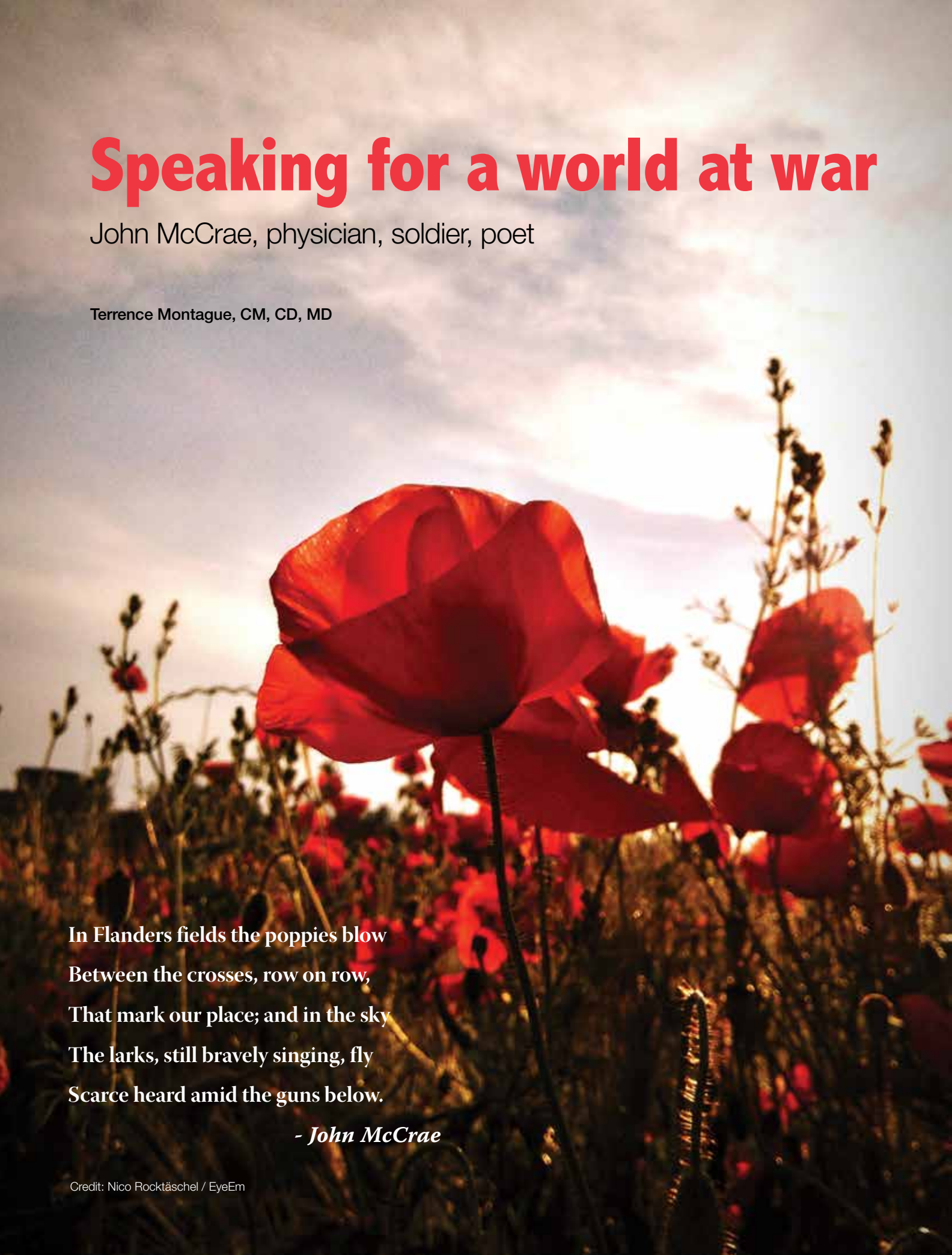


Speaking for a world at war

John McCrae, physician, soldier, poet

Terrence Montague, CM, CD, MD



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.

- John McCrae



John McCrae, Canadian World War I soldier, poet, and surgeon. (Photo by Culture Club/Getty Images)

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Spawned by a long history of nationalistic hubris, and lack of clear political strategies by leading European powers of the day, World War I produced few territorial or economic benefits for any nation, despite enormous costs in life and treasure. Nonetheless, WWI was, for many countries, a defining event in national and world evolution, calling forth incredible fervor and sacrifices not seen before, or since.

In Canada, a developing country of approximately 8 million citizens in 1914,¹ more than 600,000 men and women enlisted in the armed forces as soldiers, sailors, and airmen.² More than 400,000 Canadians served overseas—the majority as members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), the army in the field.

