

What to remember

I've just been looking over my photos from the Bancroft Remembrance Day ceremony at the town cenotaph. And I was struck by a heretical thought: these ceremonies have become calcified. The speeches, the wreaths, the medals, the pipe band ? it doesn't really connect to what I think should be the two central themes of the occasion: first, the actual recognition of what veterans faced, and second, why we should strive to make sure that we deal appropriately with the after-effects of war. If we want to appreciate what veterans went through, we have to get our minds away from the video game sanitizations of combat. The ways of killing and getting killed aren't pretty. In the First World War, large numbers of soldiers were simply pulverized ? blown to pieces by long-distance explosive shells (70 per cent of Western Front combat deaths were from artillery. On non-battle days, these deaths were cynically termed ?wastage?). In Afghanistan, a lot of Canadian soldiers died from explosions as well ? IEDs, mines, and RPGs. And ironically, in all combat, some of the deaths occur from ?friendly fire? ? essentially, getting shot by your own side; the most recent Canadian soldier's death (in Iraq) came when he was accidentally killed by the Kurdish troops he was helping to train. Then there are the civilian deaths. In all wars, large numbers of non-combatants get killed too, in what is now chillingly termed ?collateral damage?. In the Second World War, Korea, and many peace-keeping operations, far more civilians died than soldiers. In other words, death in war is seldom glamorous or ?glorious.?. Again, in all recent wars, there are far more people injured than killed. The injuries can be physically disabling ? loss of limbs, spinal damage. But the wounds can be mentally disabling as well. In the First World War, it was called ?shell shock,? and there was a wing in the Ottawa Veterans Hospital where such cases lived on for decades, still stuck in the trenches in their minds. In the Second World War, it was called ?combat fatigue,? and led to levels of alcoholism among veterans well above the national average. Now it is called ?post-traumatic stress disorder,? or PTSD, as we discover that Afghan vets have a suicide rate well above that of the rest of the Armed Forces. Whatever it's called, it's the result of seeing much more than anyone should of destruction ? including the destruction of innocent families caught in the conflict, who lose their homes, their relatives, and in too many cases, their homeland itself. Back in the First World War, a young British army officer named Wilfrid Owen wrote about PTSD long before it was called that, in a poem entitled ?Mental Cases.? To quote it in part:

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed?
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh ?

Stroke on stroke of pain
Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

(Owen, by the way, was wounded physically and mentally himself, and though he had turned against the war, chose to return to duty and his men. He was killed in action one week before the war ended.)
In the face of what we know about physical and mental trauma among Canadian soldiers returning from overseas missions, it is good to learn that veterans' services are now being restored after years of cuts. We have new veterans ? young men and women ? who have been hurt, and need help if they are to go on to live productive lives. Such increased help is surely what they deserve. Wars end, but their effects continue long afterward. As a country, we should help people put their lives back together. After destruction must come reconstruction. That is how we can truly honour veterans. Otherwise our cenotaph ceremonies are what

St. Paul called 'sounding brass' ? loud, but hollow and ultimately empty.

- Tony Pearson