

Red poppies – a symbol of patriotism

By Mike Crowley

Have you ever asked yourself while passing by some stores in May, why are these men and women in military dress handing out red poppies made of paper? Yes, it's to commemorate and remember the loss of men and women who died in wartime for our freedom. But why a red poppy?

On May 3, 1915, during World War I, a young Canadian physician and lieutenant colonel named John McCrae was presiding over the funeral of a fellow soldier, killed in the western part of Belgium in a region known as Flanders Fields. McCrae composed a poem for the service titled, "In Flanders Fields." He did not think it was a very good poem. He wrote it in 20 minutes, just before the service.

However, his fellow soldiers thought he had written an all-inspiring poem perfect for the battlefields in times of war. Over the next few months the poem became very popular throughout the free nations at war. On Dec. 8, 1915, the poem was first published by the British magazine Punch. It was so popular during World War I, it became the most quoted poem of its time. Here it is in full, from a 1919 published collection of McCrae's works:

"In Flanders Fields," by John McCrae

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.*

According to writers, the reference to poppies is the red poppies that sprung up quickly from the ground around the graves of buried soldiers. These red poppies have been associated with battle since the Napoleonic Wars. A writer of the time noted that poppies grew in abundance over the graves of soldiers lost in battle. Research indicates that bombings of the landscape at Flanders fields increased the deposit of lime into the soil, which greatly increased the growth of poppies. After World War I ended in 1918, wearing a red poppy symbolized the remembrance of those who had died in war.

Wearing a Red Poppy today is the continuance of a great American tradition – remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice so we could live in freedom. So now you know, why a red poppy.

Sources used: Article: In Flanders Fields, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia; American Legion, Legion Auxiliary, and War Veterans.

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