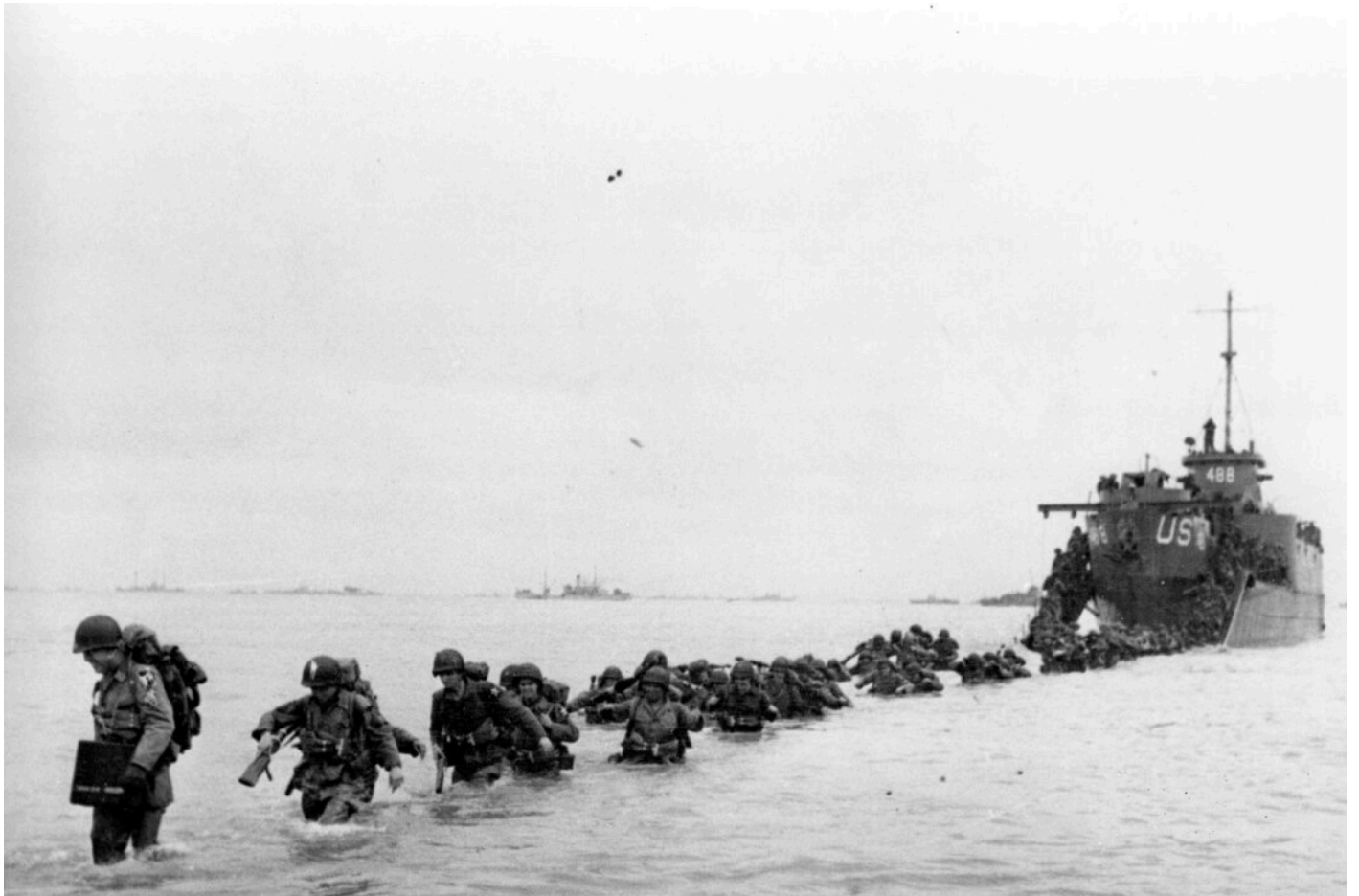


John Robson: As They Were Ready to Serve, So We Must Be

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U.S. reinforcements wade to shore in Normandy from a landing craft in the days following D-Day and the Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France, in June 1944 during World War II. Bert Brandt/Pool via AP



By John Robson

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Commentary

When I was a kid, Remembrance Day was a widely observed tribute to a bygone era, and to people who had shown a particular kind of virtue and dedication we wouldn't be needing any more. It was heartfelt, including because virtue and dedication generally were still needed. But war? All gone.

