



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

*Kevin November*  
11-2970

8433 Bailey Road \* Darien, Illinois 60561 \* 630-969-4141

Rev. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.  
Carmelite Spiritual Center  
8433 Bailey Rd.  
Darien, IL 60561-5305

LIFE IS WORTH GIVING

CANADIAN CELT'S

"FLANDER'S FIELDS"

HONORS SOLDIERS

OF WORLD WAR I

by Fr. Kevin O'Neill Shanley, O.Carm.

The most popular poem of World War I was "In Flanders Fields" written by Lt. Col. John McCrae, a Canadian Celt who was a medical officer who served with the Canadian, Irish and English divisions on the Western Front in France and Belgium during the years of World War I (1914-18).

The poem, first published in the English magazine "Punch" on Dec. 8, 1915, was composed during the Second Battle of Ypres (which the soldiers referred to as "Wipers" because of the heavy casualties) in Belgium.

It reads as follows:

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.

Author Unknown

Although Col. McCrae left his poem originally unsigned, since he did not initially realize its great literary value, it soon found its way to many people who felt greatly the suffering experienced by the troops in Flanders. People wanted to know who was the author. The poem soon became the most copied verse of World War I, and was read from thousands of platforms in England, France, Canada and elsewhere.

And when the United States entered the war in April of 1917, the poem was used to stir patriotic sentiment for "the war to end all wars" and "to make the world safe for democracy." Although the poem's first verses were a eulogy for the fallen heroes who made the supreme sacrifice, the final ones were used to recruit new troops for the war.

Memorial Flower

The poppy soon grew as the memorial flower for the American and Allied war dead. This tradition goes back to Col. McCrae's experience in battle. After a day of fierce battle at Ypres, he looked out from his muddy and blood-soaked trench.

In looking through the barbed wire, he struck by the multitude of little red poppies waving in the breeze above the rows of makeshift crosses that marked the new graves of his fallen comrades. The sight touched him deeply.

It was a tribute to nature that the tiny flowers grew in such profusion. The wild poppy grows best in recently cultivated soil, although its seeds may lie dormant for years, waiting to be uprooted.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 1915, the fields around Ypres were greatly disturbed by the digging of trenches and the frequent bombardments by hundreds of cannons on both sides of "No Man's Land." Not long afterwards, both Allied and German troops were amazed to see great numbers of the tiny red flowers springing up among the graves to make an almost pastoral scene in the blood-soaked soil of the battlefields. It was almost as though nature wanted to soften the impact of so much death and destruction.

Touched by the scene and the memory of so many fallen comrades he had attended to as a medical officer, Col. McCrae soon found paper and pen to jot down the verses that came quickly to mind. It soon became one of the most memorable war poems in the English language. It is still taught in elementary schools to this day.

Author Known

Although he survived the horrors of the trenches in World War I, Col. McCrae died of pneumonia a few months later on Jan. 28, 1918 in the military hospital in Boulogne, France, where he was the director.

Dr. John McCrae, the son of David and Janet McCrae, was born on Nov. 30, 1872, in Guelph, Ont., Canada. His Scots Presbyterian family had lived there for several generations. After attending local schools, he won a scholarship to the University of Toronto and graduated with a degree in biology in 1894. After a brief but unsuccessful career as a teacher, John McCrae returned to the university to study medicine. He graduated in 1898 with a gold medal and a scholarship in physiology and pathology.

It was during his student days that John McCrae first published his poetry. Ironically, much of it focused on the theme of death.

The new Dr. McCrae practiced at the Toronto General Hospital and Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Md., before accepting an appointment in pathology at McGill University in Montreal and Montreal General Hospital.

In 1900 he joined a Canadian contingent to fight in the Boer War in South Africa where he rose to the rank of major.

It was his field experience of war although he had been interested in the military since boyhood when he marched with the Guelph Highland Cadets. His father was also in the Canadian militia. And when World War I broke out, Dr. McCrae soon offered his services as a medical officer.

Peace and Remembrance

When peace finally came on Nov. 11, 1918, long known as Armistice Day (now called Veterans Day), returning troops brought home memories of the red poppies growing on the battlefields and in the many military cemeteries. The tiny flower took on an almost sacred significance for those who had survived the war. It was a way of remembering their fallen comrades who had given their lives in the great struggle.

But it was mainly through the great efforts of Moina Michael, a Georgia schoolteacher, that the red poppy eventually became recognized in many nations, especially the U.S., as the beloved symbol of both honoring the deceased and helping the surviving victims of the war.

Even though she had never been to war, Michael was so touched by the poem that she vowed to wear a poppy of remembrance for the rest of her life, and to help make the tiny flower a symbol to honor those who made the supreme sacrifice.

The Georgia schoolteacher is also responsible for the practice of wearing a poppy on our own Memorial Day which originally honored those who were killed in the American Civil War. She herself made paper poppies to sell to family, friends and others, and then donated the proceeds to help disabled veterans.

#### American Legion

But Michael's efforts remained only local until the then newly-formed American Legion adopted the poppy as their own symbol. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and other similar groups followed.

Ironically, the first public sale happened almost unplanned. At the homecoming of the 32nd (Red Arrow) Division in Milwaukee, Wis., in June of 1919, a coffee and doughnut booth with paper red poppies was soon stripped of its decorations, and those who took them left donations of several hundred dollars.

Fortunately, Mary Hanecy, one of the volunteers at the book, soon realized that the poppies meant so much to people. She then proposed to the American Legion that offering the poppies to the public on Memorial Day would be an excellent way to raise money for those in veterans hospitals. Post #1 in Milwaukee readily accepted the idea.

According to reliable sources, the very first "Poppy Day" was held on the Saturday before Memorial Day in 1920. It brought in so much in donations that the American Legion soon adopted the poppy as its official memorial flower at the group's national convention in 1921.

Other Nations

The success of the American Legion's poppy program encouraged other war veterans groups in the U.S., England and France to adopt the sales program, too. Funds raised then, as they are today, are given to help needy and disabled veterans, their dependents, and widows and orphans of deceased veterans.

Even today the red poppy of Flanders fields is still a reminder of those who gave their lives in war, and a hope that as Scripture says: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another; nor shall they train for war again."

(ISAIAH 2:4)