

Remembering a family member's bravery, dedicated service

Remembrance

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Remembrance Day comes but once a year, a solemn occasion for Canadians. It's a day to reflect on the sacrifices made for our country through two world wars, Korea, and many peacekeeping operations. And now most recently, we include Afghanistan. 158 young Canadians, their families, and friends paid the ultimate sacrifice there. But it is in war's aftermath that the full impact of that sacrifice, where pain and loss are most often felt.

War affects families in the most twisted ways. Many surviving veterans carry unseen scars that haunt some interminably. At the front end of their pain, are the families who are often left unprepared to deal with it.

Such a set of circumstances happened to my family. It all occurred in the final push and days leading to the end of the Second World War.

A crisis occurred during the Second World War following the Italian Campaign, The army fought hard, lost many brave souls, and replacements were urgently needed. None were readily found. By this time, recruitment had all but dried up.

Canada selected the best of the best in the early days of the war. By 1944 though, military authorities were not as picky. Volunteers were no longer plentiful. The need for manpower was far too great particularly after the losses in Italy. That gaping manpower hole was exacerbated following the battles through Normandy and beyond into Northwest Europe soon after D-Day.

A manpower shortfall eventually precipitated the Conscription Crisis, where promises had been made not to do that for overseas duty. Other means were also sought. There was a move afoot to transfer the surplus of volunteers from the

RCAF to fill army needs.¹ That was soon rejected on the basis and terms for which these service men volunteered.

The manpower crisis remained. The inevitable happened. The government had no choice but to pursue conscription that created division and discord within Canada that remains to this day.

Regardless of the brewing political strife, there were still some anxious civilians willing to volunteer and get in the fray. One of those, was my Uncle Leslie O'Keefe, my mother's eldest brother. Leslie badgered his family to let him join up long before 1944. He made a number of previous furtive attempts to join up but was rejected because of his age.



Family Archives – Certificate of Enlistment – an earlier failed attempt 24 September 1943

His father finally relented and signed for him. There may have been some doubts about Leslie's age, but given his father's tacit approval, it was all military authorities needed. Leslie was finally enrolled into the Canadian Army 14 April 1944 at the height of this developing crisis.

In amongst Leslie's attestation papers was this note "O'Keefe seems a keen, frank young man tall and rather slim." He was a mere 5ft 10", 135 lbs, and more

¹ C. P. STACEY, **ARMS, MEN AND GOVERNMENTS - THE WAR POLICIES OF CANADA - 1939 – 1945**, The Queen's Printer for Canada , Ottawa, 1970, pg. 446-447/710

importantly, it was noted “His father served on the last war, and he wants to do his bit”.



Photo Daniel O’Keefe, Leslie’s Dad circa 1915 from family archives

Following his enlistment 14 April, Leslie spent time in basic and trade training in Canada. This was in preparation for overseas duty, and he was held here until October that year.

Leslie’s training staff went on to note “O’Keefe has completed his Infantry Corps Training at CITC A-12 Farnham and has qualified on every branch laid down in Standard Training Syllabus. His Company Commander reports him sloppy and awkward; will be a fair ranker, tries hard. His military efficiency is average and leadership, also conduct. He should become a good field soldier with time.”

Significantly as a moment in history, this assessment was signed and dated 6 June 1944, D-day. Leslie was soon off to the battlefields of Northwest Europe where his desire to do his bit, was to be fulfilled.²

Leslie entered the battle line 26 December 1944 as a reinforcement with 1 Can Scot (Canadian Scottish Regiment). He was employed as an infantryman and served on the line from 26 December 1944 to 28 February 1945. The army officially acknowledged him as missing in action, 18 February after little more than two months in the field.³

His parents received the following message when he was reported missing:



Gerry Madigan - Family Archives Leslie O'Keefe MIA Telegram 28 February 1945

² I have my uncle's service records from DVA in my possession. These records were scanned in three parts. Rather than citing form etc., I shall be citing the Part and page number of the xeroxed copied reference file in my possession that I serialized as for example this citation:

Part 1 pg. 9/27

³ Part 1 pg.18/27

Leslie was taken prisoner and held until 29 April 1945. In the meantime, neither his unit nor the Army had any knowledge whether he was dead or alive, wounded or prisoner. His Statement of Service Sheet remained a relative blank until then, when he was found alive, liberated, and placed on the strength of a prisoner of war (POW) list.⁴

An overview of Leslie's Battle and Capture

The Canadian Army was engaged in the first phase of Operation "VERITABLE" in early 1945. The Operation was almost completed 14 February, days before Leslie's capture. It was in the final push to finish the battle that Leslie's fate was sealed. His Brigade was ordered to renew an attack on the Moyland Wood with their sister regiment, the Reginas. But the Reginas' attack met determined enemy resistance and stalled. They were unable to come up to a line paralleling the Canadian Scottish Regiment's position.

