



Hidden Messages of the Red Flanders Poppy

**“If you see a poppy
And if it nods its head
Walk softly,
Go around it,
For it marks a soldier’s bed”
(Anonymous)**

Flight Sergeant Lesley “Oxo” Abrahams, a South African veteran of WWII, learnt about the “poppy language” from his father-in-law, Hugo van Niekerk, who was a WWI veteran. He explained the secrets to me, his niece.

The red poppy is internationally accepted as the symbol of remembrance. But many uninformed people want to know ‘what?’ exactly ‘what?’ is to be remembered. The answer is: **One remembers the soldiers and veterans who fought in ‘the wars of their generation’.**

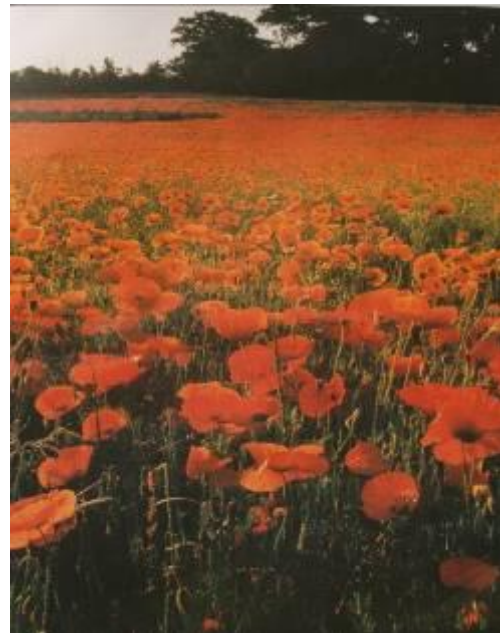
The idea started soon after the tragedy of World War I (1914 – 1918) and was brought to the attention of the general public by a poem written by John McCrae, himself a Canadian soldier and doctor who fought and died in World War I:

**“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,
Lived 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.”**

(John McCrae)



If you look at a patch of poppies, keeping the memory of fighting soldiers, sailors, airmen as well as veterans in mind, you will uncover the following hidden messages from Mother Nature herself. Take note that the photographs of the poppies below were taken in my garden, where they bloomed and grew:



The four delicate red petals that form the open face of the Flanders poppy symbolizes the four years, 1914 – 1918 during which millions of lives were lost, in WW1. If there are no black markings on the petals, it represents the millions of fighting men who returned unscathed.



A blood red poppy with a black cross at the centre signifies a soldier, sailor or airman who 'fell' (he was killed or drowned).



A red poppy with only half a black cross passing through the centre indicates a soldier who was wounded.



A rather scarce poppy with only a quarter of a black cross showing on a single petal, represents a soldier who was one of the 'walking wounded' (he had a light injury).



A white poppy growing amongst a patch of red poppies OR a red poppy displaying pale marks on the face of the bloom, reminds the onlooker of the 'boy soldiers, sailors and pilots', under the age of 18 years, who lied about their age so that they could enlist. The white markings can be seen around the edge or on the black cross at the centre of the bloom.



Should a purple poppy show its face amongst a patch of red Flanders poppies, some people consider it a reminder of the animals that were victims of war i.e. War horses, donkeys, mules, dogs and carrier pigeons also served, suffered and died as victims of war.



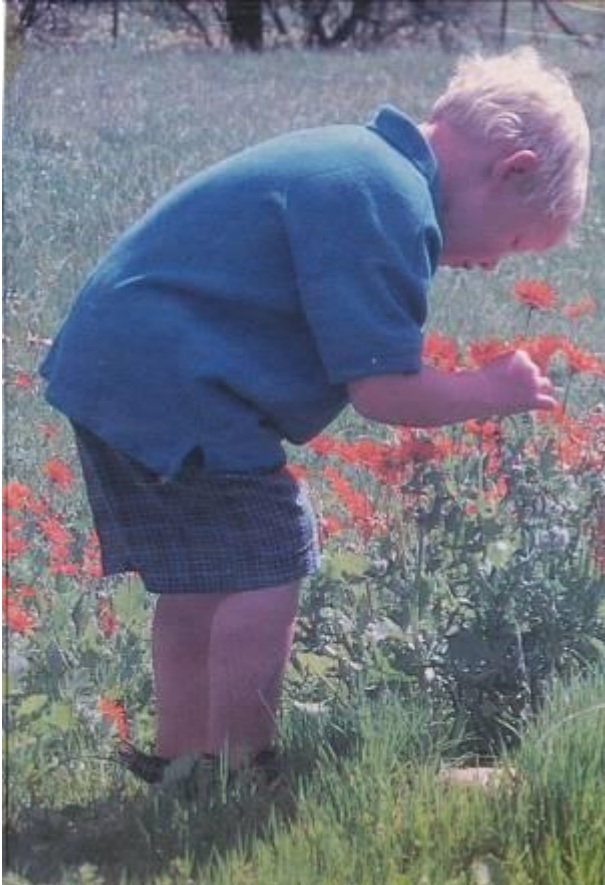
A red poppy as dishevelled as this one, reminds us of the many soldiers who suffered psychological damage known as Shell Shock, Battle Fatigue or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).



