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Editorial Page Editor: STEVE LUKITS,  
Phone (613) 544-5000 ext. 270

## FORUM

## HISTORY

## C O L U M N

# An immigrant, a soldier, a janitor – and a hero

**T**WO MINUTES BEFORE 11 ON THE morning of Nov. 11, 1918, a German sniper's bullet killed George Price at the village of Ville-sur-Haine, just east of Mons, France. He was one of the 60,661 Canadian soldiers killed during the First World War, and was among the last to die on the Western Front. The war ended seconds later.

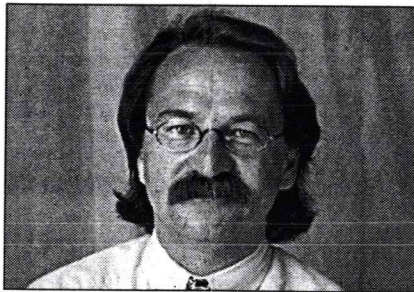
On average, more than 5,600 men were killed each day – more than the total number of Canadian veterans of the Great War for Civilization still alive today. Except, perhaps, on Remembrance Day, these are our unremembered soldiers, even as we solemnly intone a poem by another Canadian, Lt.-Col. John M. McCrae, which begs us to recall their sacrifice:

*We are the Dead. Short days ago*

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow.*

On Monday, July 15, in Ottawa, we began to reverse our collective neglect by commemorating the wartime valor of a Canadian soldier, Filip Konowal, one of these forgotten men.

Born in Ukraine, Konowal emigrated to Canada in 1913. He left behind a wife and daughter, promising to return soon. He hoped to build a better life for his family in Canada. After the war broke out, he volunteered for service, joining Ottawa's 77 Infantry Battalion, and was later reassigned to



By LUBOMYR LUCIUK

British Columbia's 47th Battalion.

Unlike most Ukrainian immigrants in Canada, Konowal had come from Ukrainian lands then under the control of the Russian Empire. He was lucky, for that meant that he was misidentified officially as a "Russian." Because most Ukrainians in Canada at that time had been born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they were labelled "Austrians." Thousands of Konowal's fellow Ukrainians were stigmatized with the label of "enemy aliens" during Canada's first national internment operations of 1914-20. Many were carted off to one of the 24 Canadian concentration camps, women and children among them. The last survivors of that injustice will soon be gone. Like Konowal, they, too, have been all but forgotten.

In August 1917, during the battle for Hill 70, near Lens, France, Cpl. Konowal fought with exceptional valor. For his deeds, he was awarded the British Empire's highest decoration, the Victoria Cross. Presenting the medal in person, His Majesty King George V remarked: "Your exploit is one of the most daring and heroic in the history of my army. For this, accept my thanks."

Konowal finally returned to Canada on July 20, 1919, having soldiered for three years and 357 days in the ranks of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, both in Europe and in Siberia. Reportedly, as many as 10,000 other Ukrainian-Canadians had also served.

**T**HE REMAINDER OF KONOWAL'S LIFE was troubled, probably the consequence of his severe war wounds. His first wife and daughter both disappeared during the Stalinist terror in Ukraine. Until his death in 1959, the best job he could find was being a janitor in the House of Commons. While honored by his fellow Ukrainian-Canadian veterans, he was otherwise neglected.

After he was buried by his regiment with full military honors in Ottawa's Notre Dame Cemetery, Konowal's grave was marked with only the sim-



Canadian War Museum

**A painting of Victoria Cross recipient Sgt. Filip Konowal by Maj. Ambrose McEvoy**

plest of tablets. And then this man and his remarkable story were all but forgotten. Even the whereabouts of his Victoria Cross – one of the 94 won by Canadians since the Crimean War – remains unknown.

By consecrating a new upright marker at Konowal's grave, by unveiling this trilingual plaque in Ottawa's

Cartier Square Drill Hall – the regimental home of the Governor General's Foot Guards – and by taking steps to place other markers in Toronto, in New Westminster, B.C., and in Konowal's home village of Kudkiv, Ukraine, we have today begun the essential process of reminding all Canadians of the price that this one man paid to be a Canadian, of his pride in having been able to serve as a soldier.

**A**T A TIME WHEN OUR NATIONAL UNITY is under threat, when there are those loose in the land who are cynical about the honorable nature of a military calling, when there are attempts to fragment Canada along regional, ethnic, racial or political lines, it is well worth remembering what this simple man – an immigrant, a soldier, a janitor – was willing to do for his king, for his country and for all of us. He did what he had to do for no reward, for precious little recognition. Konowal's self-sacrifice and humility, moreso than his remarkable bravery under fire, are what make him a real Canadian hero, worthy of our respectful acknowledgement.

□ *Lubomyr Luciuk teaches political geography at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston.*