

Senior Essay 1st Place  
Kate C.  
Branch 625 Richmond  
Zone G-5

Ghosts of War

The old man's bones creaked as he hobbled down Main Street, alone. Once, there had been hundreds of other men who had walked beside him, but now he was the only man left. A quick glance to the side showed the people who had gathered to watch their fallen heroes march on the day the armistice of the Great War had first been declared. Other, younger men and women followed behind him, all of them players in the unfinished game that wrought the world to no end. The old soldier could see the small children fingering the red flowers they wore on their jackets, or tugging on their parent's sleeves, unsure of why they were there or what those men in uniform were marching for. The old soldier, whose joints were swollen with arthritis and his eyesight dim, wished that his comrades were there to march in the parade with him, but they had all gone on to the other side, leaving him alone in the cold November wind.

A tear slipped down his wrinkled cheek. He been a soldier in the Great War. They had told him it would be a war to end all wars, fought so those men and women following behind him wouldn't have to be there. Alas, like everything in history, that promise was forgotten and twenty-one years later, his son had been recruited to fight in another war with the younger generation. But unlike his father, the young boy hadn't come home. More tears slipped down the old soldier's face when children drew in close to their mothers as the Last Post played, the damning melody that would haunt him for the rest of his days. Not because he didn't like the song, but for all it represented - children turned into adults on a bloody battlefield, boys and girls who wouldn't be coming home.

The marching stopped and the soldiers all stood at attention in front of the monument that had been erected at the end of the First World War, depicting men and cannons and all the names of the soldiers who didn't return from overseas carved on the marble base. His son was carved in there, along with some of his platoon mates.

With every note the bugler played, the fabric of the world seemed to ripple. Glowing figures slowly faded into existence standing beside the bugler in a place of honour. If the old man wasn't standing at attention with the other soldiers, years of training stopping him from making a sound, he would have had to stifle a gasp.

For there, standing before him, were faces he recognized from almost a century before. The men of his regiment, standing tall and proud in death, not a scratch on them, stood mixed with soldiers of different eras. World War One, World War Two, Korea, Vietnam - they all blurred together. The old man could see Markus, one the conscripted boys in his regiment who had been killed in his first battle, smiling down at him. A few men over, stood Edmund, who'd survived the war only to succumb to the Spanish Influenza a year later. And next to him was the old man's son, Calum, forever eighteen, round faced, freckled, and smiling for eternity. The old man hardly noticed when the moment of silence was observed and the wreaths were put on the grave of the unknown soldier. He was too focused on his son - Calum, who had fought bravely for his country until one day the letters home just stopped and he'd gotten a visit from an officer, saying he had been taken prisoner in a POW camp and hadn't survived the trip there. Tears dripped off the old soldier's nose and onto the frozen ground below.

He was the last one, the last who'd survived the horrors of Ypres, waded in blood at the Somme, had heard the bombardments at Vimy and lived to tell the tale. But he was old and fading, and knew that it was time the torch was thrown to the next generation to keep the memory of the World Wars alive and to not forget the sins of their forefathers. The old soldier knew that by this time next year, he'd be standing with the other ghosts beside the bugler, only an echo of conflict long ago. Only a memory of events taught in history class. Only a ghost of war.