This poppy, with multiple black markings, is a reminder of the many sets of brothers who died while serving in WWI.

Heart-sore stories are: The sorrow and loneliness of the widow of the late Mr. J.A. Barnton of Pretoria, South Africa can only be imagined. Both her sons Vivian Roland (30) and Roy Cuthbert (28) fell on the same day, 16 July 1916, during the Battle of Delville Wood. Both have no known graves. Their names are, however, recorded on the Thiepval Memorial. Mrs. Elizabeth Davies of St. Helens in England, lost 5 sons. Four were killed on active service and the 5th son, died at home, a victim of Shell Shock. Mr. Frederick Smith and his wife Maggie from Yongala, Australia lost six of their seven sons in different battles during the Great War. Seeing a bright red poppy with multiple markings takes on a totally different meaning when one realizes that literally thousands of families were sadly affected by the loss of brothers during World War 1.

One often sees people wearing a red poppy emblem close to the date of 11 November when Armistice Day (also known as Poppy Day) is remembered. A '2 Minute Silent Pause' is observed at 11:00 on the 11th day of the 11th month (November) because the guns of World War I (Also known as The Great War) stopped firing at that time. An armistice had been declared and observed between the opposing nations. Millions of soldiers, sailors and airmen had died on both sides.



The Inquisitive Mind of a Child.

Why are they selling poppies Mummy?

Selling poppies in town today?

The poppies, child, are flowers of love

For the men who marched away.

But, why have they chosen a poppy,

Mummy?

Why not a beautiful rose?

Because my child, men fought and died

In fields where the poppies grow.

But why are the poppies so red Mummy?

Red is the colour of blood, my child,

The blood our soldiers shed.

The heart of the poppy is black, Mummy,

Why does it have to be black?

Black my child, is the symbol of grief

For the men who never came back.

But, why Mummy, are you crying so?

Your tears are giving you pain.

My tears are my fears for you my child

For the world is FORGETTING AGAIN.

(John F. Wilcocks)

Plant red poppy seed, Flanders poppy seeds, also known as corn poppies, in your garden or flower box. They will grow and blossom to remind you of the stories told by veterans. You will have a 'garden story book' in your own garden to discuss with and show to your family, as well as youngsters, friends and visitors. The proof will be there close at hand to show and even pick. Your 'poppy talk' will become a talking point because so few people know the significance and meaning of the black and white markings to be seen at the centre on the open face of a bright red Flanders poppy.

If you remembered to plant red Flanders poppies in your garden in Spring (August/September in South Africa), you will be able to walk in your own private garden to stop at 11:00 for 2 minutes on 11 November and think about war and peace as well as freedom and your own personal contributions.

P.S Harvest your own seeds from the yellowish, dry pods that develop when the red petals fall off so that you can sow them again in the spring of the next year to blossom and spread their hidden stories by the next November. Store the dry seed in an envelope, glass bottle or paper bag rather than a plastic container.



Another idea is to press a poppy between the pages of an old book.

In December 2013 a dry, pressed poppy once picked and pressed by a 17 year old boy-soldier Private Cecil Roughton, after surviving the Battle of Arras (1916), was auctioned and fetched £6,200. It was bought by the London-based jewellers Hancocks, who are famous for still being the makers of the highest military award of valour, The Victoria Cross. (Daily Echo - 9 December 2013.)

Another Poppy Poem, for sailors, was written by Eileen Mahoney aged 90 years young:

**In ocean wastes no poppies blow,
No crosses stand in ordered row,
... There young hearts sleep... beneath the waves...
The spirited, the good, the brave,
But stars a constant vigil keep,
For them who lie beneath the deep.
“Tis true you cannot kneel in prayer
On certain spot and think “He’s there.”
But you can to the ocean go...
See whitecaps marching row on row;
Know one for him will always ride...
In and out...with the tide.
And when your span of life is past,
He’ll meet you at the “Captain’s Mast.”
And they who mourn on distant shore
For sailors who’ll come home no more,
Can dry their tears and pray for these
Who rest beneath the heaving seas...?
For stars that shine and winds that blow
And whitecaps marching row on row,
And they can never lonely be
For when they lived...they chose the sea.**



(Eileen Mahoney)



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