RECAP–HISTORY OF THE POPPY

BY SAMANTHA SAENZ

In 1915, a popular wartime poem sparked the inspiration of an American professor and humanitarian named Moina Michael.

“In Flanders Fields,” written by Canadian Lt. Col. John McCrae (during World War I), described the red poppies that grew between the graves of fallen soldiers during the funeral of his good friend and fellow soldier Lt. Alex Helmer.

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.

Moved by this verse by McCrae, Michael penned her own poem in response, “We Shall Keep the Faith,” as a personal vow to remember those who died, and it was her words that first sparked the idea that has now become a beloved tradition: wearing a red poppy to honor those who have fallen in battle.

In the 100-plus years since, poppies have become a global symbol of remembrance. But the story of this symbol and its relationship to Memorial Day began long before McCrae ever penned his famous poem.

1868: Gen. John Logan Asks People to Lay Flowers on Graves
On May 5, 1868, Gen. John Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, declared in his General Order No. 11 that on the 30th of May, nicknamed “Decoration Day,” people should string flowers together to decorate the graves of those who died while defending their country.

1915: Moina Michael Wears the First Red Poppy
After writing her response to “In Flanders Fields,” Michael decided to wear a red poppy on Memorial Day to honor those who had died serving in a national war. The trend quickly caught on, and Michael began selling poppies to friends and co-workers. She donated the profits to service members in need.

1920: The American Legion Steps in to Expand Awareness
Determined to expand the practice of wearing poppies to remember those lost in battle, Michael turned to The American Legion for help. At its national convention that year, The American Legion adopted the poppy as its official flower and a national emblem of remembrance.

Currently, The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars both distribute poppies to honor fallen service members and to raise money for needy veterans. With the support of the United States Congress, The American Legion worked to create National Poppy Day™, which occurs each Friday before Memorial Day. This year National Poppy Day will take place on May 26. “