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Listening to our soldiers

By Sherwood Hines

There is no real way to understand the PTSD a soldier experiences in active action. Stories can be told, situations imagined, but it is, in the end, only words for those of us who have not been there.

My grandfather fought in the Second World War. I remember once as a young boy excitedly asking him to tell me tales of his adventures in Italy and France. But he merely turned his head away, continued to smoke his pipe, and said simply ?no.?

A man who lived across the road from us drank heavily and was a mean and nasty father. But my parents treated him well. When I asked my mother about it, she said I was too young to understand. I learned later that he had been a sniper in the Great War.

My brother joined the forces young and has been to Bosnia, Kuwait, Afghanistan. In Bosnia they were responsible for pulling dead bodies out of local wells. In Afghanistan he was in the next tent when five British soldiers were shot and killed while having their dinner. Like my grandfather, he doesn't want to talk about what he has experienced in these far-flung places.

The Globe and Mail recently noted that at least 54 soldiers have committed suicide since serving in Afghanistan. There may be more but the Department of National Defence prefers to keep these types of statistics confidential. What we do know is that between 2011 and 2014, 15 times more soldiers died from suicide (29) than died in combat (2).

Roméo Dallaire, one of Canada's most celebrated soldiers, recently wrote a memoir about the heavy cost of PTSD, his suicidal tendencies, the drinking, the nightmares, the violent outbursts, the daily dose of medications that help keep the demons at bay (*Waiting for First Light, My Ongoing Battle with PTSD*).

Few soldiers come forward seeking mental health assistance. In a military culture of strength, leadership, and command, PTSD is a sign of weakness.

The Department of Defence acknowledges that one in 10 soldiers suffers from PTSD. They also admit that they currently do not have the resources to deal with the issue. Most soldiers suffer in silence.

On Nov. 11 ? Remembrance Day ? in elementary and secondary schools across the country students will assemble in gymnasiums to give pause for the price we have paid for our freedoms. I doubt that these assemblies will be any different from those we have all sat through listening to speeches about courage, patriotism, freedom.

There will be more than a little hero worship going on.

But there are no heroes in war. There are only broken giants.

We have the bad habit of glorifying our participation in past wars, trumpeting our small military successes, detailing the minutia of Canadian-led battles in our Grade 10 history classes. But there is no talk of PTSD; of what Dallaire calls the eternal nightmare a soldier suffers.

I think much differently about the Second World War vets I knew as a boy whom I saw only as violent drunks. I understand better why my grandfather left his wife and young family when he returned from Europe and hid in the woods for the better part of 20 years.

On Nov. 11, I will think of him and his quiet stoicism in the face of what he had experienced. I will think of my brother and of how he says only his military buddies understand what he has gone through.

Remembrance Day is not a time for military hero worship.

It is a time for listening, compassion, and supporting our military brothers and sisters, who have sacrificed so much for our freedoms.