Over the four-year-course of the war, approximately 130,000 CEF members were wounded, and another 60,000 died.^{2,3} Of those who died, one-third, or 20,000, lie in unmarked graves, and are communally remembered by the Tomb of The Unknown Soldier.⁴

The total Canadian WWI casualties represented 48 percent of the CEF; 32 percent of the entire armed services; and two percent of the population of Canada at the time.

Soldier and educator

John McCrae was born in Guelph, a small city in Southern Ontario, in 1872, where he lived with his brother, sister, and parents.

Following high school, he attended the University of Toronto, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1894, and a doctorate in medicine, with honors, in 1898. His educational years were complemented by military service as a cadet in high school, and artillery and infantry militia training during his university years.

In 1899, McCrae volunteered to serve overseas for two years in the Boer War in South Africa as a combat arms officer in the 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery. For his service, he received the Queen's Medal, with three clasps.

Returning to Canada in 1901, McCrae resumed his medical career with post-graduate studies in medicine and pathology at Johns Hopkins and McGill Universities. He was appointed to the Faculty of Medicine at McGill, and to the staff of several of its teaching hospitals.

McCrae was a contemporary of Sir William Osler and Maude Abbott. His brother, Thomas, was the editor of Osler's iconic textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*.

He cared for patients, taught, and coauthored *A Text-Book of Pathology for Students of Medicine* with John Adami. He was described by his contemporaries as busy, serious, studious, and focused, but also sociable, amusing, and gregarious.⁵



Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, MD, Canadian Army Medical Corps.

The poet

Although McCrae is most renowned for his poem, “In Flanders Fields,” his earlier works are also insightful and reflective of his character, traversing love, faith, conflict, and death.⁵

“Unsolved,” published in 1895, reflects his concentration on work with lonely introspection. It is complemented, however, by a suggestion, gained from gazing into a woman’s eyes, that there were challenges, knowledge and experience to be gained beyond those obtained from books alone. It has been reported that McCrae fell in love with a classmate’s sister in his late teens, just a few years before this poem was written. Unfortunately she died unexpectedly soon after they met.

Amid my books I lived the hurrying years,
 Disdaining kinship with my fellow man;
 Alike to me were human smiles and tears,

I cared not whither Earth’s great life-stream
 ran,
 Till as I knelt before my mouldered shrine,
 God made me look into a woman’s eyes;
 And I, who thought all earthly wisdom mine,
 Knew in a moment that the eternal skies
 Were measured but in inches, to the quest
 That lay before me in that mystic gaze.
 “Surely I have been errant: it is best
 That I should tread, with men their human
 ways.”
 God took the teacher, ere the task was learned,
 And to my lonely books again I turned.

McCrae never married, despite a very active social life in Montreal.

During the inter-war years between 1901 and 1914, McCrae wrote and published several poems, some with accompanying sketches and drawings.

Andrew Macphail, MD, professor, History of Medicine, McGill University; editor, *University Magazine*; founding editor, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*; and a WWI Commanding Officer of 6 Field Ambulance in Flanders, described McCrae as being religious and “an indefatigable church goer,” often standing in for the padre.⁵

In “The Dying of Pere Pierre,” a poem published in 1904, McCrae reflects some of his underlying religious self, combined with a sense of foreboding loneliness, darkness and death.

Nay, grieve not that ye can no honour give
 To these poor bones that presently must be
 But carrion; since I have sought to live
 Upon God’s earth, as He hath guided me,
 I shall not lack! Where would ye have me lie?
 High heaven is higher than cathedral nave:
 Do men paint chancels fairer than the sky?”
 Beside the darkened lake they made his grave,
 Below the altar of the hills; and night
 Swung incense clouds of mist in creeping lines
 That twisted through the tree-trunks, where the light
 Groped through the arches of the silent pines:
 And he, beside the lonely path he trod,
 Lay, tombed in splendour, in the House of God.

McCrae dealt with the theme of war in his 1907 poem "The Warrior." The last lines of which seem to forecast his introspective 1914 WWI enlistment decision.

He wrought in poverty, the dull grey days,
But with the night his little lamp-lit room
Was bright with battle flame, or through a haze
Of smoke that stung his eyes he heard the boom
Of Bluecher's guns; he shared Almeida's scars,
And from the close-packed deck, about to die,
Looked up and saw the "Birkenhead's" tall spars
Weave wavering lines across the Southern sky:

Or in the stifling 'tween decks, row on row,
At Aboukir, saw how the dead men lay;
Charged with the fiercest in Busaco's strife,
Brave dreams are his -- the flick'ring lamp burns low --
Yet couraged for the battles of the day
He goes to stand full face to face with life.

