

Memorial Day

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who have died while serving in U.S. forces in any current or previous wars.

The Significance Of Poppies On Memorial Day—And How It Became A Tradition. “In Flanders fields the poppies blow/ Between the crosses, row on row” These words, penned by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian who served as a brigade surgeon for an Allied artillery unit on the front lines during World War I, inspired a tradition across the world—wearing a poppy in honor of fallen soldiers on Memorial Day. The bright red poppy, technically classified as a weed, grows tenaciously in barren landscapes like the war-torn battlefields of World War I. Their cheerful blooms became a tiny symbol of hope for those who witnessed the devastation of the war.

McCrae’s poem “In Flanders Field,” was written as a reaction to a cluster of poppies he spotted on fields littered with dead and wounded soldiers after the Second Battle of Ypres. McCrae saw firsthand the devastating loss of life in that battle as he tended the wounded—it was the first time the Germans unleashed lethal chlorine gas against Allied Forces and Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, a friend of McCrae’s was among the dead.

He published his poem, giving voice to the fallen soldiers buried under those clumps of poppies, in Punch magazine in late 1915. It became a regular reading at memorial ceremonies and one of the most recognizable works of art from the Great War. McCrae died in January 1918, but across the Atlantic two days before the armistice, Ladies Home Journal published “In Flanders Fields” in its November issue. Moina Michael, a former professor at the University of Georgia read it. She volunteered at the New York headquarters of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and was so inspired by McCrae’s poem that she wrote “We Shall Keep Faith” in response.

In addition to the poem, Michael vowed to always wear a red poppy to honor the fallen soldiers. After the war ended, she returned to Georgia and started making red silk poppies to raise money to help support veterans. She started a campaign to make the poppy a national symbol of remembrance. In 1920, she got Georgia’s branch of the American Legion to adopt the poppy as its symbol. In September of 1920, the National American Legion voted to adopt the poppy as the official U.S. national emblem of remembrance.