"A and D" Companies of the Canadian Scottish Regiment were out on a limb. On their left was a wooded area which was to be the Brigade's objective on the day. This objective was initially tasked to the Reginas that stalled.

⁴ Part 1 pg.20/27



Photo from family archives

The ground leading to the wood was undulating and came under enemy observation. Leslie's platoon was ordered to push forward to seize a crossroad at ROSZKAMP, a few hundred yards beyond HESLER FELD. This was designed to compensate for the stall and gain a start for a follow through attack by "A and D" Companies who were to seize the wood.⁵

Their attack began at one-thirty in the afternoon and soon ran into heavy fire and was stalled once again. In the immediate aftermath of the battle it was recorded, "The going was tough....The enemy machine gun and mortar fire was hellish....In no time at all we had lost half our lead platoon and the attack threatened to bog down. ...Casualties were mounting...in the circumstances we couldn't move one inch."⁶

⁵ R.H.Roy, *Ready for the Fray – DEAS GU CATH, The History of the Canadian Scottish regiment (Princess Mary's) 1920 to 1955*, Evergreen Press Limited, Vancouver BC, 1958, pg. 376

⁶ *ibid* R.H.Roy, 1958, pg. 376

The following is an account from the original combat report that provides some insight on the stiff enemy resistance and resolve:

“ On the morning of 18 February 45 “C” Coy (company) was given the task of attacking a strong German position. They had to move up to the start line under heavy MG and mortar fire and suffered very heavy casualties en-route. Just beyond the start line they topped a crest and ran into a German reverse slope position plus MG fire from either flank.

Major Tye was wounded just after Company HQ got over the crest, and the CSM, realizing that the Coy faced hopeless odds, pulled Coy HQ over the crest, bringing Major Tye with him.

There were only two platoons in the Coy at the time, and they were too actively engaged to draw back to form a firm defense.”

Finally, the company was cut down so badly in numbers that the few left had either to withdraw or be captured. Leslie’s fate was initially recounted as:

“Nothing further is known of the fate of the remainder of the company except that a good many were wounded and evacuated by the Germans, and that others were overwhelmed and captured.”

Leslie was eventually listed “Missing in Action” and A/CSM Morgan, C. reported:

“Re D-144848 , Pte O’Keefe, L.J. – this man was with “C” Company on the morning of 18 February 1945, and was, last seen in the fighting at 0945 hrs that morning.”



Leslie O'Keefe circa 1944 -family archives

Leslie was eventually found and liberated. He was taken on strength by a holding unit in the field, 11 May 1945 for what appears to be administrative purposes. He was subsequently struck off strength, 24 May then taken on strength at another holding unit in the United Kingdom 26 May 1945.⁷

⁷ Part 1 pg.18/27



"POWs at Stalag 11B at Fallingbosten welcome their liberators, 16 April 1945." (Imperial War Museum)

And so this was the sharp, short war that Leslie endured that was to have life long ramifications for his physical and mental well being. And he was not alone. Many service men and women came back from the war less than whole. Some recovered or coped, while others simply could not or did not, and Leslie was a part of that latter cohort.

Leslie was awarded the following honours for his overseas service to Canada:

- 1939 Star
- France and Germany Star
- Canadian Volunteer medal with clasp
- War Medal 1939-45



Photo Leslie's Medals from family archives

Leslie's story and service were not unique to just one family. His service was recorded in the medals awarded to him. Such records of service are likely commonly found amongst the treasured effects of many homes here in Nova Scotia too. Leslie's war was a common-shared experience for many, past and present, as loved ones returned from the traumas of war.

Trauma

Many returning veterans had difficulty in facing the personal demons left over from the war. That trauma came in many forms. Most often it arose from exposure to direct contact with the enemy. The war was conducted in great brutality that our soldiers lived themselves.

And lessor known and perhaps the most ignored, was the trauma of the families that soon followed after the war, only experienced after their loved one's return. It was living with the daily experience of the broken spirit of many veterans, who were left to their immediate care, for which the families were either ill-equipped or ill prepared to do so.

The trauma of war played havoc with one's mind and personality, sometimes altering it for the worse. That was often expressed in emotional, mental, and

physical breakdown. The mental trauma was difficult to codify or recognize as a wound injury by military authorities either during or in the aftermath of war.

During the Great War for example, such instances were codified, hidden, or chalked up under the guise of wastage, shellshock, not yet diagnosed, nervous, or combat exhaustion.⁸ In more recent times, it is now recognized as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

But in Leslie's day, it was classified more often as not as Neurasthenia, characterized as a nervous debility or exhaustion from over work.⁹ For soldiers, this condition was the mild term for what was then generally known as "Shell Shock".¹⁰ Leslie was eventually diagnosed with Neurasthenia on 14 June 1946, and subsequently hospitalized for 11 days.¹¹

His family had not heard from him for some time after his liberation when he was safe in England. Leslie's correspondence became increasingly irregular to the point that it had stopped altogether. Daniel, his father, wrote to National Defence (NDHQ) officials in February 1946, asking of Leslie's condition and whereabouts. NDHQ replied that Leslie was well and that they would get him to write home. It was just the first sign and indication of a slow descent into a personal hell.¹² He was ignoring his loved ones.

