

A Brief History of "In Flanders Fields"

May 1915, in an area of northern Belgium called Flanders, the Second Battle of Ypres is now two weeks grim. German forces pursue a gruesome campaign against French and Canadian lines, who would not break despite the relentless barrage. This battle would bear a terrible distinction, one of the first to see the use of chlorine gas, as if mortars and machine guns weren't enough.

Early on a Sunday morning, Canadian Lieutenant Alexis Helmer of Quebec, age 22, joins a fellow officer to check on a Canadian Battery. Only feet from the safety of their position, a 6-inch explosive shell bursts. Death is instantaneous. One account would report that the few discernable remaining pieces of Lieutenant Helmer were gathered in a sandbag to await their last rites.

Devastated by this news is Helmer's close friend, John McCrae, a Major and the Medical Officer of the Canadian Field Artillery.

At 42, McCrae is probably as much a father figure as a friend to Helmer. Major McCrae was decades into a distinguished medical, military, and academic career. A residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital was followed by a tour in South Africa with the Royal Canadian Artillery during the Second Boer War. He taught at the University of Vermont and at Canada's famed McGill University before taking posts at Montreal General and Royal Victoria hospitals. He even had a pathology textbook to his name.

McCrae, in a brutal twist of fate, is compelled to preside at his young friend's funeral when no chaplain could be spared. He observes, among other things, the poppies that spring up beneath the lonely wooden crosses that mark, at least for a short while, the graves of thousands upon thousands of fallen friends.

Although accounts would vary, McCrae is seen sitting putting pen to paper in the back of an ambulance the day after burying his dear friend. His grief and hollowness flow in fits onto the page. Unhappy with his effort, McCrae casts his work aside. Fellow soldiers retrieve it and discover a poem that would become both a lamentation and a rallying cry during the Great War. The haunting verse would also establish a symbol of remembrance that endures in the Commonwealth to this day. The symbol: a simple poppy of red and black. The title scrawled atop the crumpled leaf they found that day: In Flanders Fields.

In Flanders Fields

*In Flanders Fields, the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

Reflective Questions

What quarrel would you take up?

What torch has been thrown to you?

Who threw it?

What faith are they asking you to keep?