



Red & White Poppies

By Jan Slakov

Introduction

This mini unit plan is designed not only to help students think critically about a controversial issue and develop their own positions on it, but also to introduce them to alternate perspectives on war and how it is possible to work nonviolently for freedom and democracy.

Through this unit, students will be introduced to the white poppy tradition for Remembrance Day. This symbol, the white poppy, has become popular among peace activists across Canada, as a way of showing that they want to question any tradition which glorifies or justifies war. It is a symbol for many of the things that are not usually spoken of on Remembrance Day, such as the true costs and causes of war.

As background for this unit, it would be useful for teachers to have read the description below of some of the things that traditional Remembrance Day ceremonies ignore:

One thing that certainly gets ignored is how many people in the military have suffered in ways that don't fit the "noble sacrifice" image. For instance, many veterans of the first Gulf War got sick with a mysterious disease called "Gulf War Syndrome". It's not certain what the causes of this disease are but it's very likely that these soldiers are mainly suffering as a result of vaccines and contamination from depleted uranium or DU. DU is basically waste from the nuclear industry. It is STILL being used by the US in large quantities even though we know that it is highly toxic and can contaminate people and the environment for BILLIONS of years. A UN subcommission in 1996 declared DU weapons to be "weapons of mass destruction or indiscriminate effect" and recommended that their use be outlawed. [Note 1]

The wife of one of the veterans who died of Gulf War Syndrome, Sue Riordon, has testified to parliament and elsewhere about what her family went through and what she has learned about the military. She has pointed out that these veterans and their families are often basically ignored or lied to by the government. The Canadian government calls the Gulf War the "Persian Gulf Conflict". Since the war is thus not an official war, the veterans are not eligible for full veterans' benefits. ... Sue's husband, Terry Riordon, was misdiagnosed by a military doctor as being an epileptic. However, Sue was able to find out, through an access to information request, that the doctor had written down that Terry was suffering from Gulf War Syndrome but he told Terry that he was epileptic. Despite the fact that this doctor has been publicly exposed for his misconduct, he was still "treating" military personnel four years later and may still be practicing now. As a result of all she has learned, Sue Riordon compares the military to a cult.

Another thing that gets ignored is the flip side of "noble sacrifice". The question is asked, "Would you die for your country?" but no one asks, "Would you kill for your country?"

And what about the oft-repeated idea that our soldiers are fighting for freedom, justice and only good things like that? The truth is quite different from this simplistic assumption. After a career in the U.S. military, Major General Smedley Butler, in a speech delivered in 1933, stated:

"I spent thirty- three years and four months in active military service as a member of this country's most agile

military force, the Marine Corps. I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major-General. And during that period, I spent most of my time being a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism." [Note 2]

Has this reality changed since then? The record of high finance backing for politicians who advocate military intervention points to a negative answer to that question. New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman said as much in 1999:

"The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist -- McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps." [Note 3]

Thomas L. Friedman

Not only is military force used to defend big business interests, big business profits off of war. (Manufacturers of items sold to the military are notorious for charging exorbitant rates for their wares... and making huge profits.)

In General Smedley Butler's speech, he goes on to explain how decent people like himself could get caught up in a "racket":

Like all the members of the military profession, I never had a thought of my own until I left the service. My mental faculties remained in suspended animation while I obeyed the orders of higher-ups. This is typical with everyone in the military service. [Note 4]

The military is, in many ways, comparable to a cult. Through military indoctrination, it is possible to take intelligent, decent human beings and train them to participate in actions that degrade themselves and cause incalculable harm. It appears that statesmen who send soldiers off to fight wars understand that those in the military are merely pawns for their plans, as the following quote shows:

"Military men are just dumb, stupid animals to be used as pawns in foreign policy". [Note 5]

It was a US statesman, Henry Kissinger, who said this, but Kissinger is only one of many people who have made decisions that sent soldiers off to fight wars that benefited them and their friends.

