The Red Poppy

The red poppy, the Flanders' poppy, was first described as the flower of remembrance by Colonel John McCrae, who was Professor of Medicine at McGill University of Canada before World War I. Colonel McCrae had served as a gunner in the Boer War, but went to France in World War I as a medical officer with the first Canadian contingent.

At the second battle of Ypres in 1915, when in charge of a small first-aid post, he wrote in pencil on a page torn from his despatch book:

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 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.

The verses were apparently sent anonymously to the English magazine 'Punch', which published them under the title, "In Flanders' Fields".

Colonel McCrae was wounded in May 1918 and died after three days in a military hospital on the French coast. On the eve of his death he allegedly said to his doctor "Tell them this. If ye break faith with us who die we shall not sleep".

An American Miss Moira Michael, read "In Flanders' Fields" and wrote a reply entitled "We Shall Keep the Faith":

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Oh! You who sleep in Flanders' fields,
Sleep sweet - to rise anew,
We caught the torch you threw,
And holding high we kept
The faith with those who died,
We cherish, too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led.

It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders' fields.
And now the torch and Poppy red
Wear in honour of our dead
Fear not that ye have died for naught
We've learned the lesson that ye taught
In Flanders' fields.

The Poppy, bloomed profusely on the battlefields of the Western Front in France during World War I. Legend has it that the Poppy goes back to the time of the famous Mongol leader, Genghis Khan and is symbolic of the spirit of service and sacrifice.

The Poppy was first made for an appeal in France and a group of widows of French ex-servicemen called on Earl Haig at the British Legion Headquarters and suggested they might be sold as a means of raising money to aid the distress amongst those who were incapacitated as a result of war. These first Poppies were sold in the streets of London on Armistice Day 1921.

Leading up to and on Remembrance Day each year the United Returned Soldiers' Fund conduct the Poppy Day Appeal in NSW, all moneys raised from this Appeal are distributed to the three participating organisations namely; RSL Welfare and Benevolent Institution, T.B. Sailors, Soldiers & Airmen's Association of NSW Relief Fund and the Limbless Soldiers' Association of New South Wales Welfare Fund.