One 'mild' wound, a lifetime of unanswered questions

MICHAEL MCDONNELL

"Went to hospital wounded."

The stark words were written, in pencil, in my grandfather's cramped cursive on thin note paper, tattered and brittle after a century and more.

In his service record a medical officer's notation about the same event reads, "GSW L. Hand. Mild." That translates to "gunshot wound left hand. Mild."

My grandfather's four words are so matter of fact. I once asked a doctor and historian I met how that could be. He said that compared to the horrors soldiers were witnessing, a wound like that was, in fact, relatively mild.

How did Frank, that was his name, react when he was shot?

Was he stoic and carried on fighting?

Did he tremble from shock and fear in the mud at the bottom of a filthy trench, grasping his left wrist, staring wide-eyed at his mangled and bloody hand?

Was his hand left maimed and useless? Undamaged but for a puckered circle of skin? Was he missing fingers?

I never knew my grandfather. He died years before I was born. I didn't find his notes until after my own father died. No one remains who would have known the answers. Sadly, I never asked enough questions.

I'll never know what "mild gunshot wound" means. I do know he returned to duty after two months in hospital, serving until being discharged in May of 1919.

He had been a lumberman in what is now the east side of Algonquin Park prior to the war. During his service he was a sapper, a soldier who built the things an army needs; trenches, tunnels, railways, telephone lines.

Visiting Vimy Ridge in 2017, I had the opportunity to walk through a preserved tunnel. Standing in the dank coolness it occurred to me there was a real possibility that exactly 100 years earlier my grandfather had a hand in carving that very tunnel through the chalk of northern France during preparations for the battle soon to follow.

I also visited Hill 70, where my grandfather received that "mild wound" in August 1917. Again, I was struck by the thought that he and I had stood on the same piece of ground in a land far from Canada.

Those places are serene and beautiful now, sites of impressive monuments. In his time, they were hellscapes of mud and shattered trees, bomb-craters and barbed-wire, strewn bodies and body parts, trenches populated by rats and lice and men desperately striving to survive.

When I was a child my father, himself a veteran, would take me each year to the Remembrance Day ceremony in Burlington. Then, as now, the cenotaph was on the lakefront. My recollection is that every year it was overcast and rainy, a cold wind blowing in off the water.

As I stood shivering at my father's side, wondering who the old men in wheelchairs and uniforms were, I had no real understanding of what it all meant.

I was then, as I still am, struck by the mournful loneliness of the single piper. When I was older, I understood its meaning, but did not, and to this day, cannot truly know what the suffering of war was like; no books or movies can convey that. As an adult I realize the ceremony is simply to remember the generations of men and women whose lives were forever altered by their experiences during the wars and the sacrifices they made of both body and mind.

I have my grandfather's war medals, hung from colourful ribbons; the Victory Medal and the British War Medal. What did those medals cost him?

Among the few papers he left in a worn, brown leather billfold was a receipt for his Canadian Legion membership dated March 5, 1947. He died of cancer that October at the age of 56 years. A civilian soldier, fighting to the end.

Lest we forget.

WATERFORD'S MICHAEL MCDONNELL IS AN OCCASIONAL COMMENTATOR ON CURRENT AFFAIRS.



LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

Wounded Canadian soldiers are treated during an advance in the Battle of Hill 70 in northern France, in August 1917. Michael McDonnell's grandfather was wounded in that engagement.



THOMAS FROESE

In this 2021 scene, Elizabeth Froese skates at Lake Jojo, also known as the Dundas Marsh. Commenting on Joni Mitchell's song "River," Thomas Froese writes, "Now imagine skating away in your own life."

A Christmas song for any day of the year



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

November is horribly early to roll out Christmas music, even for the diehards, but it's about to fall upon us as surely as snowflakes and that hypnotic holiday shopping.

It's called Christmas creep for a reason.

On the other hand, today, Nov. 7, is the birthday of Joni Mitchell, the Canadian singer-songwriter, who, for my money, has the best Christmas song for any day of the year.

The song "River," and its official video — a dreamscape, fluid-ink animation that's strikingly worthwhile in itself — is as close as your phone.

Granted, if you and the neighbours are playing "Family Feud," nobody will think of "River" as a Top 5 Christmas song.

"White Christmas?" Sure. "Silent Night?" Of course. Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You?" Cha-ching to never-ending royalties on that one.

But with Mitchell, a Canadian icon who's won 10 Grammys, turning 83 today, consider this. She wrote "River" in 1970 after experiencing relational heartbreak and the shallowness of life in California, this while pining for her simpler youth in the frozen winters of Saskatchewan.

Her river is not entirely a river as much as an image. It's home. It's escaping emotional pain.

Now imagine skating away in your own life. You might even dream of it, literally. As a kid I'd dream about ice skating to, of all places, my boyhood school. With great joy, there I go back and forth. What, I need a river for this?

Then there's a few winters ago when my eldest, Elizabeth, needed photo art for her own modest music. So where did the young lady, Liz, take me with her skates and summer dress? To a frozen Lake Jojo, the Dundas Marsh, the place she imagined as the best.