Leslie was repatriated home later that year and soon tried to get back to a normal routine. But he was a haunted man. It showed greatly after his father's death in the 1950s.

Leslie began a slow spiral to much lower depths, that was stayed for a time only because of his father's help and support. Sadly, Daniel died, and he lost the one

⁸ Tim Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers -How Canadians Survived The Great War*, Penguin Random House, 2018, pg. 103

⁹ Random house dictionary, 1968

¹⁰ Shell shock, neurasthenia, and war neurosis

Source: http://sites.scran.ac.uk/Warp/Shell_shock.htm

Accessed: 4 February 2020

¹¹ Part 1 Pg. 19/27

¹² Part 2 Pg. 1-24

and only person who truly understood what he went through. Leslie was incapable of coping with daily life.



Leslie Homecoming 1946 – with his Cousin Viola

When Daniel was alive, Leslie held a job and was improving, but after Daniel's death, Leslie was unable to recoup from that loss. He was also left coping with his distraught mother. The load was too much to bear.

Sadly, what happened to Leslie was quite common. Many simply could not deal with what happened during the war.

Leslie's story and end are given in this touching remembrance by my sister Donna. "I remember as a child coming home from St Brendan's school one afternoon to find Mom attending to Leslie who was in full break down mode at the kitchen table. He was crying uncontrollably." We tried to support Leslie through a lot, but he refused our help. He had survivor's guilt and felt unworthy.

Eventually my mother and her brother became estranged. She lost touch with him after we moved from Montreal to Sept Iles Qc in 1964. He eventually succumbed to cancer in 1974, alone, in Toronto.

Leslie never contacted any member of the family when he fell gravely ill with lung cancer. We found out after the fact that "the nurses who tended him said he was so mannerly and quite a delight...never complaining and smoking to his last days."

After dying alone in Toronto a virtual pauper, his only possession, was a wallet that led him back to us. In it was a book of matches, a dollar bill and a phone number, that of a childhood friend who relayed to officials that Leslie did indeed have family. And that was how my mother found out her brother had died.

Leslie story was the common one. Many returning veterans had great difficulty in the adjustment to civilian life. Many families were left to endure a problematic return. But some, the fortunate ones, were eventually restored to mental and physical health.

Many veterans overcame their difficulties and went on to lead happy and productive lives. This was with the help of the love and compassion of family and friends. But it was up to the individual veteran and their recognition that the keys to turning a life around, were in the acceptance and acknowledgement of a need for help,

Others were not so fortunate and could not cope. What Leslie had witnessed, was not easily forgotten. The discord and disruption led to family breakdowns addiction and alcoholism, and more often than not, a deep soul sucking despair, so

much so, that many ended up on the streets with no where to go and lacking support.

Remembrance Day comes but once a year. Veterans and Canadians will gather around local and national cenotaphs. Politicians will bow their head in a minute of silence, make some annual vain empty promise, and then promptly forget them once the day and lip service are done.

Remembrance Through Outreach

For many of us in this day and age, remembrance has become a very daily and personal act. But there is a more practical way for us to honour our veterans. That can be easily found in community service and outreach.

There are many worthwhile organizations that would appreciate any donation of your time or money. They not only serve the wider community, but also veterans' needs too. The obvious are mental health services, food, and shelter.

Sadly many veterans today still feel abandoned after their service. Some are left to fend on the streets. Often, they leave broken families behind too in their inability to cope.

Remembrance need not be an annual act on one single day. Sometimes "outreach" is as simple as a helping hand, reaching out with a coffee or a smile, and simply saying "hello", or just listening.

John Macrae's poem "In Flanders' Fields" asks Canadians to remember "if ye break faith with us who die...we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders' Fields". And sometimes remembrance is simply the time either to reflect or to lend a helping hand too.

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Post Script - Remembrance Groups and Sources

Here is a select list of remembrance websites and historians for those who may have an interest that are available to google:

Nick Devaux - Home - The Log Book Project

Chris Larsen - Pennfield Parish Military Historical Society
(pennfieldridgeairstation.blogspot.com)

Bruce MacDonald – Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society (rnshs.ca)

Gerry Madigan – Nova Scotia Military History – madiganstories.com

Edward Walshe - CEFRRG (Canadian Expeditionary Force Research Group) -
YouTube

Also here are some select organizations dedicated to the memory of various units and services:

Royal Canadian Navy - A ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY Historical Project - For
Posterity's Sake (forposterityssake.ca)

Canadian Army - THE IRISH REGIMENT OF CANADA (pipesforfreedom.com),
and Royal New Brunswick Regiment | Facebook

Air force – Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum, and RCAF WWII
Memorial – Dedicated to the plan for training air force personnel for the
Commonwealth in WWII (airmuseum.ca)