

## **Lest we forget today's heroes**

VETERANS of the Second World War have always had it easier, by comparison. After the Great War (which came to be known as the First World War), everyone was just relieved it was over. There was no triumphant victory, just general exhaustion. Returning home, veterans were hit by a global pandemic (the 1918 influenza pandemic), killing millions and upending whatever was left of life from before the war.

The Korean War (a “conflict” that took decades to be recognized as a “war” by the Canadian government) is still not over. It ended with a truce, not a victory, and became just one of the bloodier incidents in the Cold War — another war that has dragged on for decades and still rears its head in international relations.

Veterans of Canada's various peacekeeping missions were never officially fighting in a war, despite how it felt on the ground in the Balkans, especially in Bosnia. It was also hard to return home from Rwanda or Somalia feeling like a hero, while other peacekeeping missions have dragged on for decades. There have been no victory celebrations, no parades, just the quiet welcome of families who later came to realize the emotional costs of these deployments overseas.

By contrast, the Second World War ended a terrible evil, one that had a face (and a moustache) that society had come to fear and despise. The veterans were treated as conquering heroes, then and still, so many years later. My maternal grandfather was part of the liberation of Holland, as a tank mechanic, but to the end of his life he remembered the gratitude of the Dutch people. There were Canadian units, led by Canadians, who fought as Canadians and returned home to Canadian celebrations.

The Great War and the influenza were followed by a few years of economic recovery, before the stock market crash of 1929 and a decade of the Great Depression. Only protests, some angry, led to financial support for veterans from governments that were overwhelmed and inadequate.

Again, by contrast, the Second World War was followed by the Marshall Plan and the booming prosperity of the new American empire and its allies. Everything was newer, bigger and better, even though it blossomed under the radioactive clouds of atmospheric testing and the prospect of global nuclear annihilation. For the veterans, life was good, as Royal Canadian Legion branches sprang up across the country, and they could wear their navy-blue blazers in public, and with pride.

For the veterans of Canada's longest war, the war in Afghanistan, on this Remembrance Day there is much less to celebrate, however. The Taliban are back in power, and despite recent, heroic efforts on the part of these veterans, thousands of Afghans and their families are still at risk because of their help to Canadian forces. The Canadian involvement in Afghanistan was marked by the ways our troops overcame adversity. It is a sad fact, however, that much of that adversity was caused not by enemy fighters, but by politicians at home — and is, still.

After 13 years of war, 158 Canadian lives lost and billions of dollars spent, after more than 40,000 Canadians left their homes and deployed to Afghanistan, in many different roles (only some of which were in combat), it is now over.

We left in 2014, not because our role was completed, but because the Harper government was facing reelection and hoped for a bounce in the polls, by bringing our people home.

But unlike in 1945, hardly anyone noticed. Once again, there were no celebrations. How could there be?

I understand the applause for veterans of the Second World War, and the respect shown to those few remaining, but they have been honoured many times before. We need to change the focus of Remembrance Day, and honour instead those who offer their time, their work, their health — and sometimes their lives — in the service of all Canadians.

Focusing on that service, rather than on (only once) winning a war, creates a far better way for us to recognize and remember our veterans. We will continue to call on the Canadian Armed Forces as the flood waters rise again; as yet another disaster strikes at home or abroad; as the forest fires burn and the pandemics rage. When violence threatens Canadians, we rely on the cool heads, courage and skill of our armed forces to defend us, in the air, on the land and at sea — to make, as well as to keep, the peace.

We need to honour and embrace those serving today, and respect them for their continuing sacrifices. We need to honour and embrace those who are healing from the physical and emotional wounds of their service in Afghanistan and elsewhere right now, not just keeping alive the memory of those who have long since passed on.

Wear a poppy, watch or attend a ceremony, pause and reflect, thank someone for their service.

Lest we forget — knowing our veterans never will.

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