

When I was in high school, I lived in a small village on the west end of the island of Montreal called Ste. Anne de Bellevue. Ste Anne's history began as a small trading post built where the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers met and within a few years, the inhabitants had added three taverns and a church. Beyond Ste. Anne's lay the vast hunting and trapping grounds for the courier du bois who went into the wilderness in search of furs for the Northwest Trading Company and the Hudson's Bay Company and was either the first or the last outpost of civilization depending on which way you were going – the church was there to nourish the soul and the taverns....well, the taverns..

Among the institutions in the village when I lived there was a large hospital which cared for veterans from the first and second world wars and Korea and I used to volunteer on Friday nights there – I would visit the soldiers, help them in any way I could and I suppose just be present with them. These vets ranged in age from their thirties to their seventies and they all had either physical or emotional disabilities brought about

by their experiences in the heart of darkness we call WAR. The most tragic ones were those who, while physically whole, suffered from the debilitating effects of PTSD which we then called Shell Shock. Many drifted in and out of their memories and were monitored all the times because they were prone to sudden and sometimes violent outbursts through no fault of their own.

I was particularly close to a young man who had been caught in the D-Day moment and who had survived only to replay those moments on the beach over and over again. Sometimes Will would remember after a panic attack and apologize and sometimes he couldn't fathom what had happened and it was heart-breaking to say the least. One night he told me of his life in the darkest moments and I returned to my nice, safe, peaceful home filled with deep sorrow for what had happened to him. Alone in my room, I wrote this out and even though it is almost sixty years since I put poem to paper, this is what I said:

Day breaks with all the hope of Summer before it.

The green-coloured, grey-hatted men,

line up like toy soldiers set for battle

joggle and jiggle from foot to foot,

ready or not to march into God only knew what.

Black-vested priest, raising his hand in hope,

names the Trinity, wishes them well

and turns away, knowing, knowing...

Five pipers, resplendid in skirls and swirls and colours

strip the dawn with painful cries;

the order sent, the line moves off

as the women of the village creep furtively

through the shattered remains of what once was

in search of milk or bread or...anything

while the pipes ply an ancient air of glorious battles

and hope for the future.

In the dusk,

after the battle has died,

ragged corpses lay in the sand,

lifeblood mingling with the rising tide,

washing from them the terror and the pain

as four pipers play a lament for those

whose future lies only in the hands of God,

and the remnant slough off to be offered bread and smokes.

Crack of bullet, tremor of cannon, dullness of death

awake those who sang their symphony of agony

through the sleepless night

and three pipes call all to reveillie

as God weeps and baptizes the living and the dead.

The eyes of War look out as more are surprised and fall twisted

towards the enemy line where as many lie

as on their side of the insanity.

For those who fall, there is no epilogue, no encore, no eulogy...

Noon sky darkens with the shadows of death

raining from above as shrapnel bursts like mosquitos

as the living march while the two play on and on and on...

Their flag, now shredded and bloodied, hangs her head

and acknowledges the blackened field of honour

as the sun sets upon the sea

that once led home

and

one piper greets the rest and solitude of night

and

then

goes

out,

leaving us to remember

the singers

and the song.

And we will remember...