

& Soldier

friend lost at the hands of modern war

"The Army's there so civilian aid agencies can get in there," Anna says, recounting Joel's philosophy. "The mission is something important for not just Afghanistan, but for Canada. By helping ensure international security, we are protecting our own nation."

I can't ask Joel if he thinks his death was worth it, but he went courageously to Afghanistan, knowing full well what he might be missing if he didn't come home. Porlier, in the same situation, feels similar to Joel in rationalizing his assignment.

"I too have known friends who have died while serving overseas, and I know that this is not an easy thing to experience. In saying that, I know why I am going to Afghanistan; I have my reasons, and I am fully aware of the consequences. If something were to happen to me [...], the last thing that I would want is to have Canadian troops pull out of the country. I feel that by us being in Afghanistan, we are bringing a much-needed stability to the region and assisting Afghans [to] build a better future for themselves. One question that I ask myself is, 'Is my life more valuable than any other?' [...] If my life helps others to bring stability and peace to a region, then yes, it was worth it."

Joel left with something of a devil-may-care attitude. He was excited about the mission and hid any trepidation well. But he wasn't the everyman of the Canadian military of World Wars I and II. Then, the average soldier was a civilian called upon in a time of national emergency, and most Canadians could better identify with a soldier's family because they too had a relative in the Forces. Today, our military is much smaller and our nation much bigger.

The connection seems to be weaker in that regard, but it's also stronger because Joel's face is everywhere, his story widely told. The level of publication of Joel as an individual casualty is much higher than in the past, and it's the faces of him and his fallen comrades—along with their grieving families—that serve as the memorials for this war.

On 11 November, Sherry Clark, Joel's mother, will be at the Butterdome to lay a wreath on behalf of Silver Cross mothers. The Silver Cross is an award, established during the First World War, given to mothers and widows of fallen soldiers. Perhaps because her grandfather served in World War II, Sherry has always believed in the importance of Remembrance Day, and it was a mindset she instilled in her children.

"[Joel] always thought that [it] was very important, and he was always respectful, even when I was dragging [all my children there]."

His mind never changed. "Of all the things they make us do in the Army, it's the one thing we all know is important," he told her at this time last year.

"I think it's really important, despite politics, that we remember our fallen soldiers," Sherry says. She doesn't want anyone to use her son's casket as a soapbox for political ends.

Sherry sees Remembrance Day as a historically significant recognition of Canada's development.

"We are lucky as Canadians, and the reason we have everything we have is because of all the sacrifices of those who came before us."

It's these previous generations, who died by the thousands far from home, who bequeathed to us a means of national mourning. It's reality check—a reminder that success doesn't come easily—and it's a sentiment that Porlier agrees with.

"I will [...] never forget the sacrifices that our and many other nations' soldiers have made so that I can experience the freedoms that I have today," he says.

Now, Sherry and her family are coming to terms with the sacrifice of their son and brother. Life is busy for all of us, she says, "But when we need to, we take the time to get together and talk."

One of her solaces has been tending Joel's grave in the Glenwood cemetery.

"I go to visit Joel at the cemetery every day—I find it comforting to be there. I made sure he had the nicest grass, despite the heat in July. I watered the grass every single day, and it's still green [as of the end of October]."

Sherry is one of only a very few mothers to have her son's remains repatriated. Throughout most of Canada's wars, soldiers were left where they fell. The existence of Remembrance Day, Canada's monuments at home and overseas, and even the poppy owe their creation to Canadians who searched for a non-traditional way of dealing with grief. Having something to do helps, Sherry explains.

"I felt [tending his grass] was giving honour to Joel—still being a mom. There's not a lot that I can do, and it does provide comfort."

As a memorial at the cemetery, she's placed two three-foot stones that the family has engraved.

"Maybe they're a bit over the top for some people, but we felt we needed to give Joel messages," she explains. Next year, they're going to plant a tree behind them, something that will create what she calls a living memory.

Joel's friends, meanwhile, are finding their own means of remembrance. After he died, his sister Marcie created a Facebook group for him, which hundreds have joined. Remembrance Day may have been passed to us from our ancestors, but through our own remembrance of those like Pte Wiebe, it's becoming part of our generation too.

Check out our 29 November issue for our profile of Porlier and his upcoming tour of duty in Afghanistan.



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Joel's mother

