

Music Speaks Louder Than Words

by Anna Kefalas

May 3rd, 1915. One day after the Second Battle of Ypres. Wild poppies are already beginning to bloom between the crosses that mark the graves of thousands of fallen soldiers. One of these soldiers is Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, a friend of Canadian physician Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. Inspired by the sight of the poppies, McCrae will then channel the voices of the soldiers buried underneath them to author the poem *In Flanders Fields* to honor his late friend's sacrifice.

November 11th, 1918. An armistice is signed by the Allied powers and Germany, effectively ending World War I. This day will later come to be known as Veterans Day. 100 years later. November 2018. A middle schooler with glasses and braces receives a piece of music titled *In Flanders Fields* from her chorus teacher. She listens as her teacher reads the poem and the brief biography on the inside cover of her music. She watches her teacher sit down on the piano bench and say, "This is important. Listen."

I was the middle schooler with glasses and braces, and at first, I didn't understand what my teacher meant. In the beginning, the piece was just notes I had to learn, rhythms I had to nail down. I was so focused with the musical technicalities that somehow, I managed to miss the most crucial detail: the meaning of the words I was singing. It wasn't until after I learned the notes and rhythms that I started to see the song differently. One morning, as I was practicing, it struck me.

"We are the Dead/Short days ago/We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow/Loved and were loved" (6-8). These soldiers were real people. They had names, faces, families. They lived beautiful lives, full of warmth and love, and yet they gave it up to fight for their countries. "Take up our quarrel with the foe:/To you from failing hands we throw/The torch; be yours to hold it high" (10-12). Many soldiers didn't come home and now, they were looking to our generation, and the generations that will come after, to continue their fight.

These truths reveal that although *In Flanders Fields* was written over a century ago, it continues to epitomize the essence of Veterans Day by honoring and thanking veterans. Following the publication of *In Flanders Fields* in December of 1915, the poppies McCrae mentioned came to symbolize those who have given their lives in battle. Known today as remembrance poppies, they are worn on Veterans Day to commemorate veterans who have died for their country.

Poppies are an age-old symbol of life, and their meaning deepens in the song. As the poppies grow over the graves of fallen soldiers, they show that no matter the circumstances, life will go on. Natural cycles will continue. Flowers will keep growing. This constant cycle may seem disheartening, but to me, it places even more importance on the value of remembering. After all, as life goes on, our memories remind us how we got where we are. Remembering our veterans is how we thank them; how we ensure that they didn't die in vain. And that is what Veterans Day is all about: remembering and saying thank you. Today, when I think of Veterans Day, I am reminded of *In Flanders Fields*. When I listen, the music brings me to that field of remembrance poppies, and, in doing so, I make a connection to those soldiers. And through music, the force that binds us all, I can thank them.