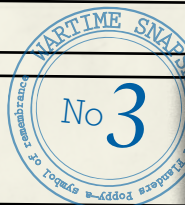


WARTIME SNAPSHOTS

The Flanders Poppy— a symbol of remembrance



A commemorative poster featuring the image of the poppy was produced for the 2009 Remembrance Day. The red poppy is a popular symbol of commemoration and regularly used in wreaths and adorns the walls of the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour.

The poem, *In Flanders Fields*, written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae on 3 May 1915 features on the design.



Facts, Figures and Background

The Flanders Poppy—a Commemorative symbol

During the First World War, red poppies were the plants to spring up in the battlefields of northern France and Belgium. The soil rich with lime allowed the poppy, *popaver rhoeas*, to readily grow. The sight of the new growth and life of the red poppy provided a strong contrast to the devastation and death of war. In soldiers' minds, the red became symbolic of the blood of their mates soaking the ground.

The poppies on the battlefield at Ypres in 1915 inspired Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae to write the poem, *In Flanders Fields*. He was a Canadian surgeon attached to the 1st Field Artillery Brigade during the battle of Ypres. Over a seventeen day period he worked treating the injured men. The suffering and loss of life he witnessed in the dressing station was hard to bear and the death of a friend and his burial in the cemetery close by moved him to write the poem.

Although McCrae initially threw the poem away, a fellow officer retrieved it and sent it to the newspapers in England. It was rejected by *The Spectator*, in London, but published in *Punch* on 8 December 1915.

Three years later, Moina Michael, working for the American YMCA, read McCrae's poem before Armistice Day. She wrote a poem in reply and committed to wear a red poppy as a way to keep the faith and remember the dead. Her idea was extended to the selling of poppies to raise money for war widows, orphans and veterans.

The poppy soon became widely accepted in Commonwealth countries as the flower of remembrance to be worn on Armistice Day (now Remembrance Day). The Australian Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League first sold poppies for Armistice Day in 1921 by importing one million silk poppies made in French orphanages. Each poppy sold for a shilling. Today, the War Widows Guild and the RSL continue to sell poppies for Remembrance Day to raise funds for welfare work.

Websites and References

Publications

- Australians on the Western Front, Department of Veterans' Affairs Education Resource, pages 11–16
- Their Spirit, Our History, Department of Veterans' Affairs and Australian War Memorial Education Resource, pages 20–22

Websites

Department of Veterans' Affairs

www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/commemorations/education/Pages/education%20resources.aspx Education resources

www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/commemorations/commemorative_events/remembrance_day/Pages/index.aspx Historical information

Australian War Memorial

www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/customs/poppies.asp Information about poppies

www.awm.gov.au/wartime/8/articles/flanders_fields.pdf Wartime article on Poppies

www.awm.gov.au/blog/2007/04/04/in-flanders-fields-the-poem/ Blog about John McCrae

www.awm.gov.au/education/activities/makeyourpoppy.pdf Make a poppy

Veterans Affairs Canada

[www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/firstwar/mccrae)

[source=history/firstwar/mccrae](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/firstwar/mccrae) Information on Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae

General

www.rsl.org.au Information on the Returned & Services League of Australia

Teaching Activities

1. Find out about the Third Battles of Ypres in which the Australian Imperial Force(AIF) fought. How long did the battle last and what were the Australian casualties? Find the position of Ypres on a map of Belgium. What other nationalities fought in the Battles of Ypres?
2. Research about the life and work of Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. Is he known mostly for his career as a doctor or his other skills in writing and art? Make a timeline of his life from 1872 until his death in 1918. Where and how did he die?
3. Read the poem *In Flanders Fields* by John McCrae. What do you think are his feelings about war and death? What emotions does he express through the poem? Discuss the third stanza of the poem with a classmate. What is McCrae asking of those who survive the battlefield?
4. Compare the poem by John McCrae to other poems written in the First World War. Choose a poet from this time, for example, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Laurence Binyon. Does the poet speak disparagingly about war?
5. Find out more information about Moina Michael, who initiated the wearing of red poppies as a symbol of remembrance.
6. What other symbols of remembrance do we use in Australia? Are there other floral, military or ceremonial symbols that are used for Remembrance Day or Anzac Day?
7. Make your own wreath from either fresh flowers or poppies for use in a school ceremony. The template to make material or paper poppies is provided in the website links above.
8. What does the word "repatriation" mean? What organisations assist veterans and their families? Learn about the work of one of these groups, the Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL).

