

COMMENTARY ARTICLE

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# REMEMBRANCE DAY 1971

By Colonel Fred "Toot" Moar

*Photo credit: Mike Nimigon*

*Editors' Note: The following speech, shared by Colonel Moar's grandson, offers reflections from a Canadian WWII Veteran from the North Shore Regiment, who thoughtfully illustrated the complexities of armed conflict, the humanity that exists amid extreme contexts, and the lasting impacts of the moral dilemmas that arise, especially in relation to children. Colonel Moar remained steadfast in his service for a peaceful world and was greatly respected for how he championed care for fellow Veterans.*

Thank you for inviting me...

In 1939 life on the Miramichi – drab, colorless. Today – we people cut a rather sorry figure in the eyes of youth. What I'm going to speak about is I'm sure to you a bit of a drag. Today we are not, like, with it. And the action is over our heads and you may be quite right. But many young people lived and died in the days of our youth and time, and it is these people that I would like to recall for you, very briefly, today.

Joining the Army, Navy, Air Force, or Merchant Marine in those days of 1939 was to us glamorous. The thoughts of far away places, excitement, girls, the uniform, and girls, and yes – money, all \$39 each month. Life was happy and carefree except for a few officers and sergeants who endeavoured to make life miserable for us at times. But out of all of this came a sense of purpose, a feeling of belonging. Ambition and incentives took their place – you know in the service you could be anything you wished to be, it all depended on you and how hard you wanted to work and study. This is true also of any aspect of life.

I revisited Woodstock sometime ago, not the Woodstock of rock fame, but the town on the banks of the Saint John River in Western New Brunswick. Our Unit was stationed there some 30 years ago and as I retraced those steps that I had taken with so many of my friends, if I learned anything from the visit and from my years in the service it is simply this: “the total and absolute futility of war, the wasted years, the broken families, that shattered dreams, and the twisted and tortured cities and their people”. To many of us the greatest problem of all – the search for peace of mind when it was over. Many of us overcame our fears, we persevered and conquered, but others did not. Don't scoff at them, be tolerant. Some men lost their minds and were committed to mental institutions where they will remain for the rest of their natural lives. In each one of this Valiant group who served their country was a spark of greatness, pride in their unit, a love of home and Country.

Let me open a door for you and turn back the pages of time to a hot, dry, stinking afternoon in August 1944 on a Hilltop outside the small village of Sassy in Normandy, France. The Company I commanded was ordered to clear the village of the enemy. This meant it had to be done with the men, tools, and weapons at our disposal. Do you know what this means? It

means death to someone – Friend or Foe. As we advanced across the wheat fields we came under enemy fire, real live honest-to-god bullets and mortar shells. It was quite obvious to me we were in for trouble, the F.O.O. [Forward Observation Officer] who was with me from the artillery was available to call down shells and fire on any predetermined point or otherwise if and when required. The Canadian soldiers began to fall and the cries of the wounded were in my ears when I ordered the officer to fire the battery. They did. All 24 guns.

In the evening of the same day, after the village had been taken and cleared and we regrouped for the night before starting again at daybreak or sooner, the people of the village came out of their cellars and fields and began moving back towards their homes. Since I was the Senior Officer of the occupying forces, I was invited to the home of the mayor to be present when they opened and drank the “liberation wine”. It was almost dark before I was able to get away and with another officer I went to the home, shell marked and darkened. With the Enemy only a few kilometres away, it was hardly a haven to consider. On arrival we were asked to partake of their humble meal – a frugal one at Best, only a rabbit stew, but prepared with grateful thanks to the tall Canadians from across the sea who had freed their country and town from the Invaders who had occupied it for many years. The enemy had a habit of sneaking aircraft over newly occupied ground at dusk of the day it was captured. To add to this confusion these aircraft dropped hundreds of small AP [anti-personnel] bombs the size of a can of Pepsi. This type of missile wreaks havoc with troops on the ground. The humble meal had hardly begun when the dull throb of enemy aircraft overhead signalled the beginning of the raid. We quickly blew out the single candle and sat quietly in the semi-darkness. The first stick of bombs landed quite close and the house shook and rocked gently. Suddenly I heard the cries of a child in mortal terror – into the room ran a little girl not more than four or five years old. Since I was closest to her, I held up my arms and she burst into them. I raised my head and looked at the Mayor. He quietly said, “She is the child of a neighbour. Her father is dead and her mother and older sister were killed when the shells fired this afternoon. We’re going to bury them together at daybreak. They are in the next house lying on the floor.”

The bombing continued, and as I held that trembling little body wracked with great sobs close to my chest, I prayed to God that the child I cradled would never know that the great Canadian from across the sea, whose strong arms held her tenderly as if she were his own child, and the man who had ordered the shelling that killed her mother and sister was the same person.

I have had many waking hours thinking of this situation, but when I think, this event is compounded by others and others until they all run together like a great tapestry.

So there, I have tried to tell you “like it was” to one individual on one day in one year. I am not, nor is any other veteran, looking for your pity. I did what I had to do as others before me

and others after me had to do. We are the past generation in this life. You are the present. If it is within your power to do so, abolish war and strife and all its inherent effects. We of the past have lived through this terrible event and will be affected by it for the rest of our natural lives. Remember those young men and women who never returned to this wonderful country and who sleep, as Sir Rupert Brooke in his memorable poem “The Soldier” said, that “there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever England”.

I implore you to take a solemn vow that you will do everything in your power to see that war, Civil or otherwise, never happens again. Thank you.