

# Traditions, Toasts, Sayings

~ and ~

## Origins of Superstitions

### Originating during "The Great War" (and a few earlier)

#### Historical Background:

With Armistice Day now rapidly approaching, it may well be the time to dig back in my ancient files and resurrect some of the trivia we used to post on the page a couple of years back. The page wasn't so crowded then, and we had a lot of contributors to our trivia section. A change of servers essentially wiped out my collection of trivia, but I figure it might be fun to try this again.

Virtually everyone knows the origin of Armistice Day when "The Great War" ended on the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. This was an occasion celebrated by all the allies (I'm sure the Central Powers also breathed a sigh of relief). Armistice Day (in the United States) received its official name in 1926, and was declared a National Holiday in 1938 and until 1954, the name stuck.

Because WWII also contributed 400,000 more honored dead, and the exact cessation of hostilities was divided between two different theaters of war, it was difficult to pinpoint a specific day to honor the WWII Veterans. A proposal was made to change the name of Armistice Day to Veterans Day, but the congressional wheels grind slowly. On November 11<sup>th</sup> of 1954, the Korean War, having been essentially ended by the peace talks at Panmunjom in July of 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill making the 11th of November the official day honoring ALL U.S. Veterans.

In 1968, President Johnson decided to "diddle with history" and to make Veteran's Day a long weekend for at least government workers (many of whom had not even served their country). His scheme changed the celebration of Veteran's Day to the 4th Monday in October. This was not greeted by universal acceptance or good humor, as the 11<sup>th</sup> of November had become a sacred historical landmark.

The Marines were particularly unhappy as the Marine Corps Birthday is the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, and the 11<sup>th</sup> traditionally gave them a day off after the rather spirited celebrations that traditionally occur on the 10<sup>th</sup>. It seems that the rest of the country agreed with them (with perhaps slightly different motivation and rationale), and Veteran's Day was changed back to 11 November, appropriately enough on November 11<sup>th</sup> 1978. The Marines breathed a tremendous sigh of relief.

I personally have no great love for the designation of the 11<sup>th</sup> to honor **ALL** Veterans on a single day, I will always think of the 11<sup>th</sup> as Armistice Day (I'm a history buff). I personally want a day honoring the cessation of the hostilities in Vietnam separate and apart from the

generic Veterans Day. The question is, which day to pick? Perhaps we'll have to wait until Jane Fonda strangles on an allegorical male sexual appendage attached to one of her Communist Buddies? Hummm... We can only hope!

Canada and England also refer to Armistice Day as Remembrance Day which also honors the Dead of the Commonwealth not only in WWI but all wars. Poppies are traditionally sold to benefit the surviving veterans of past wars, and in England, the streets are literally filled with individuals selling paper poppies. The Poppy is a tradition stemming from a WWI poem called "In Flanders Field" written by a Canadian Surgeon, after the battle of Ypres. Major John McCrae was also a veteran of the Boer War as well as "The Great War." The gallant Major McCrae also "bought the legendary farm" not long after penning his famous lines.

### **In Flanders Fields**

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow*

*Between the crosses, row on row,*

*That mark our place; and in the sky*

*The larks, still bravely singing, fly*

*Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago*

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,*

*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 yours to hold it high.*

*If ye break faith with us who die*

*We shall not sleep, though poppies grow ...In Flanders fields.*

**~ Major John McCrae ~**

The poppy remains one of the most poignant reminders of the Allied sacrifices of the Great War (most specifically the Canadians and the English). I spent November 11<sup>th</sup> in England a few years back, and it appeared that all the British Veterans wore their respective (former) military headgear on that day, even with three piece suits – I noted several individuals proudly attired in the Red Berets of the British Airborne or the Green Beret of the Royal Marines... I was impressed with their patriotism, rather refreshing after witnessing our

youth with pigtails burning the American Flag and throwing phony medals over the fence at the White House, during the late fracas in Southeast Asia.

### **Superstitions with their Origins in “The Great War”:**

One of the first that comes to mind is that it's bad luck to have three cigarettes lit on a single match. It seems that keeping a match burning long enough to light three cigarettes was just long enough for a sniper to get a definite fix on your location. Just about the time I figured out the three on a match saying, someone chimed in and said that it had actually originated in the Boer War. This is entirely possible since the Boers were noted marksmen and often picked off a lone British Soldier standing in the open. The British complained that the Boers weren't fighting fair as they were, for the most part, wearing beards that made them difficult to pick out in the tree lines – Hummm, maybe there's a lesson here somewhere. I can't vouch for the Boer War connection of three on a match as I was in Cuba at the time, hee, hee, hee...