Meanwhile, the conventional approach to Remembrance Day does not remember the work of those who struggled nonviolently for peace and justice. There are many wonderful examples of this work, but most are not well known. One example follows here.

Hannah Arendt describes how the power of nonviolence saved lives in Denmark during WW II:

It was not just that the people of Denmark refused to assist in implementing the Final Solution, as the peoples of so many other conquered nations had been persuaded to do (or had been eager to do) – but also, that when the Reich cracked

down and decided to do the job itself it found that its own personnel in Denmark had been infected by this and were unable to overcome their human aversion with the appropriate ruthlessness, as their peers in more cooperative areas had. [6]

Of course, the above description of aspects of war that are ignored on Remembrance Day does not provide a complete view of what the military is all about. But it does help compensate for some of the glossing over of disturbing aspects of war that is typical not only of Remembrance Day, but of discourse in a militarized society in general.

1) The United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities passed a resolution condemning the use of depleted uranium weapons during its 48th session in August, 1996, as described in U.N. Press Release HR/CN/755, "Subcommittee on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities Concludes Forty-Eighth Session." Relevant section available at <http://southmovement.alphalink.com.au/antiwar/UNres.htm>

2) Smedley Butler on Interventionism
-- Excerpt from a speech delivered in 1933, by Major General Smedley Butler, USMC.
cited on the Federation of American Scientists' Military Analysis Network
website: <http://www.fas.org/man/smedley.htm>

3) from A Manifesto for the Fast World
New York Times, March 28 1999
<http://www.globalpolicy.org/nations/fried99.htm>

4) Ibid. Not long after Butler made this speech, he was instrumental in thwarting a coup to overthrow the Roosevelt government and replace it with a fascist dictatorship. This was documented in the April, 2004 issue of Press for Conversion! (Issue #53), published by the Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade

5) from The Final Days, Woodward and Bernstein (Simon & Schuster, 1976), quoted in Kiss the Boys Good-bye, by Monika Jensen-Stevenson, Dutton, 1990, Page 97

6) from Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, by Hannah Arendt, Viking Press, 1963

Objectives

Students will develop their ability to

- think critically about a controversial issue
- provide reasons for their opinions
- reflect on and understand opinions different from their own

Material

- handout copies of John Pottinger's Remembrance Day article
- handout copies of articles discussing the white poppy tradition as well as the white poppy brochure, sent separately from this lesson

- copies of the assignment (or simply write it up on the board)

Procedure

Take about 20 minutes from a class to read John Pottinger's article, "Lest we forget on Remembrance Day" with the class. Some points to discuss:

- a comparison of WW I & WW II (WW I: trench warfare, poison gas, most of the dead were soldiers. WW II was different in many ways, with bombing of civilian targets, genocidal Nazi policies, but also racism in Allied countries too (e.g. Japanese internment and confiscation of property), huge losses in Russia with the 900-day siege on Leningrad (now St. Petersburg once again)

- In the 4th to last paragraph there is reference to "throwing the torch". This refers to the famous poem, "In Flanders Fields"

- Have they had an experience of coming to appreciate something after first having been unable to appreciate it?... What about not appreciating something that they feel some pressure to appreciate?

Ask students to share their reflections on war, their family stories about involvement in war. Since many students may not have asked their parents or grandparents about this topic, ask them to find out for an upcoming class. Point out that it is not necessary for these stories to be about having fought in a war as a Canadian soldier, that there are many other types of experience of war. Invite them to think and ask about what Remembrance Day means to them.

Begin the next class with a sharing of these stories. If some of these stories go beyond the conventional, bringing up examples of people who were somehow linked to a cause that cannot be claimed to be "so that we could live in freedom" (e.g. for Germany, Italy or Japan in WW II, or someone who experienced war as a citizen of one of the many countries which has suffered war in more recent years such as Rwanda, Afghanistan, Guatemala - the list is endless), or bringing up examples of people who "fought" nonviolently for justice, such as people who hid Jews or German deserters in WW II or who helped refugees or someone who has been active in the peace movement, etc., you can use those examples to help illustrate that war is a much more complicated reality than the conventional image that is portrayed on Remembrance Day.

