

NEIGHBOURHOOD OF GHOSTS

Mapping Heartbreak On The Sandy Hill Home Front During The 20th Century Wars

By Julian Armour and Dave O'Malley

Julian Armour, resident of Sandy Hill

I have had the great honour of being involved with Dave O'Malley's "Neighbourhood of Sacrifice" project for almost five years. This remarkable initiative continues to evolve and it becomes increasingly more fascinating. Each time I look at his maps, I feel myself more and more moved.

I have admired Dave for many years. His spectacular graphic design never fails to delight and amaze. He has been an incredible community builder, and has a remarkable track record of volunteering with a wide range of community organizations, including arts groups, festivals, and a range of health-related causes. In 2020, he was named to the Order of Ottawa, an honour he richly deserves.

While I had admired his work for years, I only met him in person for the first time in 2009, when I was Executive Director of the Canadian Tulip Festival. We put on a wonderfully ambitious festival that expanded this spring celebration to four different locations. Dave created the most beautiful poster and graphic I ever could have imagined.

Fast forward to 2020. After two fascinating and delightful years working with the Tulip Festival, I had gone on to found Music and Beyond. Thanks to Grant Hooker, one of the long-time pillars of the Tulip Festival, a partnership was formed between these two major festivals. Music and Beyond would be programming a series of music to complement the whole Tulip experience. Early in 2020, Grant made me aware of Dave O'Malley's new project, "Neighbourhood of Sacrifice". It was both beautiful and chilling. What I saw was a map of The Glebe, Centretown and a few surrounding areas. I saw the familiar grid of streets in an area I know very well, with numbered dots in red, black and blue carefully placed on this grid.

The first effect on me was as horrifying for me as it would be for anyone else. Each dot represented a serviceman who had died in World War II. It was hard not to look at Dave O'Malley's map without being profoundly moved. Each dot represented the death of a young man who had his whole life ahead of him. As the father of four boys, I can't begin to comprehend what it would be like to experience any of them heading off to war, and how shattering it would be to learn they would never be coming back.

Only seconds after I was first shown the map, I saw something completely different. I saw lines covered with dots. I have been trained to read music ever since I was a little kid, and musical notation jumped out at me. I took out some music paper and chose five streets in the Glebe to be five lines of a normal music staff. The dots representing these poor young men who were killed became notes. I then sent these notes to the superb Ottawa composer Gilles Leclerc and asked him if he would consider writing a piece based on them. And what a piece he wrote! Out of the hundreds of pieces I have premiered in my career, this was one of the most powerful and deeply moving of all of them.

Gilles created a profound and evocative work called "Glebe North – Leaving Home." It depicts young men leaving their homes in the Glebe with all of the excitement of heading off to a new adventure. We hear musical depictions of combat and then the inevitable sad ending to this "adventure."

Gille Leclerc's piece brought many people to tears, an experience heightened by the fact that I was performing it with one of my sons, Francis, who was twelve years old at the time. I will play this work again at this summer's Music and Beyond festival.

I was so intrigued by this project, that I asked Dave about my own neighbourhood, Sandy Hill. Our family lives in the home where James Lorimer Ilsley used to live. Ilsley was MacKenzie King's Minister of Finance during World War II, a period when taxation in Canada exploded to pay for this incredibly expensive war.

Dave O'Malley has produced a powerful map of Sandy Hill that includes WWI, WWII and the Korean War. It is worth noting that in World War I, a large percentage of the servicemen in Sandy Hill, were officers. This speaks to the fact that, at that time, Sandy Hill was where many wealthy families lived, until Rockcliffe grew to prominence.

While no one living in our house was killed in either war, this perhaps speaks to the fact that people living here were of the wrong ages to serve in the forces. However, our whole street and all of Sandy Hill are lined with these gruesome markers.

My own family was similarly untouched. My Canadian grandfather taught navigation to Canadian and British airmen during WWII. As we know, an alarmingly high number of these young men did not return home. My mother's father was a corporal in the British army, but this was before World War II had started. My father was only a child during this war, but he briefly joined the Canadian Naval Reserves when he was in university.

I had grown up thinking Canada was the most peaceful nation on Earth, but I am concerned by how close we Canadians are to foreign wars. Just like World War I, I fear it may be too easy to be drawn into a war as many countries move to make binding alliances and create new enemies. As a father, and looking at this map, I am grateful for the peacefulness of our own land, but it also makes me fearful that the wrong chain of events could bring on a very different reality.

I once played at an event for Boris Yeltsin and Brian Mulroney. At some point, Yeltsin ran up to the stage and shook my hand. We all thought this was truly the end of the Cold War. How wrong we were...