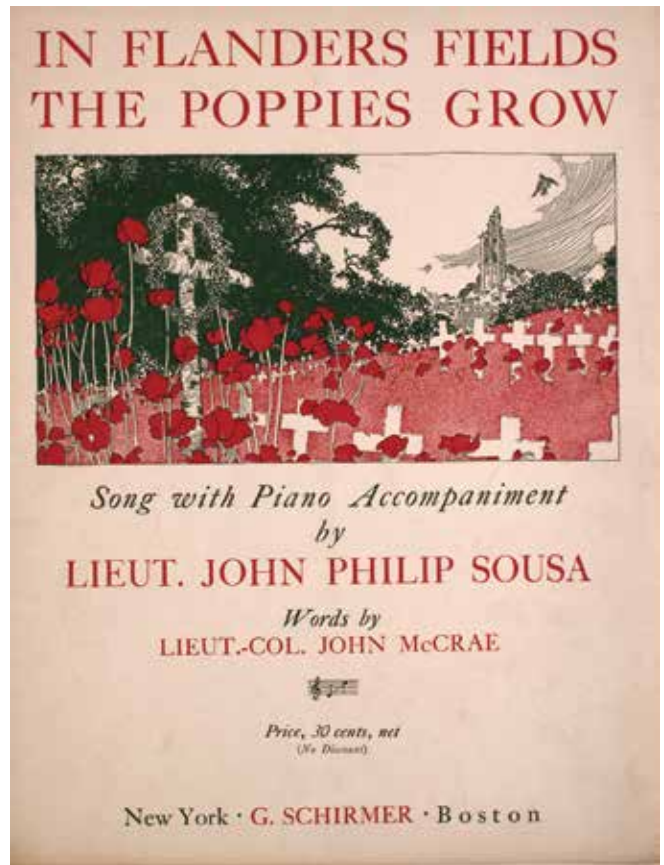
He had more than 30 poems published over his lifetime, many appearing in journals such as *Punch*, *The Spectator*, *Massey's Magazine*, *University Magazine*, *Canadian Magazine*, *The Westminster*, *Varsity*, and *The Toronto Globe*.⁵

In Flanders Fields

The land embracing the provinces of East and West Flanders in Belgium, and the Department of *Nord-Pas-de-Calais* in France, was the epicenter of the Western Front in WWI. It was the site of some of the largest and most deadly battles of the war. As a consequence, completely new connotations became associated with previously mundane geographic terms like the Somme, Ypres, Passchendaele and Vimy Ridge, which became hallowed ground.

McCrae wrote letters to his relatives and friends describing life in Flanders where he was posted as Medical Officer, and Second in Command, of the 1st Brigade Canadian Field Artillery.

Many, including McCrae, lived and worked in tents, or dug into the sodden earth. McCrae's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Morrison wrote, "My headquarters were in a trench...on the bank of the Ypres Canal...John had his dressing station in a hole dug in the foot of the bank. During the battle, men actually rolled down the bank into his dressing station. Along a few hundred yards was the headquarters of a regiment...many times, he and I watched them bury their dead whenever there was a lull. Thus, the crosses, row on row, grew into a good-sized cemetery."⁵



The scene was captured by McCrae in a sketch showing the position of his Brigade's medical station. This was where he wrote "In Flanders Fields." The handwritten inscription reads, "Looking S. from our position. The back slope in the foreground."⁵

Second Battle of Ypres

Macphail said, the "inner history of war" is written by "those who have endured it."⁵

In a letter written to his mother during the Ypres battle, McCrae vividly defined the reality of soldiers in deadly combat, "The general impression...is of a nightmare...the most bitter of fights...for 17 days...none of us have had our clothes off...nor our boots. In all that time, gun fire, rifle fire never ceased for 60 seconds...Our casualties were half ...the men in the firing line...Behind it all was the constant background of the sights of the dead, the wounded, the maimed, and a terrible anxiety—lest the line should give way."⁵

During this battle, on May 2, 1915, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, 2nd Battery, 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, was killed from a direct hit by enemy fire. Helmer, 22-years-old, and a graduate of McGill University and the Royal Military College of Canada, was popular among his peers and a close friend of McCrae. His remains were collected in a blanket, and during a brief pause in the battle, McCrae



Looking S. from
our position.
The 'back slope' in the
foreground.

