

“Remembrance Day Reflection”  
REV. ELIZABETH CUNNINGHAM  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, November 10, 2019

As chaplain to the Royal Canadian Legion, I have been blessed with being able to know and accompany some of our veterans. Sargent William James Sawyer was one such wonderful man, who very generously let me read his journal of his experiences in the Second World War, and gave me permission to share his stories. Bill Sawyer died in 2008 at the age of 93. This is part of his experience of being a soldier. He served in Italy.

Bill would say that there were certainly periods of boredom as a soldier. The monotonous drills. The chores in the camp. But the in-between time, between the boredom and the action, was an unnerving time for all soldiers. He wrote in his Journal this account as his Unit was moving under cover of darkness: April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944 – We moved to Vanafo, in Italy. The Unit is in action on 5000 yards of difficult front in the area of Vallirotonda. The road into Vallirotonda is a nightmare. We have to travel in complete darkness. The supply convoy is lined up just around a bend in the road that is not visible to the enemy. The road winds around. There are cliffs above us and valleys below. They are very steep. The roads are very narrow, barely wide enough for a small truck. As soon as it is completely dark, we start out. Of course, no lights of any kind are allowed. Someone has put a white tape along the outside of the road, to go beyond that means immediate death. The valley must be hundreds of feet, straight down. We have taken our windshields out to prevent any possible reflections.

The Germans know we go in at night and he peppers the cliffs above us with mortar shells and machine-gun fire. The noise of the explosion and the flashes and the tracer bullets, and the falling rocks and debris from above us, are terrifying. We inch along, holding our breath. A man walks in front of each truck, we can hardly see him. He is there to yell at us if we get too close to the edge of the road. It takes about an hour to cover that particular section of road before we can get around another bend where we are out of the German’s fire.

Here is a similar experience of travelling along a difficult road. From the book called 15 Days, offering accounts of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan – Christine Blatchford writes about Corporal Ash Van Leeuwen, on August 5, 2006, in Kandahar – “From his vantage point in the turret with the C6, Corporal Van Leeuwen watched Ambush Alley – Highway 1 from the Panjwaii district to Kandahar city – stretch like a child during a growth spurt. “It started off being, like, two kilometres, and it grew to be fourteen kilometers long,” he says, “and you puckered, you didn’t sweat, and you didn’t breathe.” And then they’d arrive intact, and he’d be giddy with the loveliness before him.”

Bill Sawyer knew the sheer hell of war, and somehow also find humour in those moments.

From Sargent Sawyer’s Journal – May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1944 – my birthday.

May 19<sup>th</sup> – the order came to ‘dig in’. Roy Asmussen and I started to dig a slit-trench together. This is the usual way. Two guys would dig one trench and then a second. That way, there was one ready if some stuff started coming over.

In this particular instance, we were only half done when a German plane came over, flying very low, and dropping anti-personnel bombs. We saw him coming straight at us and the bombs were falling in a row and the explosions throwing up dirt and debris. We jumped into our half finished slit-trench, it was only about two feet deep. We sat on the bottom facing each other with our heads bent forward as far as they would go. Our tin hats were hitting each other because we were shaking and the hats made a noise all of their own. At that time, we were very scared. The nearest one landed about 20 feet away. We were showered by dirt and small stones but we were not hurt. No one was hurt and this was a small miracle because we were in a very concentrated area and not yet fully ‘dug in’. Later Roy and I had a good laugh when we thought back to the way our tin hats were banging together and we were swearing at the German.”

In Sargent Sawyer’s ‘Forward’ to his memoir, he writes, “This Journal is a recording of a five-year piece of my life that I thought would never end and was being wasted. But now, I have no regrets. The experience, the comradeship, the tolerance of others I only gained by going through certain terrifying moments together ... Mostly, I remember the dust, the noise of our own artillery shells passing overhead and the German shells crashing along side of the road. I remember the Italian refugees streaming out of their villages and heading for the hills.

Most of all while I was typing this journal, I kept thinking of all the friends I made in the New Westminster Regiment, and how many of them were killed. I will remember them all. Sargent Sawyer, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1993.

By reading war accounts like the one that Sargent Sawyer shared with his family and friends, we open a place within our hearts to let the ‘realness’ of war be present. By shedding light on the terrible evil that is war, it asks us to be part of the path towards peace in the midst of so much horrific death and destruction.

The prophet Micah offered the words that continue to inspire so many, as you, as I, wonder how to move into a world where war still has not been given its last rites. “O mortal, what is good?” And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice. And to love kindness. And to walk humbly with your God.

Amen.