

John McCrae Facts

WORLD WAR I

- ★ When Britain declared war on Germany after the invasion of Belgium on August 4, 1914, the First World War was underway, with the Dominion of Canada going to war as well (they were within the British Empire).
- ★ McCrae was appointed as Medical Officer and Major of the 1st Brigade CFA (Canadian Field Artillery); by this point, he was 41 years old and had resigned from the army 10 years prior.
- ★ In April 1915, McCrae was sent to the trenches near Ypres, Belgium.
- ★ This was the area that is traditionally known as “Flanders Fields” and is where some of the heaviest fighting of the First World War took place.
- ★ The Second Battle of Ypres saw heavy casualties because the Germans used deadly chlorine gas against Allied troops in a desperate attempt to break the stalemate that had formed between the two sides.
- ★ The Canadian forces held the line, fighting tirelessly, for another 16 days, but suffered hundreds of casualties as a result of the gas attacks and ongoing fighting.
- ★ McCrae tended hundreds of wounded soldiers every day and was surrounded by death and dying.
- ★ It was his experiences on the battlefields of Flanders that eventually led to him writing *In Flanders Fields*.



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FLANDERS FIELDS AND LEGACY OF JOHN MCCRAE

- ★ While there are many legends about the inspiration for the poem “In Flanders Fields,” the most commonly held belief is that it was written on May 3rd, 1915, which was the day after the funeral and burial of his friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who had been killed during the Second Battle of Ypres.
- ★ It is said that McCrae wrote the poem while sitting on the back of a medical field ambulance, with wild poppies blooming between the makeshift graves all around him.
- ★ As he was unable to help his friend or any of the others who died, McCrae wrote the poem to give them a voice.
- ★ Shortly after, McCrae was transferred to a Canadian General Hospital in France where he acted as the Chief of Medical Services.
- ★ It was here the wounded were brought from the Battle of the Somme, the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the third Battle of Ypres, and from Arras and Passchendaele.
- ★ After the war, McCrae was rightfully affected by the fighting and by the loss he endured, which turned him bitter and disillusioned.
- ★ McCrae continued to write letters and poetry to help him get through the post-traumatic stress of the war; his final poem was titled “The Anxious Dead.”
- ★ In 1917, McCrae began developing signs of pneumonia, and on January 28th, 1918, John McCrae died; he was buried with full military honours not far from Flanders Fields.



Alexis Helmer, McCrae's friend