Which is to say that there are rivers and then there are rivers. There's the physical place, then there's that river that's like a doorway.

And isn't this how art, at least good art, works?

It honours the so-called "thisness" of life. The particular. The concrete. The everyday. Because this is how the majesty of truth, if it comes at all, comes to us.

You sing about a specific place, like a river. Or you sing poetically about an experience, like a broken heart, because, like Joni writes in her song, "I'm so hard to handle, I'm selfish and I'm sad." People then listen and relate to your grief and regret, before then flying off on some river of their own, even if they've never once laced up a pair of skates.

The Christmas narrative moves in the same way. The cosmic mystery of God isn't some abstract theory or vague hooey. Rather, it became a particular child in time and place, with specificity — poor and displaced and needy — so we'd see and touch and smell him, full diapers and all.

So we might relate to that human vulnerability and feel less lonely and more connected.

Good art and good spirituality have this intimate relationship. And thank God they do, because this helps fill the emptiness that's also part of the upcoming holiday season.

The other thought about music and this time of year is that votes will soon be in for this year's top local stories. And the 2026 Juno Awards, held at TD Coliseum in March, was surely a highlight of what Hamilton Region offers.

I was there on that early spring day with my daughter, the Lake Jojo skater, the two of us sitting some distance from the stage, as far east as the stage was west. From there we saw Joni receive her Juno Lifetime Achievement Award from Prime Minister Mark Carney.

Far, yet close, there's Joni, large onscreen, our troubadour on stage with her cane and black velvet beret, reminding us that Canada has both good rivers and good music, that it's still a fine place to skate away in any season.

Today, it's an especially good memory to have.

Happy Birthday to Joni.

THOMAS FROESE WRITES ABOUT NEWS, TRAVEL AND LIFE. FIND HIM AT THOMASFROESE.COM AND THOMASFROESE.SUBSTACK.COM.

LETTERS

Trucking industry needs repairs

Re: Canada's trucking industry at a crossroads as safety and compliance concerns grow, Nov. 3

I worked many years in the trucking and warehousing industry, and this article spells out some of the issues. I saw many drivers who were not capable of backing into a dock, and at times saw other drivers get out and back it in for them because they were tired of waiting. There was a driver who, after filling up with fuel, hit the bollard at a gas station and tore the axle out of the truck.

There were drivers who were making payments on a vehicle that was in the company's name, but they were called contract drivers. If they got into an accident, the company got the insurance money and the driver making the payments on it got nothing.

There are many drivers on the road that are not properly trained, and clearly their licence was bought because they were not capable of driving a big rig. The driver training schools need to be more controlled, as well as the companies that take advantage of new drivers.

We had many accidents, but thankfully no one was killed. Under the current rules that may very well change.

Terry Horne, Hamilton

The department store's demise

This came to mind the other day about the absolute lack of competition in the department stores arena. Walmart was allowed to open and was welcomed with open arms by our previous oblivious councillors because of the constant mantra of an increase in the property tax base and of course the ever present drum beating of the jobs being brought to the city.

So let's see what we have now. Well, we've lost Kresge's, Sears and lately The Bay. So what's left standing? Oh yeah, *Walmart*, with its part-time work, low wages and its money flowing south of the border. Well done to the councillors who were warned this would happen and I can tell you they were warned.

Aldo Castelli, Winona

It's time for some reflection

President Donald Trump and his cabinet should hold their next meeting at the big, beautiful reflecting pool. Have all chairs facing the pool. It's time to reflect!

Hughena Matheson, Burlington

A much-needed turning point

"Forests were dying, but the trees continued to vote for the axe because its handle was wooden, and they thought it was one of them."

Donald Trump's political appeal has been built, in large part, on convincing millions of Americans that he is one of them — that he represents their values, frustrations and identity.

Yet the fundamental question remains: what happens when the person people believe is fighting for them is actually undermining the very institutions, freedoms and protections that serve them? The greatest irony is that those who believed they were protecting their way of life may, in fact, have been helping to dismantle it.

One can only hope that this political chapter is finally drawing to a close. Perhaps, at long last, America is beginning to see the light. The challenge now is for people to recognize the difference between someone who merely claims to fight for them and someone whose actions genuinely serve their needs.

I would not call this the end of Trump's presidency, but I would call it a potentially decisive turning point in his final two years.

Perhaps this is the beginning of a much-needed turning point — and a reminder that loyalty should never come at the expense of judgment.

Ross Prince, Hamilton

Some people shouldn't vote

Unless people are truly informed and engaged, they should not be voting. Judging a candidate by their picture on a poster or hearing what a neighbour has to say about their partner at work does not give you the knowledge to make an informed decision.

Watching the CBC coverage of the American elections recently, I saw an older lady being interviewed. When asked about her participation in the voting process, she answered very righteously, chin out: "I'm a Christian; I vote for President Trump."

Gudrun Boehm-Johnson, Ancaster

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