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Why we remember

by BRIAN LOCKHART

It was June 6, 1944, when over 150,000 Canadian, British, and American soldiers began the storming of Europe on the beaches of Normandy.

After a full year of training in the U.K., many of those soldiers never even fired a shot in battle. They died before taking more than a couple of steps onto the beach or taking a direct hit into the landing craft approaching the land.

Several million more soldiers landed in Europe to back up the initial invasion.

Old soldiers who stormed the beaches that day are still around, although their ranks are getting smaller with the passing years. Typically, they don't speak much about their war experience.

Although, I did have a very interesting conversation with one gentleman in Shelburne a few years ago who was on a landing craft approaching Omaha beach that day.

He told me that he was at the American-assigned beach because the US lacked landing craft and British and Canadian forces were given the task of getting them to shore.

He described how the American battleships opened fire and he could hear the screaming sound of the shells as they flew to their targets at the fortifications on the beach. A few moments later, the defending Germans returned fire, so ?the shells were flying both ways over our heads.?

Old soldiers probably don't speak about their war experiences because they saw some pretty horrific things they would like to forget about.

That included seeing young friends die in front of their eyes when at a time in life, they had probably not even experienced a death in their own family.

While Hollywood has made some great war movies over the years, historically they miss the mark on one thing in particular ? the age of soldiers involved in the fighting.

Private Ryan, is considered an epic motion picture and has been described by some as the most accurate portrayal of the D-Day landing. However, actor Tom Hanks, who played the protagonist, Captain Miller, was 42 years old when the film was made. At that age, he would have not been a front-line soldier, if he had been called up at all.

In 1949, Sands of Iwo Jima debuted in theatres. It was another epic tale of the fight to take a small island in the Pacific, at a great cost. John Wayne was in the lead role, as Sgt. John M. Stryker. Wayne was also 42 years old when the film was made.

At the time, he was given the script, and he questioned whether he should play the role at all, realizing he was way too old to be believable as a marine who stormed the island.

On the flip side, the German production of Das Boot is a superb film about a submarine crew hunting Allied ships with a wolf-pack in the North Atlantic.

The film really captures life in the cramped, suffocating atmosphere of a submarine.

However, the crew is not a true representation of the sailors who manned those underwater death traps.

Of 40,000 German submariners during WWII, around 30,000 perished ? it was a dangerous job.

One critic pointed out that the crew in the film were way too old, citing the fact that at age 30, the captain would have been considered the ?old guy' on the vessel.

Most of the soldiers who fought in both the First and Second World Wars, were young. Many of them were still teenagers. They were handed a rifle, taught how to use it, and given the task of killing other people. That's a heavy load for some kid right out of high school.

These were not armies of professional career soldiers, they were armies of volunteers or conscripts called up to do a duty they probably never expected they would have to do. But they stepped up at a time when they were needed.

Those that died on the battlefield never had the chance to get on with their lives, find a career, or get married and raise a family.

They remain now, as names etched on granite cenotaphs around the country, as images in faded photographs, and in the memory of the remaining few that remember an older brother who went off to war and never returned.

That's why it is important to wear a poppy on Remembrance Day.

It recognizes the sacrifice of thousands and the lives that were never fully lived.