

If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep!

On May 2, 1915, Canadian officer and hospital surgeon, John McCrae, presided over the graveside funeral service of a personal friend, Alexis “Lex” Helmer, a former student at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Helmer died in combat during World War I from a direct hit by a German artillery shell while serving at Ypres, Belgium, a region of western Flanders. He was literally blown to pieces by the explosion, so much so that his body parts had to be gathered by his comrades and buried in a burlap sack. Lex Helmer was 22 years old.

The following day John McCrae sat on the rear stoop of a Canadian field ambulance and looked out across the makeshift cemetery of thousands of white crosses marking the graves of his beloved fallen comrades. He observed that red poppy flowers were popping up between the rows of crosses where the ground had been disturbed by the violence of war. Overwhelmed by melancholy, John McCrae wrote a poem that day expressing his profound sadness over the loss of so many brave young men who had given their lives fighting for their country. The poem is entitled “Flanders Fields.”

In Flanders Fields, the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
that marks our place, and in the sky
the larks, still bravely singing, fly.
Scarce was heard amidst the guns below.

We are the dead; short days ago
we lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
We loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
the torch; be ours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die,
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.

After reviewing the poem, McCrae did not like it and he discarded the scrape of paper on which he had written it into a cluttered corner of the hospital. A few days later, the discarded poem was found and retrieved by a hospital nurse, Clare Gass, who persuaded McCrae to submit it for publication.

The poem was first published by Punch Magazine on October 30, 1915. It quickly became popular after being promoted by American professor and humanitarian, Moina Michael, who wrote and published an equally passionate response in her 1918 poem entitled “*We Shall Keep The Faith.*” The Red Poppy flower soon became the international symbol of remembrance of those who died

in World War I. The Buddy Poppy flower was adopted by the American Legion and the VFW in the early 1920s as the official flower to memorialize ALL soldiers who died in ALL wars.

Red Poppy wearers avow never to forget our fallen soldiers. McCrae's poem speaks in the voice of the dead. His words declare the sacrifice of the dead. They issue a challenge for the living "to carry the torch tossed to them by the fallen comrades." Their words of the dead declare, "*If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep!*" The general narrative of McCrae's poem contrasts the live, colorful poppies growing between the graves of the dead and the birds (the larks) singing cheerily high in the sky with the reality of the suffering, the carnage and the death all around them.

The last Monday of May each year has been officially declared by our government as Memorial Day, a day for remembering and honoring all who have died while serving in uniform. This year's Memorial Day Presentation will take place on Monday, May 25, 2026, beginning at 10:00 A.M. at the Veteran's Memorial Monument, located across from the Atmore Fire Department. The program is sponsored and conducted by Atmore's VFW Post 7016 and American Legion Post 90. All patriots are invited and encouraged to attend, to wear a Buddy Poppy flower on your lapel in remembrance of those whose names are inscribed on the Monument. Buddy Poppies will be available and free to all who attend. Your donations are appreciated, but are not required. All Buddy Poppy donations are set aside exclusively for the relief of veterans and their families in distress.

Lloyd Albritton is a U. S. Marine Corps veteran who served overseas in the Vietnam War. He is the Commander of Atmore's VFW Post 7016. Veterans interested in joining the VFW may call or text Lloyd at (850)281-3233 or email him at cmd@vfw7016.org for more information. Visit our post website at www.vfw7016.org to join, make a donation or purchase a ticket in our great raffles.