

Become a part of the history of the Great War on Wednesday, commemorating the first global conflict

By Brock Weir

It has been over 100 years ago since the First World War broke out in August 1914, but what's in a century?

That is a question Kevin Hebib regularly asks visitors to Toronto's Fort York in his capacity as historian.

Think about how fast the last 10 years have flown by for you, he says. When you get down to it, there are really only 10 of those that have happened since August 1914.



Kevin Hebib

It is not so deeply rooted in the past that we can't understand it, says Mr. Hebib, who brings the history and objects related to The Great War to a myth-busting event at the Aurora Cultural Centre next Wednesday, April 8, at 7 p.m.

As a teen and young man growing up in the 1970s, men and women who served during the First World War were still around us, regular fixtures at commemorations, and his own great-grandfather was among them.

In a sense, his experience inspired me to take an interest [in the Great War], he says.

It is not necessarily the mass change that swept the globe between 1914 and 1918 that necessarily interests him, rather it is the gritty of the war, the personal side of the war, and the personal experiences of the everyday soldier soldiers not unlike his great-grandfather.

Part of this is a little bit of myth-busting things we know about the Great War, particularly for the Canadian Experience, things that when you scratch the surface you find not to be true such as the Ross Rifle. Was it really all that dangerous? he asks. Yes, it could be dangerous had it been assembled incorrectly, but in terms of the piece of technology, it was a spectacularly well-engineered and designed piece. It just didn't suit active service.

Another myth surrounds what soldiers ate, which I find particularly interesting. People think that soldiers on the frontlines spent their [entire] time in the trench eating nothing more than corned beef and hardtack biscuits. Some of the meals were actually quite sophisticated and soldiers found all kinds of ways to make the food less monotonous.

Ahead of next week's lecture, Mr. Hebib will select a number of items both original and reproduction which will help underscore the personal realities of those who served. He particularly likes what he describes as the tactile nature of history. All too often people spend their days looking at a screen, whether it is to work or learn. Being in the presence of real, tangible objects yields a lot

more information? than anything that is on the screen, he says.

?My colleagues and I participated in the Great War Attic, travelling around Toronto and other areas where people brought out objects from their family collections in a sort of Antiques Roadshow model where we helped identify some of the things people had been holding onto or discovered when moving into a home,? he explains. ?What we discovered was a great appetite for understanding our collective past and dealing with authentic things and objects.

?What I found most interesting was the heartfelt nature of some of these very personal objects. Today, we look at some of the material culture left over from the Great War. While a lot of it is interesting, it is only when you attach to it the personal stories that the object really comes alive and the connection with that person is also brought to life. It sort of animates the object and when you're in the presence of the real thing that someone touched, something that was there, all of a sudden you have sort of written yourself into the history of the object. It is that common thread of humanity.?

The Great War: Up Close with a Canadian Soldier takes place at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Wednesday, April 8, from 7 ? 8 p.m. Admission by donation.