

Armistice Day (as we used to call it)
By Geoff Wood

Some time ago I was excited to discover my great, great granduncle, Henry Wood, was at the Battle of Gettysburg. At age forty-eight he had joined up with the 99th Pennsylvania Infantry as a private. His fourteen-year-old son, Henry Jr., joined up also - as a fifer. Henry Jr. remained with the regiment until January, 1863, when he was discharged because (as his records state): "He enlisted as a fifer but he couldn't fife." The older Henry went on to see action with the Third Corps at Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, where on the second day he fought amid the carnage of Devil's Den and on the next day stood in reserve fifty yards from that famous stone wall, breached momentarily by Pickett's Charge.

Now why should I be excited over that? Why should I value having been somehow present at a great battle by way of a blood relative? Or for that matter, why should I still feel a thrill when I see a rerun of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* or of *The Fighting 69th* - I recall as a boy sitting through that latter film three times of an afternoon and then going home, my ears still ringing with the strains of *Garry Owen*. Or why am I moved when someone gives me an artificial red poppy, reminding me of that forgotten poem: *In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row, . . .*

I am a peaceful person. As a Christian and a rational person I am opposed to war as a solution to problems. I certainly don't want to see my son go to war. And yet I can't deny the excitement I feel when confronted by the image of that lad in *The Red Badge of Courage* picking up a tattered flag and shouting to his hesitant companions, "Come on! Come on!" Is it all a symptom of something barbaric lingering within my otherwise civilized breast? I like to think it's perhaps envy, the envy people trapped in some comfortable, undemanding routine feel toward the unselfish heroism that so often emerges within the crucible of war - where suddenly individuals exhibit what Lincoln called that last full measure of devotion.

I like to think that's what moves me when I hear *Garry Owen* and makes me proud to know my great, great granduncle showed up for roll call at Gettysburg. It's not war. Literal warfare may usurp our capacity for heroism to apply it to aims unworthy of it. When all the while God has planted this nobility within us to fight the good fight, to win the greater battle of building a more humane world by no less heroic, passionate acts of human service, art, eloquence, caring! Like the commitment a spouse must make to see to the increasingly demanding needs of a partner's incurable ills.

So on Armistice Day I thank my great, great granduncle and the men of the 99th and those who lie in Flanders fields and Normandy and the Ardennes and the vast Pacific and our own town's Veterans' resting place - for an example of a heroism we all need to manifest beyond the confines of war. For in their heart of hearts I know all veterans must agree with Wilfred Owen, who died in combat just a few days before November 11th, 1918:

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death; . . . / . . . We chorused when he sang aloft; / We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe . . . // . . . We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum . . . / . . . We laughed, knowing that better men would come, / And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags / He wars on Death - for lives; not men - for flags.