war best when he advised his readers to, "Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime." Upon returning home from the Second World War where he served as a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune, John Steinbeck aptly described his experience, when he declared "All war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal." As both Hemingway and Steinbeck pointed out, in the end the cost of war always far outweighs any benefits it might generate. Turning back through the 100+ years of history archived in The Bancroft Times, there is an over-abundance of evidence affirming the observations of these witnesses, and testifying to the deadly folly of war. Flipping through the pages of some of the wartime editions of The Bancroft Times, I stumbled upon a brief write up by an unknown editor, entitled, "40,000 Children Died Fleeing Nazis." Stating only the facts, this report highlighted how some 40,000 children died on the roads of France in June of 1940 in the exodus of refugees fleeing the Nazi terror. In the report the French newspaper Petit Nicois was also quoted as saying that the figures made public at the assembly of the French Red Cross Society held at Nice in unoccupied France "leave us dumb with horror - 40,000 little bodies buried by the Red Cross in graves dug in the fields - How many others were killed and buried in unknown graves?" When is it not a crime to kill a single child, let alone 40,000? Have those calling for "total war" in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza or any other nation currently at war considered this question before dropping bombs on hospitals, schools, churches and mosques? How

can the killing of more innocent civilians nurture anything but hate? It is no secret by now that this hate we are fostering with our acceptance of war as a so-called 'necessary evil' waters the breeding ground for more violence which will inevitably be unleashed on mostly innocent people in the future. Decades after being exiled from South Vietnam in 1966 for expressing opposition to the Vietnam War and refusing to take sides, the renowned pacifist and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh shed light on why it is that we seem to be doomed to repeat the inherently catastrophic error of war in his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Looking inward for the root cause of war while pointing a finger at the enemy in the mirror, he explained why war never leads us to peace: 'We often think of peace as the absence of war, that if powerful countries would reduce their weapon arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we see our own minds, our own prejudices, fears and ignorance. Even if we transport all the bombs to the moon, the roots of war and the roots of bombs are still there, in our hearts and minds, and sooner or later we will make new bombs. To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women. To prepare for war, to give millions of men and women the opportunity to practice killing day and night in their hearts, is to plant millions of seeds of violence, anger, frustration, and fear that will be passed on for generations to come.' In April 2022, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute released a report which acknowledged how for the first time in human history, global military spending surpassed \$2-trillion in 2021. With this investment and the latest weapons of mass destruction in hand, can we honestly say the world is a safer and more peaceful place to live? What would the world look like if instead of blowing up trillions of dollars and each other in the process, we were to invest our tax dollars in health care, education, and climate change adaptation and mitigation? Would our future still remain so bleak? Lest we forget?