

Life during wartime



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By Nate Smelle

Looking into your family history can be a very enlightening experience. Seeing where we came from not only gives us insight into how we became who we are, it also provide us with a glimpse of where we are going.

That is not to say that this exercise gives us supernatural powers to predict the future. Nor is it that we walk so closely in our ancestors' footsteps. What it does provide us with however, is the opportunity to learn about the lives and struggles of our relatives and how they were shaped by the world they lived in.

Recently while conducting such an investigation into my own family history, I realized how pervasive the influence of war has been in defining the quality of life of our ancestors, and that which we possess in the world we live in today.

In the absence of bombs over Bancroft, most of us alive today only know war through the images of carnage we witness in the daily news. There is no disputing the power and necessity of the role these photographs and videos play in awakening us to the ongoing atrocities of war. That is why so many journalist and photographers risk, and even sacrifice their lives to share such snapshots of reality with us. Still, as effective as these captured moments might be, they always fall short of inspiring the level of fear and suffering endured by the people up on which they focus.

What I have personally found to be most helpful and transformative when trying to understand war are the accounts of those who have actually lived in a war zone. Considering all my relatives who have lived in a country during wartime, and/or fought in a war are dead; and that most of the veterans who fought in the First and Second World Wars have also passed on, these type of stories are becoming harder to come by.

By no means does this mean that our consciousness as a species has moved beyond, or is moving past the concept of war. If anything, recognizing the overwhelming number of ongoing armed conflicts; and the push for another nuclear arms race south of the border and elsewhere around the world there appears to be a desire to ramp up our capacity to kill.

As a journalist I have had the privilege of speaking with several individuals and families who have experienced the terror of war firsthand. I say privilege because of what I have learned from these conversations, not because of their content. This Remembrance Day I encourage anyone who considers war to be a necessary evil to speak with someone who has lived through one. Ask them about the necessity of so-called "just wars." Ask them what they feel is an acceptable number of innocent human lives lost to "collateral damage."

From my experience, one's view on such misleading terms used to describe the circumstances of war change drastically when they know how it feels to face the very real possibility of becoming a statistic.

While serving as vice president of the American Anti-Imperialist League in the early 1900s, American writer and journalist Mark Twain summed up the futility of war most accurately when he wrote:

?All war must be just the killing of strangers against whom you feel no personal animosity; strangers whom, in any other circumstances, you would help if you found them in trouble, and who would help you if you needed it.?
Thinking of war in this way just might take away itchy trigger fingers on all sides of a conflict.