Explain that some people have been concerned that the way Remembrance Day is often celebrated contributes to glorifying war. Ask students if they can guess what would be meant by that and explain:

To glorify something is to make it sound more glorious than it is. Glorifying war is all about selling it as a legitimate, honourable enterprise. On Remembrance Day there is a lot of talk of how soldiers made the "ultimate sacrifice" for our freedom, of stories of great courage and honour. Soldiers are portrayed as heroes. "Glorifying war" means only speaking of things that would make us feel pride for those who fought for "our side" and ignoring other things about war.

There is a white poppy tradition as an alternative way of marking Remembrance Day. People who think it is important to remember war and how horrible it is, but who do not want in any way to glorify it, have chosen to wear white poppies, usually along with red ones, to symbolize their commitment to work to end war. The tradition dates from 1933, when a Women's Co-operative Guild in England chose to wear white poppies to symbolize their commitment to work for peace and to end their acquiescence to militarism.

Some people have found this white poppy tradition offensive. They feel it belittles the sacrifices made by

soldiers to fight for our freedoms.

Tell the students that you will be giving them material about the significance of both poppies to read and also articles commenting on the traditions. They are to read these items and then write about their own opinions.

Assignment

Answer the following question, giving at least three reasons for your answer:

Are you in favour of wearing white poppies as part of your way of marking Remembrance Day?

In your answer, explain briefly what you think the meaning of Remembrance Day ought to be.

On another day, invite students to share their views with the whole class, either by reading out their assignments or more informally. List reasons given for their positions on the board in two columns: for and against the white poppy tradition.

Then divide the class into "pro" and "con" groups so that one group is on one side of the class. The students are now to engage in a debate, where they argue the opposing side to the one they wrote in favour of. This will help students see things from a different perspective than their own.

Award one point for each new reason provided by each side in support of their position.

If there is sufficient interest in the class, students could be encouraged to make white poppies for themselves and others in an art class. These could be as simple as white cardboard cut out in the poppy shape and pinned to clothing, or more elaborately made, with painted centres and safety pins glued to the back. Fabric stores sell different types of material which make more durable poppies (such as plasticized cloth or a type of "felt" lining material, etc.)

Lest we forget on Remembrance Day

My father was a peaceful man. But from the time he was 19 until he was 24, he lived in the black belly of war. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, year after dismal year, he was slammed and bounced around the bleak, bitter North Atlantic Ocean. Through the roaring flaming sea, tortured sounds and images were unwillingly seared forever into his young brain.

He enlisted knowing full well what the consequences would be. His only memories of his own father were of a sickly man who lay in bed coughing and choking, passing away when my dad was five. He had breathed in a few lungfulls of poison gas in some muddy and freezing, bloody and screeching trench in what we now call the pastoral rolling hills of the French countryside.

A generation later I grew up doing things with my Dad that he hadn't been able to do as a child. We camped and picknicked; we enjoyed family birthdays and Christmases; I played and went to school.

When I was a teenager my dad and I grew apart. I thought he was out of touch with the real world, when it was I, of course, that had no bloody idea.

In my early 20s I travelled, worked at a dozen different jobs and laughed with my friends. For me the lessons of war were scarce heard amid the sounds of fun.

I didn't understand what he - and millions of others - had been through. Worse still, I didn't much care. Those were the sparkling spring days of my life and the sounds and images lodging in my young brain were of parties and dances, with rock and roll music and pretty girls in flowered dresses row on row.

A few years (and a few mistakes) later, I stumbled on the truth, the horror, the obscene sobbing Hell that is war. By that time my dad was gone.

So I never got to thank him for giving up those precious young years of his life, for placing himself in harm's way, for truly putting it all on the line so that a woman he had yet to meet, and their children yet unborn, could live their lives in peace.

