

We Must Remember

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To my grandfathers, great uncles and aunts. To every man and woman who fought, lost and sacrificed, and the families that suffered with you. You all changed the course of our existence. Thank you.

The wind blows, icy rain soaks into my uniform proving it really wasn't meant for these kinds of conditions. People huddle together like penguins under their patterned umbrellas. Those still arriving zip up their raincoats, gripping their to-go coffee cups which made them late in the first place. The trumpets start, some shouts of command, and the marching begins. Some will remember how they marched, how despite the wind and rain they moved in unison, unphased by the small discomforts for they represented something far greater.

I will remember something different. I will remember the couple discussing their weekend plans, what restaurant they considered visiting and whether they served margaritas or not. How some left early because it was rainy and cold. How most kept their heads down to answer the ding of a message or watch a six second video with no real importance or meaning.

I will remember how it was only the sound of the cannons that made them look up, and the margarita talk silenced. At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, two minutes of silence was called for and I will remember the whispers. Only one day a year is reserved to remember the 2.3 million plus Canadians who served Canada in the First World War (1914-1918), the Second World War (1939-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), and since then, and sacrificed for our country.¹ More than 118,000 of them having their last moments surrounded by screams and shrapnel.² They served. They died. To keep us free. To keep us safe. And we can't stay quiet for two minutes? Most of us in Canada live in the luxurious absence of war. The significance of our freedom is lost in work, Netflix shows and our own self pities. Yet when November eleventh rolls around we hardly blink an eye. We think of it as a long weekend, a time where we can sleep in, plan trips and spend another day in our pjs. Most of us can't comprehend what that day really means.

For my grandfather, William Lawrence, he would remember the day he had to say goodbye to his family and high school sweetheart, not knowing whether he would ever see them again, feel the warmth of their hugs or comfort of their voices. He left his home, job and the dreams of a young man because Canada needed him more. He and his brother enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy in 1942. Like us they didn't know what war was. What it felt like.



Credit: Provided by Author

Brothers William and Hubert Lawrence unexpectedly ran into each other near Halifax in 1943. With months of little contact, this was a glimpse of hope. Both William and Hubert survived the war, married and had families.

What it meant. At the beginning it was like any other job. He signed the contract. He got the uniform. He said farewell to his past life and started his training at HMCS *Discovery* in 1942. No amount of training could prepare any human being for the job at hand. He would remember the day he boarded HMCS *Edmundston*. How at age 21



Brothers William and Hubert Lawrence as they unexpectedly met up on the shores of Halifax in 1943.


he was the eldest of his crewmates. How most of his crew were still just boys and had never been on a boat before let alone seen the ocean, yet their job was to master and protect it, or die trying.

He would remember the convoys. The days at sea which turned to months, then years, in the unforgiving treachery of the Atlantic. He would remember the ice that grew like mold that, if not removed, would cause the ship to capsize into the cold depths of the sea. He would remember the day when the ocean was no longer his happy place but a black abyss that helped camouflage the enemy. How despite the rolling of the ship, the yells and shouts, the blast of fire power and depth chargers, and the loss of fellow sailors, he couldn't waver or falter. As Leading Telegraphist, it was him and only him who could receive, interpret the dits and dahs and respond to communications from other ships. Transmitting up to 84 words a minute,³ no amount of cockroach-infested food, no bouts of seasickness, or sleepless nights was an excuse to make a

mistake, for one wrongly interpreted message could have taken the future of each and every sailor.

His brother, Hubert Lawrence, would remember something different. As a Stoker he lived and breathed the fumes of the ship. Below sea level, with no forced ventilation, he fought for his country in the confined space of engines and boilers at temperatures estimated to be up to 45 degrees Celsius.⁴ It was by the sweat of his brow and power of his body and will, along with every other Stoker, that the convoys kept moving. He would remember the day he was summoned to speak with his Captain, when only moments later a torpedo barrelled through the engine room killing all men in its vicinity. If it were moments earlier, it would have been him. But he didn't escape unscathed. A piece of shrapnel from the explosion buried deep into his flesh, too close to his heart to operate. It lived with him through every new ship and crew he transferred to. Through the passing of war and until the end of his days. To never be forgotten. Like everyone who fought, they carried a piece of war far too deep to ever be removed.

I will remember when the Remembrance Day ceremony was over, how my mother squeezed my hand and tears pooled in her eyes. I said to her "I wish he could have been here with us." "I don't," she replied. "Once he made it home, he never once came to one of these. He couldn't." "Why not?" I asked. "Because he didn't want to remember. None of them did."

With the passing of time, we forget that freedom is a privilege. A gift, passed on from the efforts of others. It's our job to remember. Our job is to remember those who fought, remember those who served, remember those who sacrificed. We must remember so they don't have to. 

Notes

1. Canada, Veterans Affairs, "Introduction. A Day of Remembrance - History - Remembrance," 11 July 2019.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Tiffini Theisen, "What is Morse Code," Military.com, 28 June 2023.
4. Patrick Devenish, personal communications, 4 August 2024.



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