



# Lest we forget

This time of year, as our thoughts reflect on the many who have lost their lives during war time, Clive Rowley remembers the significance of the poppy during this month.

**Words:** Squadron Leader Clive Rowley  
MBE RAF Rtd  
(Former Officer Commanding the BBMF)



In the days and weeks approaching Remembrance Day in November each year many people wear a paper poppy, purchased with a donation to The Royal British Legion, as a symbol of remembrance for those who have died in the service of their country during times of conflict. On Remembrance Sunday poppy wreaths will be laid at war memorials all over the county.

This summer there have been many fields in Lincolnshire full of scarlet poppies, a colourful sight sure to draw the eye of those who have the time and inclination to observe nature and perhaps, for some, to wonder about these bright flowers and what they now stand for.

Poppies grow naturally in conditions of disturbed earth throughout Western Europe and the destruction brought by the Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth century transformed bare land into fields of blood red poppies, growing around the bodies of fallen soldiers.

In late 1914, the fields of northern France and Flanders were again ripped open as the First World War raged through Europe's heart. Once again poppies were amongst the few things that could survive and grow in those terrible conditions, perhaps surprisingly, as the poppy is delicate and relatively short-lived, rather like the young men killed in the horrors of the war.

The possible significance of the poppy as a lasting memorial symbol to the fallen was first recognized by the First World War Canadian Army surgeon John McCrae. Outside a dressing station near Ypres in 1915, he wrote of the scenes around him. Dissatisfied, he tore the poem from his notebook and returned to his duties. A fellow officer discovered the poem in the mud and sent a copy to the press. Through John McCrae's poem 'In Flanders Fields' the poppy came to represent the immeasurable sacrifice made by his comrades and quickly became a lasting memorial to those who died in the First World War and subsequently in later conflicts. John McCrae died in 1918 but his poem is recited at Remembrance services throughout the world, and is now recognized as one of the most memorable and moving poems of the Great War. The first official Poppy Day was held on 11 November 1921.

The poppy has become such a well-recognized and poignant symbol of remembrance for fallen warriors that its use has

*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.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,*

*Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from falling hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields*

**By John McCrae 1915**

spread beyond the few weeks before the annual Remembrance Day. In recent years the RAF's Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF), based at RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire, has been tasked to drop paper poppies from the bomb bay of its Lancaster bomber at some significant commemorative events. The fiftieth anniversary of VJ Day and of the end of World War Two on 19th August 1995 saw the BBMF Lancaster dropping one million poppies along The Mall on its approach to overfly Buckingham Palace. Nine years passed before a poppy drop from the Lancaster was repeated, this time for the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day in June 2004, the poppies being dropped alongside a ship carrying D-Day veterans to Normandy for the international commemorations. Then, for the National Commemoration Day on 10th July 2005, the culmination of a week-long programme of events to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War Two, the Lancaster, flanked by a Hurricane and Spitfire, once again dropped one million paper poppies over The Mall as an act of remembrance. Those who were there on the ground that day said that, as the poppies fluttered quietly down and the sound of the BBMF formation's Merlin engines receded, this was an experience that touched their hearts and would live in their memories.

Thousands watching on television also shared the poignancy of the moment. The author was privileged to be flying one of the BBMF Spitfires in formation on the Lancaster's wing for both of the latter two events and it is an experience that will live with him too as, when the Lancaster bomb bay doors opened and the poppies streamed out into the airflow, it looked as though the mighty bomber was haemorrhaging, so red and blood-like was the plume. There was also an added significance in that the Lancaster's bomb bay, intended for the carriage of the war-load of bombs that would have caused so much death and destruction, now carries only these symbols of remembrance on these few very special occasions. These occasions will remain preciously few as this is in no way a routine task for the BBMF and Lancaster poppy-drops incur considerable expenditure of man hours in the necessary preparation of the Lancaster.

In her speech to the Nation on 10th July, 2006, Her Majesty The Queen said, "There is another reason we must never forget. An act of remembrance is an act of honour - to those who sacrificed all, who bore the sufferings of war, who had the wisdom to build the peace. It is a tribute, an expression of our admiration, our respect and our thanks."

Wear your poppies with pride - as the motto on the official royal BBMF crest says, "Lest We Forget".

# The British Legion

The Royal British Legion is seeking a new generation of volunteers for its 2007 Poppy People Campaign. The generous donation of time is the most critical factor in the success of the annual Poppy Appeal. Unfortunately, each year the Poppy People numbers drop by thousands, as many of our older collectors decide they can no longer assist, having well and truly done their 'bit'. As a result, the British Legion is always looking for new faces to come forward.

Poppy People give anything from two hours of their time to two weeks to collect on streets, shops and workplaces across the country. The organisation also needs local organisers, drivers, poppy distributors and volunteer counters. Everyone can get involved and your contribution can really make a difference to serving and ex-service people in need.

## ► Support today

Today, British men and women continue to serve their country, in Iraq, the Falklands, the Gulf, and Rwanda to name a few. They need to know the The Royal British Legion will be there to help them when they need it most. The legion will be needed for as long as people continue to be affected by conflict. It doesn't advocate war but is simply there to support those who have been prepared to make a personal sacrifice through serving in the British Armed Forces.

## ► Did you know?

- The Poppy Appeal raised a record £26 million in 2006. 300,000 staff and volunteers organise the Poppy Appeal each year
- More than 36 million poppies, 107,000 wreaths and sprays, 800,000 remembrance crosses and other remembrance items will be distributed this year
- Poppy Support was launched last year to promote the Legion's welfare services through six areas of work covering: advice, funds, homes, volunteers, breaks and travel

