For the Journey

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For those who enjoy history, reading about history, watching quality historical documentaries or perhaps dramatical movie portrayals of historical events, there is a certain perspective brought to all of it - we know the outcome. Hindsight is 20/20 we used to say, not with particular reference to wars and conflicts but perhaps the general observation applies nonetheless. In reading a well-regarded book of history, such as Barbara Tuchman's "The Guns of August", or in watching an exceptional docuseries like Ken Burns' epic 12-episode account the U.S. Civil War, "The Civil War", or perhaps the Oscar winning 2017 movie "Darkest Hour", we read or observe from the perspective of hindsight and triumph. There is a distance between our lives today and the historical situations we have interest in. We watch or read history in relative comfort, knowing the end of the story, which, when it comes to the wars our ancestors participated in, was victory for the allies, utter defeat for the enemies of all that was good and just and democratic.

Of course that was not the case for the actual veterans we remember at this time of year, our forebears, many of whom were barely out of puberty when sent overseas to confront evil, defend freedom and democracy. Nor was it true for the families left behind in Crossfield or elsewhere. They had no idea how things would unfold, which side would win, what implications for their young lives would come to pass. They knew nothing but they lived it. I sometimes try to imagine what went through my grandfather's mind when he arrived in England at 28 years of age, his wife and two young children left behind to sort out life on the home-front back in Calgary, letters being their only means of contact. Of course I can't imagine it with any accuracy at all, particularly the reality of facing the terrifying unknown at such a young age, having to confront, at that time, the overwhelming power and might of Nazi Germany and soon the combined force of the Axis nations. No, I can't imagine it at all.

There were, however, some Hollywood depictions from the time of World World War 2 that allow us to experience some of the context of that period of history, not what soldiers had to go through but rather how it all affected civilians, families, communities back home. I'm always moved by the fact that two of the greatest films of that era, films that dealt with the Second World War, were made while the Allies were still losing. "Casablanca" was produced in 1942. "Mrs Miniver", a powerful drama depicting a young family in rural England enduring the horrors of the Battle of Britain, was also made in 1942. "Context is everything" is a phrase sometimes heard and these movies give us some of the context of that terrible time in history.

What of our own context? First and foremost we pause on November 11th to remember the sacrifices made on our behalf by those who came before us, in many cases truly unimaginable sacrifices. Yet surely our remembrance is also meant, in part, to remind us of the sacrifices still required at times from democratic societies today in standing up to the forces that would seek to undermine everything our ancestors preserved by their sacrifice. What of our role in confronting antisemitism? What of Ukraine? What of the rise of Islamism around the globe and its oft-proclaimed hatred of western liberal-democratic freedoms? Perhaps words and thoughts to consider as we approach remembrance Day.

"Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high."
(From "In Flanders' Fields", John McCrae)