

## THE LEGEND OF THE POPPY

By Ken Gillings, Pinetown, KwaZulu-Natal, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

In many countries across the world thousands of disabled men and women, ex servicemen and women and volunteers from all walks of life manufacture bright red paper poppies, these sold and worn during November of each year. Why? Where did it all begin?

In the ancient land of Cathay grew a white flower, known at that time as the “flower of forgetfulness.” This name derived from the effects of the potent drug that was distilled from its bulbous seed pod.

In the year 1213 Genghis Khan turned his brutal Armies westward after his victories in Mongolia, these cruel hordes swept across Europe, destroying entire cities and killing thousands of men women and children. Everywhere that these brutal hordes went and men died, and out of the barren blood-soaked soil, the flower of forgetfulness sprang up in full bloom. Strange changes took place, the white poppy turned blood red and a black cross appeared in the centre, as if nature's protest to the wanton slaughter. For centuries, Emperors and Kings marched across Europe in bloody conflict and the graves of soldiers became carpeted by the red poppy – especially during WW1.

A Canadian Army surgeon, so moved by this phenomenon that he pencilled a poem during the intervals of tending the wounded of the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. This remarkable poem written under fire may not be the greatest of poetry, but it spoke of the Spirit of wartime England and her allies. This army Doctor, Colonel John MacCrae, Royal Canadian Medical Corps, sadly did not survive the war and he, himself lies “In Flanders Fields” the haunting title of this world known soldiers sad lament.

When “In Flanders Fields” was reprinted in America, it made such a deep impression on an American YMCA worker, Miss Moyna Michael that she wrote a sequel entitled “The Victory Emblem.” It was Miss Michael who envisaged the idea of wearing the “Red Poppy of Remembrance.” One of her French colleagues, Madam Guerin, took this idea a step further and in 1921 started manufacturing artificial poppies to be sold to help ex-servicemen and their dependents in need.

The Royal British Legion under the presidency of Field Marshal Earl Haig adopted this symbol of sacrifice and remembrance to honour the dead and help the living. It has adopted by the USA, Commonwealth countries and of course by the South African Legion, which uses Poppy Day as a vital source of income to continue with the phenomenal work they do improving the lot of ex-servicemen who have fallen upon hard times. In November, when you wear your poppy, remember that our freedom was bought and thousands paid.

There is a South African connection in Remembrance Day, the 11<sup>th</sup> November. On the 27<sup>th</sup> October 1919, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick (who had lost two brothers in WW1) suggested that a minute's silence be observed annually on the 11<sup>th</sup> November the date when the War ended. His suggestion was forwarded to King George V, who proclaimed on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1919: *"That at the hour when the Armistice came into force, the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, there may be for the brief space of two minutes a complete suspension of all normal activities – so that in perfect silence the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated in reverent remembrance of the glorious dead."*

The King's private secretary, Lord Stamfordham, wrote the following letter to Fitzpatrick:

*"Dear Sir Percy,*

*The King, who learns that you are shortly to leave for South Africa, desires me to assure you that he ever gratefully remembers that the idea of the two minute Pause on Armistice Day was due to your initiation – a suggestion readily adopted and carried out with heartfelt sympathy throughout the Empire."*

I leave you with the last verse of "In Flanders Fields" and the first verse of "The Victory Emblem"

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.

Oh! You who sleep in Flanders fields  
Sleep sweet-to rise anew:  
We caught the torch you threw,  
And holding high we kept  
The faith with those who died.

#### References

The Royal British Legion. (The story of the poppy)  
SA Legion  
The Home Front November 1988.

