Memorial Day

Remember back when…

Glenn Miller with the “American Patrol” and “Anchors Away”. Kay Kaiser with “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition”, Vera Lynn with “The White Cliffs of Dover”. The Andrew Sisters with “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy”. George Formy with “Bless Them All”. And Bing Crosby with “Yankee Doodle Dandy”. Songs of the Greatest Generation – the Greatest Generation at war.

These songs, stirring as they were, would be out of place this weekend as we remember the realities of what war is all about.

The veteran remembers not the swing bands, or the rock bands, or the hardcore heavy metal bands, or the stoner songs but the dying, destruction, loss, and the hell that war brings. The veteran thinks of pals lost, friends wounded, families left with loss, wounds of the heart and afflictions of the mind and soul. Memorial day brings with it memories sober and somber.

On May 2nd, 1915, John McCrae’s close friend and former student Alexis Helmer was killed by a German shell. That evening, in the absence of a Chaplin, John McCrae recited from memory a few passages from the Church of England’s “Order of the Burial of the Dead”. For security reasons Helmer’s burial in Essex Farm Cemetery was performed in complete darkness.

The next day, May 3rd, 1915, Sergeant-Major Cyril Allinson was delivering mail. McCrae was sitting at the back of an ambulance parked near the dressing station beside the Yser Canal, just a few hundred yards north of Ypres, Belgium..

As John McCrae was writing his “In Flanders Fields” poem, Allinson quietly watched and later recalled, “His face was very tired but calm as he wrote. He looked around from time to time, his eyes straying to Helmer’s grave.”

Within moments, John McCrae had completed the “In Flanders Fields” poem and when he was done, without a word, McCrae took his mail and handed the poem to Allinson.

Allinson was deeply moved:

“The (Flanders Fields) poem was an exact description of the scene in front of us both. He used the word blow in that line because the poppies actually were being blown that morning by a gentle East wind. It never occurred to me at that time that it would ever be published. It seemed to me just an exact description of the scene.”

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.

This weekend is the official beginning of Summer with its picnics, beaches, golfing, baseball, lazy Summer nights, and barbecue on the grill. Before we enjoy our families and friends, before we go on our separate ways; before we cut the grass and weed our gardens, let us remember; let us celebrate; let us believe. Memorial Day is much more than a three-day weekend that marks the beginning of Summer. Let us remember the fallen; let us celebrate our heroes; let us believe they rest in the palm of God’s hands. Then let us enjoy our freedoms. But first, let us pause to remember the cost.

The words to the hymn of heroes, “Taps”.

Day is done, gone the sun,

From the lake, from the hills, from the sky.

All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.

Fading light, dims the sight,

And a star gems the sky, gleaming bright.

From afar, drawing nigh, falls the night.

Thanks and praise, for our days,

‘Neath the sun, ‘neath the stars, ‘neath the sky.

As we go, this we know, God is nigh.

Sun has set, shadows come,

Time has fled, we must to our rest.

Always true to the promises we’ve made.

Fading light, dims the sight,

And a star gems the sky, gleaming bright.

From afar, drawing nigh,

Falls the night.