

Marking Remembrance Day: Two soldiers, one calling

Why they enlisted, the challenges they faced, the buddies they lost. For Dave McCrindle, 95, and Matthew Ramsay, 31, battle took its toll.



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Dave McCrindle, who is 95 and a Second World War veteran, has been wearing his Remembrance Day poppy since the end of October. As far as he knows, he is the only soldier left from the 35th Battery from Sherbrooke.

Five years ago, McCrindle came across an archival photograph of his old battery in an army magazine. He recognized himself — a fresh-faced boy crouched in the front row. He keeps a framed copy of that photograph next to the easy chair in his den.

McCrimdle was 18 when he enlisted in 1940. He started out as a gunner and became a bombardier after the 1944 Battle of Monte Cassino.

Today, McCrimdle lives with his partner, Nora Laws, in a Côte-St-Luc seniors' residence. Until recently, he worked out regularly at the N.D.G. YMCA. Though he walks with a cane, his mind remains sharp. He begins every day by completing the Gazette crossword — and ends it with a shot of single malt scotch.

McCrimdle is a news junkie, carefully following the conflicts taking place around the world. He says he doesn't like what has been happening, and believes there will always be war. "I doubt," he says, "that there will ever be an end to it."

McCrimdle tears up when he recounts what he and his buddies lived through during the Second World War. As a young veteran, he says, he rarely cried. Crying comes more easily to him now that he is an older man.

"I did cry, though, after the war, when I saw my mum waiting for me at the Bonaventure train station."



War medals belonging to WW2 veteran 95-year-old Dave McCrimdle at home in Montreal, on Monday, November 6, 2017. (Dave Sidaway / MONTREAL GAZETTE)

What made you decide to enlist in the Canadian Army?

"I was born in Glasgow, Scotland and we moved to Montreal when I was two years old. Back then, we lived in Maisonneuve, the district now called Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. I enlisted

because my mother kept talking about her family back in Scotland and how worried she was about them. They were under attack by German bombers. I felt I had to do something. But after I enlisted, my mother got worried about me. But she didn't try to talk me out of it. She knew that I was determined to go."

Where did you train?



"We trained in Woodstock, Ontario. We were there for three months. We trained to become anti-aircraft gunners. We were anxious to get on the gun — it was a Bofors 40 millimetre. We wanted to learn how to use it. In spring 1941, we boarded a ship called the MV Georgic. It took a week to make the crossing. We landed in Gourrock, Scotland. It was my first time back in Scotland."

Dave McCrindle says that, as far as he knows, he is the only surviving soldier from Sherbrooke's 35th Battery. Dave Sidaway / Montreal Gazette

What, for you, was the toughest part of being a soldier?

"We were partway into the Liri Valley in Cassino, Italy. By then, I was a wireless operator. That meant I had to set up a telephone connection to where the guns were. I was with my buddy Dale Lansing, another wireless operator. We suddenly realized we were being sniped at by a German 88 millimetre gun. We heard it firing over us. We ran toward where the 35th Battery Bofors was. My Canadian buddies yelled, 'Get the f— out of here!' because the snipers were following us. We dove over the embankment and into the gun pit. We were young, so we thought, 'What the hell?'"

Did any of your buddies die during the war?

"In December 1943, before Monte Cassino, we were near the Sangro River in eastern central Italy. A guy named Ing — we never knew his first name — was walking from the tent to the gun when he stepped on a landmine. He was a new recruit. We hadn't even met him yet. He was the first one who went.

The last one was a tall kid named Shackleton. We called him Shack. He was from London, Ontario. We were at Ravenna, a small city on the Italian east coast. Shack left his gun and went out to explore. He ran into a German machine gun nest.

Even after all these years, I still think of Ing and Shack a lot."

How did you cope after you returned from battle?

“We didn’t know anything about PTSD — Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We called it battle fatigue. Some of my buddies had it. But not me, though I had some nightmares for a while after the war. I had worked for a company called MacLaren Advertising before the war. After I got back, they made me production manager. I had no idea what that job was all about. I worked there until 1951, when I joined a printing company, and eventually became a partner. I married my wife Irma in 1947 and we were together until 2006 when she died. I didn’t tell Irma about my wartime experiences until the late 1980s. I guess I wasn’t quite ready before then.”

What does Remembrance Day mean to you?

“I still call it Armistice Day. It makes me feel very emotional. It brings back memories. Let’s put it this way — I’m 95; I’m on my way out. I want young people to know what the war was all about. Over the years, I’ve gone to the cenotaph in Place du Canada or in Girouard Park to pay my respects and to take part in the Remembrance Day service. But I can’t this year because I’m less mobile. There’s going to be a dinner at the legion honouring those who died. Nora and I are going to that.”

Matthew Ramsay is studying history and political science at Concordia University. “That’s the classic army degree,” jokes Ramsay, 31, who in addition to being a mature student is also a sergeant with the Black Watch of Canada, a reserve unit of the Canadian Army.