Dave O'Malley, former resident of Sandy Hill

Young men and women who are killed on active service are said to have paid the "supreme sacrifice." There's not much more that you can give than your life, but I believe that the greatest sacrifice of all is borne by the families of those killed in the line of duty. Airmen, soldiers and sailors who die in battle are lionized, and rightly so, but it's their mothers, fathers, wives and families who are conscripted to carry the burden of that sacrifice to the end of their days. This mapping project is dedicated to those families of Sandy Hill who lost a loved one in the great wars of the 20th Century.

This is a map of sorrow, a geographic depiction of the carnage on the home front and a way to change the abstraction of remembrance into a visceral understanding of the emotional damage done in Sandy Hill over that 30-year period. Each pin on this map represents the home of the fallen's next-of-kin. For the most part, this meant the parental home, the marital home or residence where a wife was living with her parents. In some cases a sibling, grandparent or even a friend or lover was all a soldier could muster as next-of-kin. I used only addresses that were mentioned in casualty lists, service files or as reported in the daily broadsheet newspapers and cross-checked these sources for accuracy.

There was nothing particularly special about Sandy Hill that brought this plague of anguish, nothing it deserved, nothing that warranted a special attention from death. Every community in Canada took the same punishment, felt the endless blows to its heart, felt its life blood seeping away. Parents stood by while their sons and daughters left home, the routines that gave them comfort, the futures that beckoned, and began arduous journeys that would lead most to war and great risk of death.

Some would die in training, others in transit. Some of disease and even murder. Some in accidents close to home, others would fall from the sky deep in enemy lands. Some by "friendly" fire, others by great malice. Many would simply disappear with no known grave, lost to the sea, a cloud-covered mountain, a blinding flash, a trackless jungle. Some would die in an instant, others with prolonged fear and pain. An extraordinarily high number of those who survived would not come home in one piece. We have made no judgment on the manner of death. If they were on a casualty list or in the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, they were included. The vast majority died in action or on military service.

It was interesting to note that in the First World War, 35 percent of all those killed from Sandy Hill were officers. In Centretown, just across the canal, that number was just 16 percent. This higher number reflects the socio-economic status of Sandy Hill in 1914 at the start of the war — with more scions of lumber barons, industrial captains, lawyers, general officers and government leaders who were able to attend military college or use their connections to secure commissions. By the Second World War, however, both Sandy Hill and Centretown were on par for an enlisted/officer ratio.

In the First World War men enlisted to fight for "King and Empire" (as misguided as that was). Many young men were first-generation immigrants from Britain and she was still their first loyalty. Through cynical patriotic suasion, the Empire recruited cannon fodder from her colonies and fed them into a British-led meat grinder on the Western Front.

By the Second World War, Canada's military services were led by Canadian officers. The experiences of the previous war and the lessons learned on Vimy Ridge meant Canadian men were no longer a British resource to waste on the battlefield. Young men across Canada joined to fight absolute tyranny, cruelty and oppression. They fought and died from Hong Kong to Germany, from Denmark to Egypt.

Almost 50 of the men on this map simply vanished — vapourized by artillery or their own bomb loads or buried in the mud of no man's land. Others disappeared into the English Channel, Mediterranean Sea, North Sea, or the dark depths of the Atlantic Ocean. Their mothers and fathers would have no answers, no headstone, no closure, as we call it today. Simply a name on a wall in a place they would likely never visit, a picture of a boy in a uniform on the mantel and memories to haunt them until their dying days.

It puts things into perspective when we reflect on the challenges we face today — homelessness, employment, healthcare, child care or work-life balance. Our stresses are real, but we don't live in fear that our sons and daughters will be killed in a war. We live in a self-centred and entitled world, and it's important to know that other families have survived far worse pressures and tragedies; that others postponed their happiness or even forfeited it for a collective cause.

Time, as it always does, heals all, or perhaps obscures all. It has put temporal distance between these events and our own lives. New families have replaced these families in Sandy Hill's houses, and in turn they have been replaced. Though these men are now long dead, Sandy Hill is still home to their ghosts and we should acknowledge their presence, should remember them in the name of their families.

This project began as a result of curiosity and then became an homage to the parents, siblings, wives and grandparents, some of whom carried the terrible weight of sacrifice well into the 21st Century. An homage to the Silver Cross Mothers, the broken fathers, the shattered families and the solitary wives. God bless them.

To watch a video of Julian and Francis Armour performing Glebe North—Leaving home, visit [YouTube](#) and search for "A Neighbourhood Sacrifice"