

# Still remembering

by Geoffrey Jackson

My father was a career soldier in the Canadian army. He joined the forces in 1939 and served with the Royal Canadian Artillery for the next thirty years.

So I was raised an army brat. I grew up thinking all fathers naturally wore khaki-green uniforms. I believed everyone lived in PMQ's, those oversized toy houses the army calls homes. Military style was something to be taken as a given.

I remember on Saturdays Father would often take me with him to the Armoury. I was only six then and getting in the old Buick and travelling to the big "castle" was terribly exciting and fun. It was right downtown, a big heap of stone masonry with turrets and a big gate.

While my father worked, I would play in the drill hall, a great cavern of a room so big that the bright lights overhead never managed to drive out all the shadows. Lined up in rows on the floor were canvas draped guns. They seemed heavy, indestructible machines that were polished clean and carefully oiled.

When I think of guns it is those silent, shrouded machines I recall. I believe when my father thinks of guns, he remembers the shattered and burnt out wreck he confronted on that morning in 1944.

On November 11th, when I turn on the TV, all I am likely to find on any channel are slow marching lines of soldiers, cold grey skies, and large monuments that dwarf the wreaths laid before them.

Perhaps this year they will again show that shot of some frail old man slumped in his wheelchair. He has medals pinned to his coat. The gun fires its salute, the bugler plays last post, and the old man sits there in the wind, remembering. He might be the last man who remembers the blood and mud at Ypres.

There is a rhetoric and a style that surround the ceremony at the cenotaph, a meaning implicit in every poppy handed out. We are to remember and honour the men who died fighting for our country.

It is a way of thinking born in the aftermath of those wars that speak to the hearts of those who experienced them. I am afraid it is also becoming a wall that separates those who were there from those who were not. As time passes the day is becoming more and

more meaningless. The four minutes of silence have become an awkward pause filled with, if anything, a sense of ignorance.

Again this year there will be voices raised that say Remembrance Day should be ended, or renamed, or re-dedicated to the cause of world peace. 'Let us end the gloomy sight of old men limping in step on icy streets. Let us have instead a day for peace, for marches in the park, for 'Saving the World.'

Saving the world is a task for every day. It is not yet time to set aside our past. These wars still belong to us.

Our time, this century, was born in the fertile and bloody mud of the Western Front. It grew twisted and cynical out of ground churned by high explosives. Armed with new weapons and moving with inspired efficiency, it entered adolescence at Warsaw, Dieppe, and Dresden. Hiroshima marked the end of that savage youth and demanded from us a new maturity, a maturity we are still struggling to obtain.

The fallen men of Waterloo or Austerlitz are no longer mourned and, inevitably, the fallen on the beaches of Dieppe or Normandy will mean as little. These wars of ours will become dusty history.

But not yet. We still have sixteen years left in our century. Perhaps in the year 2000 our children will find it an appropriate time to set their eyes forward and will be able to rise above our madness. We still have the obligation to consider the wars, to learn their lessons and to honour the men and women who died in them. The world we live in was, in part, created by their sacrifices.

The summation of all this is that I cannot remember the wars and I should not be asked to, but I do want to imagine. It is important that I understand whatever I can of what it meant to be there. Those who still do remember should tell us of those days so that we can hope to empathize and thereby learn from that empathy.

This year, during those four minutes of silence, I will not be remembering. I will be trying very hard to understand what my father must have felt the day his men died. I will not succeed, but that is not at all important. The attempt itself is a way of paying homage and showing respect.

