

The UNSUNG HEROES of WWI



Answering the call to honour Canada's Nursing Sisters

by Lynn C. Bilton, Cobourg, Ont.

Canadians who volunteer to preserve our history are to be commended. Each is inspired by a personal reason to ensure our past is not forgotten. Heather and John Caldwell have been participants in re-enactment groups travelling to events in Canada and the United States for many years, and are members of the Canadian Military Heritage Society. When I asked why they do what they do, Heather responded, "A love of history, Canadian particularly, and being with like-minded people. The reenacting community is a weirdly great bunch. We do this to honour the people who fought these wars to give us what we have now. It brings history to life in

so many ways that books can't and we love sharing that knowledge with others."

I had asked Heather if there were any such events on their summer agenda and, as fate would have it, they were travelling to Belleville, Ont., the following day to participate in a unique service at the cenotaph in Memorial Park. The 1 p.m. program had been in the works for some time and, due to dedicated members of the community, three names of Belleville residents who lost their lives in WWI were to be added to the cenotaph. Included were Lt. David Alwyn Forneri, nursing sister Agnes Florien Forneri (brother and sister) and Flight S/Lt Ellis Vair Reid, who was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) during his years of service. Coincidentally, the day of the dedication, July 29, 2019, was the 102nd anniversary of Flight S/Lt Reid's death.

As word spread, more organizations wished to be a part of the formalities. Program participants included members of The Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment, Trenton Cadet Training Centre, the Belleville mayor, city council members, guests from Montreal and Toronto, and members of the fallen soldiers' families. The event quickly blossomed from its first conception. Not only were there many people, but there was a general sense, among all who participated, that this tribute was long overdue.

Each of these three Canadians made the ultimate sacrifice. All are deserving of a story of their own, but the Nursing Sisters of WWI have always caught my interest. Prior to and after the dedication, the Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment Military Museum, in conjunction with the city of Belleville and the Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment, hosted a WWI learning

fair at the Belleville Armouries.

The armouries are where I met with Heather Caldwell, Kathleen Manneke and Debra Turrall. Each woman wore the WWI nursing sister uniform of a "bluebird," so named for their blue uniforms and white veils, and they explained that their medical branch was the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Each replica uniform was sewn with serious attention to detail. The trio not only looked the role in their makeshift casualty station but remained true to character as I chatted with them. Our conversations could have taken place 100 years ago. Nursing sister Kathleen knitted non-stop during our discussion, as there were no idle hands during war. She also shared the following insight into her volunteer role. "I bring a keen enthusiasm for historical re-enactment in the pursuit of historical interpretation, no matter what the time period. This enthusiasm is fueled by an innate desire, a calling even, to push the boundaries of authentic portrayal, thereby understanding at a core level the experience of another and then conveying that understanding to the public at large," she said. "As a historical interpreter and re-enactor, I must walk along their path and in their shoes if I am to carry forward those voices with the understanding and credence they deserve."

While we chatted, Honourary Lieutenant Colonel (HLCOL) Lee-Anne Quinn stopped to express admiration for their volunteer work. Lee-Anne dedicated more than 20 years to serving as a military nurse with the Canadian Armed Forces and received many awards for her service, which included tours of several countries, including Afghanistan. The following statement from Debra Turrall speaks volumes. "I admire Honourary Lieutenant Colonel Lee-Anne Quinn, because she heard the call and answered it. She, standing five-feet, one inch, plus a smidge, is a shining example of who I always thought I would be and it was a true pleasure to hear her speak with such clarity of purpose! All of the nurses who took part in the ceremonies that day felt honoured to be included and we, the



CAMC re-enactors, truly appreciated the interest in our display."

I'm humbled to have met this trio of Nursing Sisters. Before saying our good-byes, I thanked them for what they do. In unison, the trio brightly smiled and replied, "We must." Those simple words were spoken with such sincerity.

Multitudes of Canadians attend Remembrance Day services every year. If this has not been a habit of yours in the past, consider attending one this year. The dedication of our veterans, and of those who volunteer to preserve our past, should be acknowledged. November 11 is an annual opportunity to recall those who have served in so many capacities to preserve our freedom. "As the going down of the sun, we will remember them." ■

For more information please visit the following websites: www.camcbluebirds.ca; www.cmhslivinghistory.org; www.theregiment.ca

Above (from left) Heather, Debra and Kathleen at the Belleville, Ont., Cenotaph.