

11th November. Remembrance Day

Wednesday, 11 November 2009

Last Updated Tuesday, 10 August 2010

My paternal grandfather served at Gallipoli and in France and with his four brothers who also served, miraculously returned: of my maternal grandfathers I know nothing (yet) , but chances are that they too served. My father-in-law's father was killed at the Battle of Bullencourt in France; so for me Remembrance Day is a time to reflect on history and family. The two poppies were photographed when I visited the Australian battlefields in France in 2005.

A bit of background

It was on the 11th November 1918 that an Armistice was finally declared between the Central Powers of Germany and the Allies. It was not until 7 months later on 28 June 1919 that the Treaty of Versailles was signed between Germany and the Principal Allied and Associated Powers and 27 in all. Germany was to be punished; the Treaty forced her and her allies to accept responsibility for the loss and damage; and it was this clause, and the reparations that were contingent on it, that lay the grounds for the next great War; barely 20 years later.

The lead up to the Armistice had been a long one. In April the United States had joined the Allies, as part of President Wilson's plan to be involved in the peace process and on October 4 the German government appealed for an armistice based on the Fourteen Points drawn up by Wilson. It was not until 11th November 1918 that both sides agreed to an Armistice - in the meantime the killing continued. German delegation on French soil, led to news of an armistice spreading around the world and being announced in newspapers from the US to Argentina and Australia.

The news had to be quashed and the fighting went on right up until 11 am on that Monday; even though the Armistice was actually signed at 5. 10 am. Three days later Australia celebrated the Armistice for a second time. The German Kaiser, whom many blamed for the war, was safe on neutral territory in Holland. But the German army was still in war mode. Troops were still in the trenches, guns ready and many felt they had been betrayed.

Photo: the German cemetery at Langemark , Ypres Salient, Belgium. An eerie memorial in where 24,917 are buried. The memorial is by Emil Frieger and I am standing in front of it.

Extreme reactions

For the victorious excitement and relief were mixed with grief, gloom and sorrowful memories as those who survived celebrated the end of the carnage and remembered those they had lost. Wilfrid Owen, whose poetry of the War remains as raw and emotive as when it was first written, was killed in the last days of the war as he directed his men crossing a river. His parents in Shrewsbury were listening to the cathedral bells announcing the Armistice when the telegram arrived telling them of their son's death.

Micheal McDonagh, a journalist on London's Times newspaper wrote on that day:

"I sorrowed for the millions of young men who had lost their lives; and perhaps more so for the living than for the dead — for the bereaved mothers and wives whose reawakened grief must in this hour of triumph be unbearably poignant. But what gave me the greatest shock was my feeling in regard to myself. A melancholy took possession of me when I came to realize, as I did quickly and keenly, that a great and unique episode in my life was past and gone, and as I hoped as well as believed, would never be repeated. Our sense of the value of life and its excitements, so vividly heightened by the War, is, with one final leap of its flame today, about to expire in its ashes."

Joseph Maxwell, Iarrikin winner of the Victoria Cross whose irreverent account of the Great War Hells Bells and Mademoiselles is one of my most prized possessions was stationed in Vignacourt just outside Paris. He writes of the Armistice:

"What a day! I had just obtained leave for Doherty, Mick Clarke, and myself to visit Paris.
…

"The strain snapped. Every one in Vignacourt went mad with joy. The battalion was lined up in the main square and the colonel read the conditions of the Armistice. Surging wildly into the square came the whole civil population dancing and singing. Their bands blared the British, French, and American national anthems. The battalion "clink" was opened. Restraint was flung to the winds. The villagers opened their cellars and wine flowed among the troops. We did not wait for the puny celebration at Vignacourt. We dashed off to Paris.
"The city blazed with light and rocked to the sound of

delirious rejoicing. Rockets flared; bands crashed; scores of thousands sang in unison; scores of thousands danced in the streets on café tables, anywhere; scores of thousands of war-weary men grabbed bright-eyed mademoiselles in the endless whirl of gaiety that surged through the city from end to end.”

A little later he wrote:

"Yet, was I really glad? The Armistice sounded the death-knell of a carefree, colourful, and reckless existence…. How could I again settle down to the humdrum of a civilian existence?”He couldn’t – and he didn’t. Although he didn’t suffer from shell-shock or long term emotional or health problems like so many other survivors he never settled and spent the rest of his life, until he died in 1967, aimless and seemingly dissatisfied.

Suffering and survival

"So many others suffered from surviving this war. Writes Patsy Adam-Smith in *The Anzacs*, her collection of extraordinary experiences of ordinary men… “They had been schooled on heroic literature and not until they walked on the ‘sickly-sweet smelling corpses’ (Rupert Brookes) in the mud of the Western Front did they meet their moment of truth. Once having faced it they could never go back, but the world they would return to was a stable world where values had remained unchanged for centuries”.

Photo: The Memorial that commemorates the battle at Fromelles on 19th and 20th July, 1916 in which 5,333 Australians died.

Check out this website for more information

As the Australian men who had survived moved out of war mode, into celebration and then into yearning to return home was overwhelming. Many brought wives, fiancées and children – families they had started while

they were stationed in Europe – back to their home country. Roughly 203, 000 men were brought home between 3 December 1918 and 22 September 1919 bring with them more than 15,500 women and children to start a new life in Australia.

For those of us who have never lived in a war, or through a time of world war, it is impossible to imagine. But the personal accounts of those who did go some of the way to helping us to understand.

Copy: Carol Fallows

Photos by Martin Fallows from a trip we took to the Battlefields of France in 2005

Read more:

The First World War. A complete history by Martin Gilbert, Weidenfield & Nicolson, London, 1994.

One of the most informative and readable accounts of this conflict by one of Britain’s finest historians.

The Anzacs by Patsy Adam-Smith. First published in 1978, my edition is Penguin,1991.

Adam-Smith was an experienced journalist when she embarked on interviewing survivors of the First World War while they were, in her words ‘still alive and alert’. Put together with diaries and accounts from repositories around the world she reveals the men who went to this war and came home.

The Last Shilling: A history of Repatriation in Australia, by Clem Lloyd and Jacque Rees. Melbourne University 1994.

Taken from the archives of the Department of Veteran’s Affairs this very readable book contains information about the veterans I have never found anywhere else. And

it is a great read.

The Great War, Les
Carlyon. Pan Macmillan, Sydney,
2006.

The latest definitive
account of Australia's
role in the Great War written by an award-winning journalist who knows how to
do his research and make it a fascinating read.

The Great War: Using
Evidence by David Stewart & James Fitzgerald. Thomas Nelson, 1987.

One of my children's
history text books which I find invaluable. Packed with information on
historical sources.

Copyright Carol Fallows. This article may not be reproduced in any shape or form without written permission from the
publisher.