

“We Remember”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, November 5, 2017

I have a collection of books in my office about Remembrance Day, stories from veterans, poetry and news reports. But War is not something you can put back up on a bookshelf or put in the recycling box when you’re finished reading the newspaper articles.

War has touched Stouffville as men and women served in the military efforts through the first and second world wars. And the threat of war continues to be on the minds of families in Stouffville as our young people serve the Canadian military here and abroad.

In the book, “It Made You Think of Home: The Haunting Journal of Deward Barnes, Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1916-1919”, Toronto born Corporal Barnes is in Bellacourt, France, in a trench. It is April 28, 1918.

He writes: “Stood to from 4:00 am to 5:00 am. Dull and cold. At 1:30 pm the Germans made a daylight raid. They hid in the same sap they came up before and at 1:30 pm jumped into our trench (when everything was as quiet as could be). Not a shell fired.

This sap was on the left of our platoon and they took Ben Moore, Nick Carter, and George Morrison prisoners. Two of them were sleeping in their funk holes and the Germans threw them out of our trench, they did not fire a shot and were after prisoners. Everything was timed.

The Germans had to go overland a short distance to get into their own trench that led to their front line. There were about twenty-six of them. The minute it was pulled off the German machine gunners opened and skimmed all along our parapet. The unfortunate part of it, I had my gun down cleaning it. They got away except six.”¹

Bruce Cane, the historian adds this footnote to Barnes’ entry: “Five of the six Germans who did not make it back to their lines were accounted for by Bert Sedore, a twenty-three year old farmer from Ravenshoe, Ontario and a battalion sniper.”²

A few years ago, a woman I was visiting handed me some pieces of paper – WW II telegrams sent to her informing her first that her husband was missing in action, and the second informing her that her husband was now a prisoner of war being held in the German Prisoner of War Camp Stalag 7A.

And as I held these carefully folded telegrams in my hands, I became so aware of the emotions for the wife, for the husband, and for all the others who have held such telegrams in their hands.

¹ It Made You Think of Home, p. 190

² *Ibid.*

Sure I've seen photocopies in history books and read about these telegrams in war accounts and diaries. But nothing in history books compares to holding the real thing in your hand.

The same soldier, John Oliver, wrote later about his war experience when he returned to Canada:

“Back in the fighting line again, and after more engagements with the enemy, I was ordered to report to “A” Co. on September 27, 1943, to attach with them across the Lamone River in Italy. It is hard to explain the premonition I felt at this news. I knew I would not come back to my buddies but I had no idea what would happen.

By first light, September 28, we were on the river bank having not encountered any mines on this approach. The order to attach was given and we charged across. Our radio man was killed in the crossing and his radio rendered useless by shrapnel, so we were out of touch with headquarters. The fighting got very fierce and mortar shells were falling rapidly on us as we crawled forward and one hit a dead tree above me and exploded.

I kept crawling forward in this muddy vineyard, but when I looked up again two enemy tanks were getting into position to demolish the farm house in which some of our men had taken cover. The enemy had outflanked us and were again lined up on the river bank behind us and they had spotted me.

I tried to get my gun ready but found it jammed due to all the mud I had been crawling through and the mechanism would not release. The enemy soldier approached me. He let a short burst go into the ground on my left. I had no choice but to surrender.

He could have killed me, but I realized as he kept staring at me, as if I was some creature from outer space, he did not want to kill me no more than I wanted to kill him. After what seemed like an eternity, but in reality a few seconds, he motioned for me to march ahead of him to his headquarters.”³

John Oliver survived his Prisoner of War experience, returning to England for a few weeks of hospitalization before returning home to Mount Albert at midnight on July 12, 1945. John would in time become a long time organist of Mount Albert United Church and my husband Keith sang in his choir.

From ‘The Wounded’, printed in the Legion November/December 2017 Magazine, Stephen Thorne writes about some of our Afghanistan Veterans: “They belong to a society

³ From a sermon delivered by John Oliver to Mount Albert United Church, November 8, 1986.

whose members are connected by a bond like no other, whose badges are never shed, whose rewards are life, belonging and little more. Their sacrifices were made for a higher purpose. Most believe that. They must.”⁴

Thorne’s essay, which is also to be found on the Legion Magazine’s website, includes black and white photos and more indepth stories of Canadian soldiers wounded in Afghanistan in tours of duty in 2007 and 2009 and who returned home to face the fight of their lives because of horrific physical injuries and mental nightmares.

“I feel I’m blessed,” said Martin Renaud, who was a 19-year-old private in the Vandoos when he broke his back and lost both legs to a roadside bomb in Afghanistan more than 10 years ago. “I am a survivor. I fight for my life every day. “I have friends fallen there.”

Thorne writes, “The costs are high. To never walk again. To negotiate an infinitely more complex life than one could ever imagine possible. To battle demons and darkness, year after year after year. To learn who your friends really are, and aren’t. To reach the bottom and make the agonizing climb back up. It takes years to rebuild a life. Years and years and years.

For some, the road ended. They could see no way out from the darkness. They took their own lives and became casualties of war as much as those who returned in flag-draped coffins from the battlefields of Afghanistan and other far-off places.”⁵

I include all this detail from the first and second World Wars and from the recent tours of Afghanistan by Canadian troops because I hold deeply the privilege of being Chaplain to the Royal Canadian Legion. The work of Remembrance Day is considerable and it is hard work.

Today, as Stouffville United Church we remember and honour:

George Alvin Davis
Elmer Stanley Winn
Gordon Hoover
Leland Martin Fairles
William Thomas Tranmer

who served in the Second World War and were members of this church.

And from the First World War we remember and honour:

Fred Jennings
Ross Pipher
Floyd Davis

We remember all who have served our country, who were taken to prisoner of war camps, who gave the supreme sacrifice and lost their lives - strength and honour, torch from one hand to the next – always in the God-given hope that one day, one day, peace will prevail.

⁴ <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2017/09/the-wounded-2/>

⁵ *ibid.*

Clearly, the experience of war that we have relived this day in this worship service reminds us that war, whether in decades past or facing us today, is just as destructive in the ways in which people, families, and countries are torn asunder by its deadliness. It has not lost its evil.

The prophet Micah offered the words that continue to inspire so many, as you, as I wonder how to move into a world where war still has not been given its last rites.

“O mortal, what is good?” And what does the Lord require of you?

But to do justice. And to love kindness.

And to walk humbly with your God. Amen.