I realize Francis Fukuyama didn't proclaim the end of history until 1989. But the still-hale veterans of World War I who showed up in my youth, and of World War II who were still showing up until quite

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recently, had done what they did, suffered what they did, and left

behind so many comrades because of a world in which conquest by tyrants was still the grave peril it had been from time immemorial,

and democracies had been caught napping as it loomed. By the 1960s



was supposedly no longer so (as in 1921 according to Canada's Prime Minister Arthur Meighan.)



This notion was driven by some idealism about the siblinghood of

person, and some hard-headedness about vigilance and the American



nuclear umbrella. (And a bit the British and, we hoped, the French.)

As John Thompson, then with the Mackenzie Institute, commented in

2008 about the post-World War II Pax Americana, though he came from a military family, at least if you lived in the West, "We've had two entire generations of people who haven't heard what a thousand artillery pieces lined up wheel to wheel can sound like when the barrage begins." Nor supposedly would we again.

Um. I think. Of course, war itself was never banished. Large parts of the world were torn by conflicts as ugly in their execution, in every way, as they were ugly in their motivation. But in a strange way, and despite certain proxy conflicts from Korea to Vietnam that did engage the West and in the former case Canada, it seemed to be true that we really could ignore them in ways that we had wrongly thought we could ignore trouble in the Balkans and Central Europe in the 1900s or 1930s.

What was the Belgian Congo to us, or Biafra, except as a humanitarian issue? No possible result of such a war could threaten Canada. If we went anywhere, even the Middle East, it was as Blue Berets,

disinterested, universally loved, and safe. And to a very real degree, the gratitude we showed veterans, and the war dead, was for putting a permanent end for us to the kind of world much of humanity still lived in.

Today it does not feel that way. And not only because the war in Ukraine has shown us that war in the 21st century is, to a surprising degree, like war in the 20th, with artillery shells the critical logistical factor. Because there's war in Europe, and the Middle East, and maybe in Asia, and, um, who knows?

Our readiness is, of course, pathetic, as in 1914 and 1939. And by "us" I mean every Western nation, even including now, I fear, the United States. But definitely Canada. Ready aye unready. And how.

Thus, another sombre reflection is that when war came all the same twice in a quarter of a century back then, on a massive scale, Canadians flocked to the colours without military experience but with, as they quickly showed, great military aptitude. In those days, Robert Stead could write: "Loud is the boast of the despot, clanking his nations in arms,/ But beware of a peace-loving people when they sweep from their forests and farms." But is it still so?

"Where do we get such men?" Dwight Eisenhower marvelled of the citizen-soldiers who materialized by the millions as if from nowhere in the United States after Pearl Harbor. But today, the U.S. must reject many of those who do volunteer as unfit; playing first-person shooter games in your basement doesn't build physical or mental strength. And while in days of yore there were legitimate questions whether our elites could defend Canada, never before have we wondered if they wanted to.

Today our morale is sapped by "luxury beliefs," often deeply anti-Western, that make us even less able to respond than mere complacency had done a century ago. Our Governor General, for instance, began this year's "Presentation of the First Poppy" [by saying](#) "We are gathered today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people."

Lest we forget, we say each November 11. And rightly the main thing we remember is that they gave all their tomorrows for our today, which ought to keep us from petty grievances much of the time. A living, loving, breathing human went suddenly, or slowly, from full humanity to a grisly corpse. But we should also remember that as they were ready to serve, so we must be, not just rhetorically or emotionally but really.

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John Robson

Author

John Robson is a documentary filmmaker, National Post columnist, contributing editor to the Dorchester Review, and executive director of the Climate Discussion Nexus. His most recent documentary is “The Environment: A True Story.”

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