

Sea of poppies in London spurred reflection



Poppies

Getty Images

British Prime Minister David Cameron and his wife Samantha Cameron visit the Tower of London Saturday where they each lay a poppy at the art installation 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' by artist Paul Cummins.



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By Wendy Lindsay

"In Flanders's fields the poppies blow,

Between the crosses row on row,

That mark our place..."

— Guelph physician, soldier and poet, John McCrae

It was John McCrae's 1915 poem, "In Flanders Fields," recounting the poppies growing on the First World War battlefields, that inspired the red remembrance poppies worn in Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and many other Commonwealth countries.

And it was also McCrae's poem, along with a letter written by a British soldier referring to "The blood-swept lands and the sea of red ..." that motivated Derbyshire artist Paul Cummins to create a massive, memorial piece of public art.

Today, "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red" has become one of the most successful and widely viewed public art installations in the world, and we were there to view it.

This year, during the centennial of the start of the First World War, the moat around the Tower of London has been transformed into an immense field of giant ceramic red poppies on metal stems of varying heights. Poppies on wires even cascade from windows into the moat.

Since June, volunteers in red T-shirts have been planting this field of poppies, one poppy at a time. You may have seen photos in magazines or on TV, when royalty and other dignitaries have visited the site. But absolutely nothing can compare to the tremendous emotional impact of actually being there in person.

My husband and I made our way to the Tower of London in October when the crowds along the metal fence were only two or three deep. From what we've seen on TV, folks are now lined up six to eight deep to get a glimpse, and the emotional impact has intensified with the arrival of Remembrance Day.

Viewing the installation hits you on so many levels.

First is the numbers. Society has become inured to large numbers — Adele's songs make her \$187,000 a day, and Justin Bieber makes \$16 million a year. We've become numbed by numbers.

On Remembrance Day today, there will be 888,246 poppies planted in the moat — each one representing a Commonwealth soldier lost in the First World War.

Looking at the sea of poppies, you suddenly have a sense of how many people that really is. You can tell when the impact hits fellow spectators by the little gasp or a tear slowly trickling down their cheek.

There was a shared camaraderie among the group of us looking down into the poppy-filled moat. Strangers began talking together, sharing memories, recounting war stories they'd been told. The lady on my right, hailing from the British Midlands judging by her accent, began telling me about her mother who had lost all four of her brothers in the First World War.

I suddenly found myself telling her about my mother's cousin Harold, who had so wanted to join up, like his older brothers, that he lied about his age. Mother assumes he didn't really fool anyone, because Harold never saw action and was assigned as a stretcher bearer. It must have been dreadful and left a lasting impression on him.

Back in the 1980s when we went to visit the aging Harold, I had been warned by relatives not to wear red nail polish — he couldn't stand it and it made him physically sick. There will be three poppies planted for Harold's brothers and one for Uncle Lenard.

It felt like an international community that had come together that day last month. Two ladies in saris sat on the steps nearby, seemingly transfixed, staring at the sea of red. A tall British fellow told us about his friend, a volunteer planter, who had been overcome with emotion when a poppy

she was planting fell over and she ran to fix it, recognizing it was more than a poppy, because it represented a life.

A couple from the Caribbean told us they had made a point of coming all the way to London on their European trip just to pay respects to his grandfather's memory. Another man set up an expensive looking large-format camera on a tripod and threw a large hood over his head to block the light as he worked away snapping photos. But soon he pulled his head out and fumbled in his pockets — searching for a filter or another lens, I assumed — until I saw he now clutched a tissue and was drying the tears running down his cheeks.

Just standing there, coming from John McCrae's hometown and being part of the shared remembrance experience, is something we will never forget.

Wendy Lindsay is a Guelph freelance writer.