It's a cruel toss of some devil's coin whether a particular generation sees the face of war; another toss to see who gets maimed, blinded, burned, or simply killed.

Those still with us who served in the Second World War are now in their 80s or 90s, many unable to attend Remembrance Day services. So it is up to you and me, from those failing hands, they throw that torch. We must catch it.

In the swirling confusion of our too busy lives, we must stop for a few quiet moments to contemplate war, and pray for peace.

Luckily for most of us, the agony of war consists of tortured TV images from far-away places. But the new millennium has shown us how fragile peace can be, anywhere on this earth. Those anguished faces are closer than we know. We should think of them all as our own mothers and fathers and sons and daughters.

Lest we forget.

by John Pottinger

OUR VIEW

Red poppy already stands for peace

TO EVERYTHING there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven, as the famous quotation from *Ecclesiastes* tells us. There is "a time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace," much as we might wish there were no such things as hatred and war.

Running a white poppy campaign for peace at the same time as the red poppy campaign for Remembrance Day and war veterans is an example of doing the right thing, but in the wrong season, and in the wrong way.

For Remembrance Day ceremonies are not, as two well-meaning Victoria women behind the white poppy campaign contend, a glorification of war.

They are a remembrance of the price that whole generations have paid for war, a sacrifice that later generations need to be reminded of lest they believe war *is* somehow glorious.

Many young people crave action and adventure, and that's why some join the armed forces of any country. And the

adrenaline runs when they are called to fight.

But those who've come back from two world wars, from Korea and from the host of other small wars of this century — they know the truth. War is hell. Peace is infinitely more desirable.

It is surely not the intention of its proponents, but the white poppy campaign, by implication, sends the message that wearers of the red poppy don't wish for peace.

People who wear their red poppies not out of some abstract concept, but with the sorrow and anguish of personal loss, don't deserve that. The message of the white poppy is surely included in that of the red.

There is a time to remember war and honour our veterans, and there is a time to promote peace for its own sake.

Give out lapel pins for peace, by all means.

But don't do it around Remembrance Day, and don't use the symbol chosen by those who have paid the price of making war to create peace — the poppy.

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White poppies not 'anti-veteran'

In 1998, I learned of the white poppy tradition started in England in 1933 by a women's group which wanted to remember the horrors of war in such a way that society would dedicate itself to ending the scourge of war.

As I had long had mixed feelings about Remembrance Day because I object to any type of ceremony which glorifies war, the white poppy tradition made sense to me. I did my best to share the idea with other peace activists, especially here in Canada, but all over the world as well. I will always be grateful to for-

mer member of the armed forces, peacekeeper Stephen Downes of Bear River, for endorsing the campaign early on.

Last year, *The National Post* newspaper noticed that members of the Voice of Women for Peace group had endorsed the white poppy idea and suggested the white poppy campaign was an adversarial women versus veterans campaign.

This is not faithful to the truth. There are indeed some veterans who object to white poppies for Remembrance Day. But many people, including veterans, embrace the white poppy tradition

wholeheartedly. Most of us like to wear a red poppy, too. I, for one, do not want to offend many dear friends for whom the red poppy has deep significance.

It is impossible in a letter to the editor to explain fully why people feel the white poppy tradition is so important. But I would like to quote Second World War veteran and author Fred Knelman who has endorsed the campaign:

"I want not only to remember those who have fought and suffered as soldiers but to rededicate myself to preventing war and ending militarism. I also want to

remember that 95 per cent of the casualties in contemporary wars are civilians.

Some of our government's policies towards Yugoslavia, including the bombing, violated international law, which many veterans fought hard to establish. Now our government is joining in the obscenely costly and destabilizing Nuclear Missile Defence project. The battlefield today is in the hearts and minds of all citizens. We must unite to bring true peace and security to Canada and the world."

Jan Slakov, Weymouth

