

Peace Museum president reflects on war's true cost



By Nate Smelle

Every year on Nov. 11 Canadians across the country set aside a few hours to show their appreciation for those who have served in the Armed Forces. Although living in a time when every news report on television and online seems to feature the images of destruction and carnage that come part and parcel with war, it can be all too easy to take peace for granted when residing in a relatively peaceful country like Canada. To help build understanding of the value of peace, Bancroft This Week connected with president of the Canadian Peace Museum Chris Houston on Nov. 11 to discuss the significance of Remembrance Day, and the enduring lessons that must be learned from war. For many, Remembrance Day is a solemn occasion to honour those who served in the wars of the past. But for Houston, it also serves as a powerful reminder of the human, environmental, and financial costs of violent conflicts—and, a reason why we must never forget the lasting scars that war leaves on society. “Remembering the cost of war is essential—human, financial and environmental,” explained Houston. “Afghanistan deployment cost Canada billions. War cost the world \$17.5 trillion (USD) last year—about \$2,200 USD per person. The environmental cost of war is astonishing. Sixty days of war in Gaza had the same carbon footprint of 20 countries? On November the 11th, we focus on remembering the human cost. In the 1910s, military personnel were often conscripted, few knew the conditions they were about to face—be it death, or life altering injuries. Those injuries were physical and mental, and yet the medical community didn’t know what PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder] was. Mental and physical injuries can last a lifetime. Acknowledging that Remembrance Day is timed to mark the peace

agreement between the Allies and Germany on Nov. 11, 1918 that brought about the end of the First World War, Houston said it is crucial for people not to forget the stunning brutality of this conflict. The First World War was so brutal, he said, that even today, the actual number of deaths is still unknown. According to the best estimates of casualties, Houston said, it is believed that between nine and 11 million military personnel were killed; and, that anywhere from six million to 13 million civilians lost their lives. Highlighting how in 1914, British writer H.G. Wells famously referred to the First World War as "the war to end all wars," Houston told Bancroft This Week that the reality of war's cyclical nature became evident shortly after the armistice, with the onslaught of the Second World War and subsequent conflicts. He said the fact that humanity has still not yet found a way to prevent war from re-emerging, in spite of modern society's awareness of the true cost of war, is reason enough to keep striving for peace. "To me, it is important to remember the human cost of the world wars, but also the cost of the more recent wars," said Houston. "War is ugly and brutal. Fighting Hitler and Nazis is an easier narrative for people to talk about than why Canada went to war in Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya. Some war history is easier to digest. Not reflecting about contemporary wars is bad for veterans, bad for peace, and reduces our ability to learn from history. Thinking about war as only distant history can leave support for veterans deprioritized. I'm certain that if we understood the true human, environmental and financial cost of war, we'd have a more peaceful world." Not all veterans who fought on behalf of Canada have been honoured for their service throughout history, explained Houston. For instance, Indigenous soldiers have long been overlooked in Canada's historical narratives of war, he said, but their sacrifices are no less significant. Houston also pointed out how these veterans often faced additional barriers and prejudices when they returned from the battlefields. In addition, he said many Indigenous veterans were even denied the same rights as other Canadians, including the ability to vote; and were excluded from government programs that helped returning soldiers reintegrate into civilian life. Emphasizing how Nov. 8 marks Indigenous Veterans Day, he said, "Indigenous veterans were often denied the same post-war benefits as their non-Indigenous counterparts, including land grants and other support services. We must acknowledge this historical injustice and ensure that the contributions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit veterans are fully recognized." For Houston, the treatment of Indigenous soldiers when they returned to Canada from the frontlines drives home a central message of Remembrance Day: humanity must never forget the profound toll war takes, not just in terms of lives lost but also the enduring psychological and emotional wounds that continue to affect survivors and their families in times of peace. This lifelong impact war has on its survivors is why Houston believes that the only way for humanity to build a truly peaceful world is through active effort and engaged leadership. "We need leaders who have the imagination, courage, and skills to resolve disagreements through peaceful means," said Houston. "Every war eventually ends, but it's our job to accelerate that ending. There are countless non-violent tools at a leader's disposal, and it's time for those tools to be prioritized over military force."