With a stocky build and broad shoulders, and wearing his combat uniform when we meet at the Black Watch Regiment on Bleury St., Ramsay looks every bit the soldier. It’s when he smiles — which he does a lot — that you can see the boy he once was.

Ramsay has a quick, sharp sense of humour. He laughs at the sparse beginnings of his blond moustache. “I’m growing it for Movember,” he explains. Ramsay admits he is also prone to swearing. “I have a terrible case of infantry mouth,” he says.

A graduate of Loyola High School, Ramsay dropped out of CEGEP and enlisted in 2005 at the age of 19. He has been deployed twice — in Afghanistan in 2009, and in Ukraine in 2016.

Ramsay sees himself as a career soldier. Despite the challenges of military life, he says that it has given him opportunities he would never otherwise have had. He was part of the Canadian delegation during a 2016 address by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, and he travelled to the Arctic Circle last March as part of a sovereignty exercise.

I’ve prepared a list of questions for Ramsay. But it’s a rhetorical question that Ramsay poses — and his answer to it — that moves me most. “Why do we do this? I remain hopeful that by being there, we can make a difference. Force should be the last option. But sometimes, it’s a necessary option.”

What made you decide to enlist in the Canadian Army?

“It was inevitable. Both my grandfathers served in World War II. I only knew one of my grandfathers — John Ramsay. He had done armoured reconnaissance in France. I was always

fascinated by the military. My parents were very supportive. I've tried to go back to working civilian side. I worked as a business manager from 2013 to 2014. But I didn't have the same job satisfaction. In 2014, with the situation in Ukraine deteriorating and because I'm of Ukrainian descent, I felt the need to re-engage in the military and be in a position where I might be able to help."



Matthew Ramsay in combat uniform at the Black Watch Regiment on Bleury St. "The toughest part on the day-to-day level is dealing with monotony and spending a lot of time waiting for something to happen, he says". Pierre Obendrauf / Montreal Gazette

Where did you train?

"I trained as an infantry soldier at Valcartier, north of Quebec City. I learned field craft, which includes skills like navigation and movement in the field, as well as weapons handling and tactics. I enjoy precision activities that take practice. It's a weird Zen thing. It can be relaxing."

What, for you, is the toughest part of being a soldier?

"The toughest part on the day-to-day level is dealing with monotony and spending a lot of time waiting for something to happen. You need to be good at filling your time. I spent a lot of time

cleaning machine guns. And on deployment, when I had free time, I worked out and played video games.”

Did any of your buddies die during the war?

“On August 1, 2009, we got blown up. I was working with 2R22R — the Royal 22nd Regiment. I was sitting in the back of a LAV3 (a light-armoured vehicle) near Kandahar when an IED that was buried under the road exploded in front of our vehicle. We pulled up one hundred metres down the road, past the IED, to check for secondary devices. Two engineers in a vehicle behind us dismounted. Their names were Christian Bobbitt and Matthieu Allard.” Ramsay pauses here, checking to make sure that I have recorded both soldiers’ names and spelled them correctly. “They were killed by the secondary device. It happened right in front of me.”

How did you cope after you returned from battle?

“I was pretty angry for a while. It helped to speak to a social worker on the base in Kandahar. And I wrote about what happened in a letter home. That helped too. I had the odd symptom of what’s called a stress injury. I also had some survivor’s guilt. But most of that has dissipated over time. There’s good peer support and follow-up at the Black Watch. There’s a lot of buddy check. If you see your buddy isn’t doing so great, you ask about what’s going on. After 2009, I wanted to know what every loud noise was. I remember walking with friends and someone slammed a window shut. I wanted to know what the noise was.”

What does Remembrance Day mean to you?

“For me, Remembrance Day is a solemn day for remembrance and contemplation. I’ll be on parade at Place du Canada with my fellow soldiers from the Black Watch. I’ll be thinking of those who have given their lives to make a difference.”

By the numbers: Canadians who served

First World War, 1914-1918

Number of Canadians and Newfoundlanders who served: over 650,000

Number of Canadians and Newfoundlanders who died: over 68,000

Number of surviving veterans: none

Second World War, 1939-1945

Number of Canadians and Newfoundlanders who served: over 1 million

Number of Canadians and Newfoundlanders who died: over 47,000

Number of surviving veterans: As of March 2017, some 50,300 Second World War veterans were still alive. Their average age is 92.

Korean War, 1950-1953

Number of Canadians who served: over 26,791

Number of Canadians who died: 516

Number of surviving veterans: As of March 2017, some 7,700 Korean War veterans were still alive. Their average age is 85.

Afghanistan War, 2001-2014

Number of Canadians who served: over 40,000, many serving more than once.

Number of Canadians who died: 158

Source: Veterans Affairs Canada