One individual (from the Boer War) pointed out that it was hazardous to your health to stand next to white rocks and brought to mind the story of Herbert McBride (author of “A Rifleman Went to War”) and his sniping efforts with the British during WWI. McBride was a former U.S. National Guard Captain who had served in a Gatling Gun outfit prior to the turn of the century. He was an old competitive rifle shooter and had fired on several teams at Camp Perry. His adventures in the gold rush in Alaska had kept him from making the Spanish American War, and the Canadians wouldn't allow him to enlist for the Boer War because he wasn't a Canadian citizen. When prospects for an immediate war fizzled out in 1914 when President Wilson failed to follow up on the unpleasantness at Vera Cruz, McBride joined the Canadian Army who wasn't too choosy by the time WWI came along. All this is simply a lead in to our superstitions and cautions from WWI. McBride's book is well worth reading and as I recall can be bought through the NRA... Now back to the story...

It seems that McBride (and his fellow snipers) found that shooting at cans and boxes on the top of enemy trenches was counter productive and could in fact, be hazardous to your health... Snipers just naturally like to check their zero when covering a wide area of possible targets. Odd rocks (as in the story of the Boer War) were very attractive, but the enemy, being smarter than the average fox, figured out that by judiciously placing boxes or cans on top of the trench line, the snipers could be induced to check their zero. If the box or can was marked “just so”, it could be accurately relocated on top of the trench if a sniper shot it off. By simply using a straight stick, the “snipees” could use the bullet hole to (more or less) accurately locate their antagonist. Needless to say, the sniping community took great care to leave the tempting cans and boxes without the telltale holes that would give away their position...

### **Toasts:**

Where did the origin of the word “Toast” come from? Strangely enough it did indeed come from the word “toast” (or burned bread). Romans sometimes added burned bread to lesser-quality wine to reduce the acidity and make it more palatable. The Latin, “tostus,” which means toasted or parched, became synonymous with the drink. Ha! Gotcha' on that one I'll bet! Or perhaps more to the point, a warrior's toast! At the full moon, Viking priests toasted their chief god Odin using the skull of a fallen foe as a cup. Some say this is the

derivation of the Scandinavian toast, "Skoal (Skull?)." ...And you gents wondered why I became a "non-practicing Odinist?" heh, heh, heh... Now for WWI –

The saying when making the toast "Here's mud in your eye" DID in fact originate during the War to End All Wars. In of itself, it would seem to be meaningless unless you had spent literally years in the mud of the stagnated WWI trench warfare... The toast was a bit of "graveyard humor" that is so common amongst frontline combat troops. That toast is closely akin to the old British Regimental Toast – "Here's to the next one to die!"... Not very encouraging, but you've gotta' have been there as the saying goes! The toast – "Here's Mud in Your Eye" was an allusion to having mud shoveled in your face (similar to the saying of being patted in the face with a spade) when you "went west", the WWI saying for "buying the farm".

...So on November the 11<sup>th</sup> this year, if you go to the VFW, American Legion, Canadian and Australian Legion, or just plain celebrate Armistice Day at home, the next time you hoist one to fallen comrades, (or absent comrades – the saying varies, but the intent is the same) remember with a bit of respect the toast "Here's Mud in Your Eye" was one made by those who helped win the War to End all Wars... They (as we) were (and are) in the company of gallant gentlemen!

Semper Fidelis

~ **ROC** ~

### **Addendum;**

As in most wars, libations usually become favorites based on the experiences of the returning fighting men. A couple that seem to have survived the ages are the Cuba Libré (rum and coke with a twist of lime), and the French 75 (variations of Cognac mixed with Champagne and a bit of lemon juice to taste). What do you suppose will be written in future volumes on our late war in the jungles of Southeast Asia as our favorite drink? **Ba-me-bah** (pardon the spelling, but I am referring of course to that ubiquitous [usually] warm bottle of beer with a tiger on the label, purveyed in the villes by little oriental girls with black pajamas - this stuff was also known as "Tiger Urine")? Not too bad after you used an old sock to strain it through to to make sure you weren't ingesting ground-glass that sometimes found its way into the bottom of the bottle! Heh, heh, heh...