Facsimile of a sketch by John McCrae on the back of a card.

conducted the Committal Service as he was laid to rest in Essex Farm Military Cemetery, Ypres, Belgium.⁵

One consequence of the prolonged intensity and chaos of the military situation surrounding the Ypres battle, was that Helmer's grave site was lost to posterity, and he joined the legion of unknown soldiers. His name is, however, inscribed on the Menin Gate, Belgium's memorial to the missing in Ypres.⁷

The poem

Following Helmer's funeral, McCrae was observed sitting on a wagon overlooking the Essex Farm Cemetery and writing on a scrap of paper. A Sergeant-Major who observed McCrae that day said, "In Flanders Fields" was an "exact description of the scene in front of us both... the poppies actually were being blown that morning by a gentle east wind."⁸

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.

Apparently dissatisfied with his creation, McCrae discarded the paper with the poem. This action was noticed by another officer, who retrieved the paper from the ground. Exactly who forwarded the poem for publication is not certain. Initially submitted to *The Spectator*, it was rejected. However, it was subsequently submitted, accepted and published, in *Punch*, December 8, 1915.

In a contemporary analysis by Macphail, an experienced editor of poetry, the poem appears technically simple, "The theme has three phases...the first a deadly calm, opening statement in five lines; the second in four lines, an explanation, a regret, a reiteration of the first; the third, ...in vivid metaphor, a poignant appeal."⁵

The theme itself he describes as "the dead still conscious, fallen in a noble cause, see their graves overblown in a riot of poppy bloom...the emblem of sleep. The dead desire to sleep undisturbed...yet curiously take an interest in passing events. They regret...not living out their normal life. They call on the living to finish their task, else they... not sink into that complete repose they desire."⁵

The poem's popularity was instantaneous and immense among soldiers, and the general population.

Macphail also proposed an explanation for the poem's extraordinary ability to compellingly engage and move people to an "expression of a mood which, at the time, was universal, and will remain as a permanent record when the mood is passed away."⁵

McCrae noted the death of Helmer in his letters to his mother dated May 2 and 3, 1918, saying he died "at the guns...A soldier's death!"⁵ He did not, however, mention writing the poem.

A life cut short

In June 1915, McCrae was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and posted as Chief of Medicine, and Second in Command to Number 3 Canadian General Hospital at Boulogne, France.

The hospital of 1,560 beds and McCrae were busy treating the wounded from all the armies fighting the never-ending Flanders' battles.

Macphail recalled that McCrae's mood darkened during this time, "His old gaiety never returned."⁵

In November 1917, McCrae was selected for promotion to Colonel, and appointed Commanding Officer of Number 1 Canadian General Hospital. Shortly thereafter, he was also nominated as Consulting Physician to the British Armies in the Field. However, before he could assume either of these new positions he developed pneumonia, which rapidly progressed, resulting in his death January 28, 1918.

His funeral, held the following day, was attended by his friends, medical colleagues, Lieutenant General Currie, General Officer Commanding the Canadian Corps, Harvey Cushing from the Harvard Unit of the United States Army, and, perhaps most reflective of the extraordinary regard in which he was held, 100 Nursing Sisters.

He was buried in the Military Cemetery at Wimeureux, France, where his grave is marked with a simple stone, as are the graves of hundreds of his comrades who surround him. Carved into the top of McCrae's stone is a cross, and at the bottom, a maple leaf. An inscription in the centre reads:

Lieutenant Colonel J. McCrae,
Canadian Army Medical Corps,
28th January 1918

Living on through the written word

McCrae was an extraordinary soldier. However, his WWI service and experience were not unique. He had a communicative gift that enabled him to speak to the world for his comrades in arms. He told of the perils of war in a manner that allowed those who were not there to viscerally understand and remember the souls of the soldiers who sacrificed, and the hopes and dreams that link all soldiers.

The universal impact of "In Flanders Fields" endures. Its words, phrases and tone capture the ultimate essence of individuals as they place themselves in harm's way in service to their country.

This broader concept of a life well lived can be extended to all McCrae's comrades-in-arms. They too had vital lives and worthwhile endeavours as farmers, fishermen, woodsmen, teachers, lawyers, and other occupations,

professions, or avocations.

They were sons, fathers, brothers, sisters, and daughters.

They volunteered to go into harm's way when called by their country.

They displayed selfless courage and perseverance that enabled WWI to be won by the allies.

They were, and are, viable and relevant beacons in our ever-challenged world.

We will remember them.

Acknowledgments

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Funeral of Lt. Col. John McCrae, January 29, 1918.