

APPENDIX A

Reflections on Remembrance Day: The Impact of War on the Family

Submitted by high school student Gary O'Dwyer, 1967

Where to begin, what to say... Remembrance Day in my household probably had more impact on me when I was growing up than any significant day, yes even more significant than Christmas Day or New Years Day.

You see I grew up — for the most part — in an extended family household: parents, brothers, aunts, and grandparents. Both my father and grandfather were veterans of war, my father of WWII and my grandfather of WWI. So you see now why Remembrance Day had such an impact upon our household.

The impact of war on my family — Wow, the stories I could tell you! But let me tell you about my grandfather. I have his image etched in my mind forever, I remember him like he was here today: a tall man, confident, quiet, hard working, and oh so strong. That is the image I have of him, but that image is also impacted by what I saw, heard, and experienced in the years my grandfather was alive.

Let me take you back in time. I am four or five years old and it is Remembrance Day and we are getting ready to go to the cenotaph to watch the veterans march. My grandfather is all dressed up, decorated with his war medals. It is an exciting time for me, almost like a parade atmosphere. I watch proudly as my grandfather marches that day, and when my grandmother, who is looking after me that day, is distracted I run over to him when it is time for the ceremony. He smiles and takes me by the hand. What I will never forget though is that, during the “moment of silence,” I look up at him and he has tears in his eyes! Of course, as I got older, I realized that he was thinking about lost and fallen comrades; but that experience—of seeing my strong immortal grandfather with tears in his eyes, well, it made him seem vulnerable. I also realized that something was different about this day, because that's the day my Grandfather cried!

As I got older, I realized the depth of my grandfather's wartime experiences. All too often, I would awake to screaming, shouting, and pounding noises on the walls—my grandfather was having a nightmare, he was reliving his trench warfare experiences, the hand-to-hand combat occurrences. I remember one night I crept down to his room to see what was happening. I saw a human being struggling and grappling with the figures within his dreams: the personal hell of World War I was back to haunt him. I realized too as I grew older that as each Remembrance Day approached, the nightmares would worsen, they would occur with more frequency and intensity.

One day, I overheard the words Vimy Ridge and Ypres. I didn't know what they meant, I think I was about nine years old, but I knew there was something to them as they were said in almost hushed tones. What I remember even more clearly was the expression on my grandfather's face when I asked him: "Grandpa, what are Vimy Ridge and Ypres?"

I guess if there is such a thing as the look of death among the living then I saw it that day in his eyes. I shall never forget that look, that expression in his eyes. He didn't answer me. He simply paused and went about his business. It seems that it was not until a few years later that he actually told me about them. I was tying my shoes in the living room and he put down his newspaper and he talked to me. He spoke of Vimy Ridge, of bodies piled so high that he couldn't see the sunrise the next day, he told me of men dying as they charged into the teeth of machine gun fire, he told me of friends who died from their wounds in a painful and excruciating manner, he spoke of young men who had limbs amputated, of men shell shocked and terrified! He told me that he would have Vimy etched in his mind forever, that the nightmares would never leave him—I certainly knew about the nightmares; I realized that he would fight the war for a long time.

He told me about Ypres, about the gas, how it seemed to be ripping his lungs from his body; how his pain was so great that he wished to be hit by a bullet so he could die and the horrible pain would subside; he told me of a good friend vomiting blood and more blood until there was nothing left to vomit and still his friend retched and clutched his throat and stomach until he died, my grandfather said, as much from the pain as from the gas. Imagine watching a close friend die and you are powerless to do anything!

He told me of the Ross rifle, that Canadian rifle that would cease in combat, leaving men to the mercy of fate as they crossed "No Man's Land." He told me of reckless orders to charge enemy lines into the fire of artillery and machine guns. He told me that he sometimes envied the dead in those days because they had found peace. As he spoke, I sat rigid and in awe. I dared not move lest I interrupt his train of thought. I knew that I was being told something important, something I should remember.

That night he had an extremely terrible nightmare, the memories he had awoken in order to tell me his story returned that night with a vengeance. He knew that would happen, but he wanted me to know. I hope he knows how much I appreciate the sacrifice he made in resurrecting those horrible and haunting memories. I found out later that I was the only one he ever spoke to about his wartime experiences. What an incredible and monumental honour he bestowed upon me that day.

It is April 9, 1970, the anniversary of Vimy. I am writing this in a hospital room sitting in a chair. It is my grandfather's room. He is dying. I stop and listen as he gasps for breath, his lungs finally no longer able to ward off the after-effects of the gassing long ago. I walk over to him and I take his hand as I did that day long ago at the cenotaph. I feel him hold me like he did that day. I lean over to him and I whisper in

his ear: "It's okay Grandpa, you can go now". I feel his grip subsiding, his lungs no longer gasping.

I touch his forehead; at last he has found peace. For him, the war has finally ended. It was then that I made a pledge to myself that his story would become my story, that I would retell the horrors of Vimy Ridge, Ypres and the truth about war. But most importantly of all is that each Remembrance Day, I would honour his memory, the memory of that strong, quiet, tall, confident man, haunted by his memories of war and what war is really like.