

Danville News Column
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Friday, November 11, 2011
“Armistice Day Opportunity”
Word Count: 750

Last week I had cause to visit the Veterans Administration Hospital in Wilkes Barre. I thought it funny how I couldn't obtain any poppies. I needed poppies. Why poppies? For Armistice Day, of course. At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month (matching the National Veterans Day ceremony in Arlington Cemetery) I will be standing in Danville's Memorial Park conducting a brief ceremony of remembrance. I realize November 11 was renamed Veterans Day, but (antiquarian that I am) I warm to the original as proclaimed by Woodrow Wilson: "...the heroism of those who died in the country's service . . . has given America opportunity to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations."

Besides, I try to avoid confusing Armistice Day with a pep rally. I like the old name. Armistice means the laying down arms as a prelude for peace. That would be nice. Well, we are getting better. We exist at the most peaceful time in the history of our planet.

Why poppies? Flanders Field, naturally. The poem, 'In Flanders Fields,' was written in 1915 by Lt. Colonel John McCrae MD while seated on the back of an English ambulance looking out at the graveyard where the day before he had buried his friend killed in battle. He looked out across the soldiers' graves and remarked on the wild poppies springing up from the ditches: "*To you from failing 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 Flander's Fields.*"

We distribute the poppies as a pledge. We receive them also as a warning.

It's a week for remembrances. We have November 11 to remember and we have November 9 and 10 never to forget. That was the night called, Kristallnacht. Crystal night. The night of broken glass, when, in a terror of organized riot, storm troopers carried sledgehammers, destroyed synagogues, attacked Jewish homes and shops, brutalized thousands. On Kristallnacht, the world was finally forced to see what Hitler had been doing in Germany for a decade to deny Jews their civil (and human) rights and promote the scandal of Aryan supremacy.

It's happened before, it can happen again. Allow us no illusion of our capacity to justify evil or run with the mob.

To paraphrase James Madison: "If humans were angels, we'd have no need of government or religion; if religions and government were angels, we'd have no need of checks upon their power."

So today I'll be standing at the Soldier's Monument which commemorates the War for the Preservation of the Union. On the base you may read Cicero's quote: "O fortunate death which due to nature is most preferably paid for one's native country."

Still, I prefer Steinbeck: "A good soldier fights a battle, never a war. That's for civilians." Over Cicero, I really prefer Bill Mauldin, for Mauldin asks and answers: "Who is a combat soldier? Those who hate killing and scared to death doing it. Those so damn sick and tired of having their noses rubbed in stinking war that their only ambition will be to forget it." How else can they preserve their soul?

For years I've been puzzled by the most prominent figure on this town monument. Who is this female figure? Lady Liberty? But then why is the torch shoved into the ground? Lady Justice? Where are the scales of justice? The 1909 newspaper accounts referred to her as the Goddess of Peace. Possibly. But where are her traditional tokens of prosperity? War brings privation. Peace brings abundance.

Certainly she stands before us as an allegorical figure, accompanied by these authentic representations of soldiers who fought together: cavalry trooper, gunner-artilleryman, infantryman preparing to pull out cartridge and load his Springfield rifled musket.

She is Mother Country, facing south, grateful for peace. For the flaming torch held in her right hand, as documents record, represents the enemy engaged in the work of desolation and disunion. But those three men standing beside her on this Soldiers' Monument wrested from the enemy this 'Torch of Destruction' and surrendered it to Mother Country, who is even now extinguishing its flames of divisive hatred and sectional disunity between north and south.

Cradled in her left arm, she has received the sword, the instrument which has made this victory in defense of her honor and integrity possible.

The sword now is sheathed. We pray it stays that way.