

When I was in high school, we always invited all of the local veterans to a breakfast, and then an assembly to honor and thank them. The flags were always presented in military style, there was a speaker, and the band played a medley of the armed forces songs. As the different branches songs were playing, the branch would be announced and the veterans from that branch were invited to stand and be recognized. I was always surprised by how, in a small town of around four thousand five hundred people, how many veterans would be present. As part of the band, I was always given a red paper poppy to wear on my band uniform. If I remember right, they were handmade by the local legion. They made a hundred poppies every year just for the band. This is because red poppies are the symbol for sacrifice, and are worn in memory of the fallen.

So how did a flower that isn't even native to the United States become a symbol for the armed forces? The story goes that the war torn fields in Europe that had also been used as a burial ground for fallen soldiers was covered in red poppies the following spring. A Canadian physician by the name of Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae was inspired by these flowers and wrote the poem "*In Flanders Fields*". If you aren't familiar with the poem, McCrae uses the voice of fallen soldiers to tell their story.

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

There are two more stanzas to the poem that I won't list here. The first talks about how a few days ago the soldiers were still alive, and getting to see the sunset. The last stanza says that the soldiers are passing the torch to us, and if we break the faith, the soldiers in Flanders fields will not sleep. In 1918, an American woman named Moina Michael read this poem and was inspired to write "*We Shall Keep the Faith*". It also has three stanzas, the first of which says that we caught the torch and will keep the faith. The second talks about how we value the red poppy, because it symbolizes the blood of heroes. The last stanza goes

And now the torch and poppy red
We wear in honor of our dead
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought
In Flanders Fields.

After writing this poem, Moina vowed to always wear a red poppy in remembrance. She later began making and selling silk poppies to fundraise for returning veterans. Red poppies were officially chosen by the American Legion Auxiliary as their memorial flower in the early 1920's. There is a National Poppy day around the end of May, close to Memorial Day, but many choose to wear poppies on Veterans Day as well.

If poppies hadn't bloomed in Flanders Fields, Lt. Col. McCrae wouldn't have written about them, and Moina Michael would never have heard of them. So why did poppies bloom in a field where they hadn't been for years? There are a few different theories. The one that sounds the most plausible to me is that while the battle was going on, and in the aftermath and digging graves, the soil was stirred up. Poppies are a little different in that they need light to germinate. When the soldiers unintentionally mixed the soil, they brought up seeds that had been lying dormant. The seeds can lie dormant for up to fifty years waiting for the right conditions to germinate. Another theory is that when they dug the ground, the bare patches had less competition from other plants, leaving an opening for poppies to fill.

Whatever the case, I'm sure that Flanders Fields was a sight to see, covered in red poppies. Happy Veterans Day to all! To those that have served, have loved ones that are serving or have served, thank you so much. Your time and sacrifice is something for which a simple thank you will never suffice.

If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.

