

Remembrance Day in Canada (Veterans' Day in USA)

By the time some of you read this e-mail Remembrance Day (which is called Martyrs' Day in India on Jan 30th) would have been observed in Canada which falls on Nov 11th. Almost all Canadians wear a red poppy flower on their jackets. Boy scouts, Girl guides, Army cadets sell these flowers in shopping centers across the country. The proceeds from this sale are sent to war veterans' fund. All the politicians irrespective of party, diplomatic corps, a selected mother of one of the dead soldiers, parents, children, war widows etc. gather together and place flowers, wreaths etc. at the war memorial in front of the parliament. When a bugler sounds the 'last post' all will stand in attention. It is all the more difficult for Canada this year because Canadian soldiers (both men & women) are getting killed periodically in Afghanistan. The score now stands at 67 (If you can call it score). For a country which is 5 times the size of India, with the population of Kerala, this score is too high. We have been continuously fighting wars to end wars and make the world safe for democracy. Is our world safe now? Do you have to make war to end war? We can debate about it for one more century.

From a number of personal e-mails I have received, I understand that some of you are children of or relatives of soldiers. Even today, I am overwhelmed with grief when I see the tears of the close relatives of the departed soldiers on the national television. Today, I want to share my grief with my UCC family. For some of you who are not personally affected, this may not be palatable. Such may use delete command. Folks, tears are wetting my key board while I scribble this.

Captain Teja Ghosh was my personal friend and senior to me when he got killed during the 1962 war with China. Fortunately, he was a bachelor when he got killed (if you can call it fortune). When he was seriously wounded at the most hostile terrain (about 17,000 feet above the sea level) of the India China border, he told his men to leave him because he knew that he won't survive. But, the most motivated soldiers of the world (this is how Time Magazine has rated the Indian soldiers after a study of the world armies) did not oblige him. They carried him on a stretcher, continuously walking for 5 days and nights. On the 2nd day he died on the caring shoulders of his men. Then they carried his dead body for 3 more days till they reached the base camp in Tejpur. You may wonder how I came to know about this. Some of you may not have been borne when this happened. The 1962 war was thrust upon India by surprise. When Nehru was chanting Hinthi Cheeni Bhai Bhai, China was ready to execute a well planned attack. Those of you who want to know more details, please read the books "The Himalayan Blunder" written by Brigadier Dalvi. and "The Untold Story" written by Lt. Gen B N Kaul. Brig. Dalvi was the senior most Officer who was taken prisoner by the Chinese. An officer named Rajakdhykha who was a major at that time, was also taken as prisoner along with 49 other officers. He later became my commanding officer and gave us first hand information about the debacle of India China war. When this happened, I was doing a course on telecommunication at the Army School of Telecommunication in Mhow (Indore). Major General Oberoi who was the Division Commander of Tejpur came to Mhow and addressed all the officers (about 300 of us from different units) who were doing different courses there, gave us full details with maps and charts. The Chinese released all the Jawans who were taken as prisoners quickly. (India lost about 1600 soldiers in this war) However, all the 50 officers were kept for 9 more months. They made them walk over 500 miles in the most hostile terrain. The Chinese violated all the terms of Geneva Convention about treatment of prisoners of wars. When the whole world protested about this, China turned a Nelson's eye. Later, they treated the Indian Officers as war trophies and took them by air and exhibited them in all the important cities of China. Personally, I held resentment in my heart to Chinese for several years, till I become friendly with several Chinese in Canada. Our family doctor in Canada was a China man for years.

Commander Oommen of the Indian Navy was killed when INS Kukri was torpedoed by the Pakistanis off the coast of Jamnagar. It was Commander Oommen who attested all my certificates when I came to Bombay in 1955. In India, even today, certificates will have to be attested by gazetted officers. I don't know whether it is a legacy we are carrying forward from the British time. All armed forces officers are class one gazetted officers. However, only full colonels and above are authorized to sign passport applications to dispense with police verification. Police verification is another British legacy we are still following! It has only added incentive to an already corrupt police force to knock off a few bucks from those seeking Govt. employment or passport. (with apologies to all the UCC Alumni who hold different ranks in the Indian Police force. I can give several personal accounts to justify my allegation). May be I should stir up the UCC pot with this when we go to a dormant state from the present vibrant one.

Lt. Commander Balagopalan and I had break fast together at 7 AM in an officer's mess during the 1971 war. At that time, he was one of helicopter pilots of INS Vikrant, the aircraft carrier of the Indian Navy. Only 2 days back, he had personally helped me to lay telephone cables (we didn't have cell phones or walkie talkies those days. We had to use field telephones to establish communication) for my troop position using his helicopter over a rough terrain. That is how I become friendly with him. At 11 AM the same day, his helicopter was shot down off the Jamnagar coast by a Pakistani jet fighter. Although, he successfully ejected from the helicopter with his parachute, the cords of the parachute entangled him when he landed in the sea. By the time a rescue speed boat of the Indian Navy reached him, he was drowned.

Captain V V Kulkarni was junior to me. We lived in adjacent rooms of the officers' mess when we were bachelors. He left my regiment and got posted to a field artillery regiment. However when he got married in later life, he visited me with his wife. (his wife is youngest the sister of Madhu Dhndavathe, who was India's Railway Minister. I think he passed away only very recently). The image of Mrs. Kulkarni with her traditional Maharashtrian symbol of marriage sindhoor on her forehead with her hair adorned with fresh jasmine flowers and hugging my wife addressing her as Bhaabhi is still vivid in my memory (we didn't have caste colour or religious barrier in the armed forces then. I don't the current situation) The Kulkarnies visited us once more with their daughter. That was the last time I saw him. He was killed on the Bagladesh border while directing fire for his own field artillery regiment. He was the FOO (forward observation officer) of his regiment. A premature artillery shell fired by his own troops killed him. I am told only fragments of his body could be recovered because a field artillery shell when exploded will leave nothing in an area of about 75 sq meters. This is what the Americans call friendly fire. You may know that both Canada and Britain have lost several of their soldiers in EYERAAK (the Bush pronunciation) and Afghanistan from the friendly fire of USA. I don't know anything about the present state of the war widow Mrs. Kulkarni and her daughter.

Lt. Col Persuram, my former CO, was killed while giving aid to civil authorities.(the soldiers get killed in non-combat roles too) His unit was rescuing several marooned people when river Brahmaputra was in flood. The raging Brahmaputra took him with his jeep. I came to know about his tragic death only in May of this year when I visited a retired brother officer who now lives in Payyanoor near Kannur. Both of us were staff officers of Col Persuram. The Persuram family came to India from Sindh province of Pakistan as refugees to escape the murderous fury of religion during partition. Col Persuram was only a baby at that time.

My departed friends, your memories are still alive in bosom. For my better today, you have sacrificed your yesterday. I could have been one of you. But God's plan about me was different. The very life I enjoy today is because of you. I shed copious tears and pay tribute for you from distant Canada on this Remembrance Day. Jai Hind.

Maj (Retd) Jacob K philipose

“The Flanders Fields”

by Lt. Col. John McCrae, M.D., 1872-1918

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.