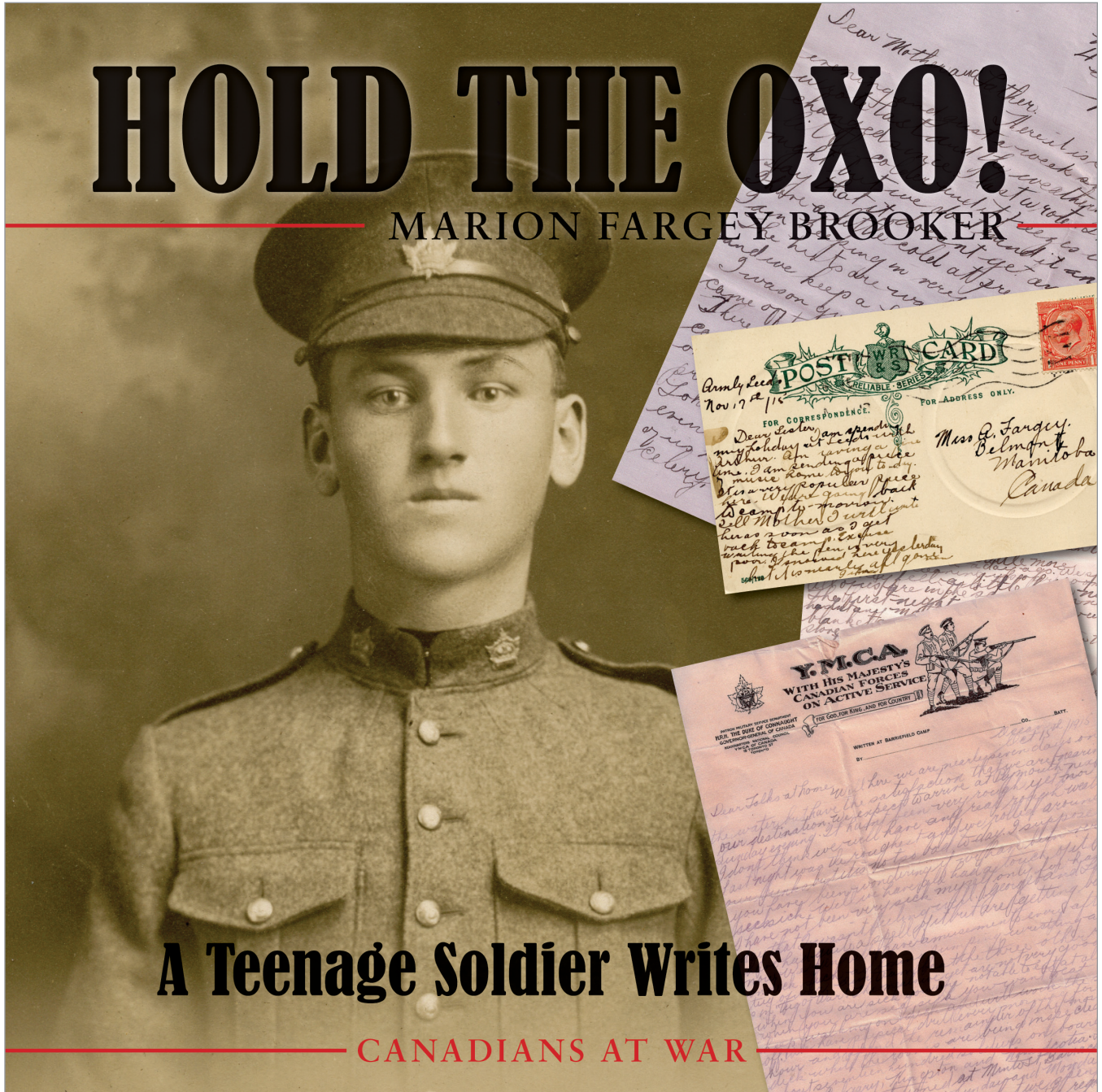


TEACHER'S GUIDE

Ages 12+

HOLD THE OXO!

MARION FARGEY BROOKER



A Teenage Soldier Writes Home

CANADIANS AT WAR

REMEMBERING

A play written by
Marion Fargey Brooker



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INTRODUCTION:

THOUGHTS ON *REMEMBERING*

A few years ago my granddaughter Alexandra Bily Brooker volunteered to help prepare a Remembrance Day program for Laurier Heights Junior High School in Edmonton. For three generations our family has handed down a shoebox that my grandmother had decorated for a dance and box social to raise money for World War I. Little did she know that nine months later her 17-year-old son would be part of that war. She saved all his letters in this beautifully decorated shoebox, which now is sagging at the corners and discoloring. The letters are faded and fraying at the edges now but Alexandra asked if they could use them to write a play for the November 11th program. Jim's diary is written with a tiny lead pencil that fit in a slot at the side. It is still there and we can touch the pencil he used in the field.

The play that resulted used the word "Imagine" as I have done. It became apparent to me that often schools are searching for something meaningful to present on our day of remembrance. I was struck by how immediate war becomes when you put the students in the trenches, in the hospitals, in the nursing stations, in the loneliness, in the letters home. So this was the inspiration for *Remembering* — not just remembering WWI but all wars; not just remembering Jim but remembering all who have worked for peace.

Hold the Oxo!

Canada was young during the First World War, and with as many as 20,000 underage soldiers leaving their homes to join the war effort, the country's army was, too. Jim, at 17, was one of them, and he penned countless letters home. But these weren't the writings of an ordinary boy. They were the letters of a lad who left a small farming community for the city on July 15, 1915, a boy who volunteered to serve with the 79th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders.

Jim's letters home gloss over the horrors of war, focusing instead on issues of the home front: of harvesting, training the horses, and the price of hogs. Rarely do these letters, especially those to his mother and father, mention the mud and rats, the lice and stench of the trenches, or the night duty of cutting barbed wire in no man's land. For 95 years his letters remained in a shoebox decorated by his mother.

Jim was just 18 when he was wounded and died during the Battle of the Somme. *Hold the Oxo!* tells the story that lies between the lines of his letters, filling in the historical context and helping us to understand what it was like to be Jim.

About the Author

Marion Fargey Brooker spent many years writing historical dramas and human interest stories for educational radio for Grades 1 to 12. She is the author of *Noreen and the Amazing No-Good Horse* and her stories and poems have been included in school textbooks and anthologies. She lives in Edmonton.



REMEMBERING

(A REMEMBRANCE DAY PLAY FOR SIX VOICES)

The 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month

NARRATOR

Imagine! August 4, 1914.

PAPER VENDOR

[yelling]

Get your copy here! Great Britain declares war on Germany! Canada joins Great Britain!

NARRATOR

[WW1 song— It's A Lovely War — playing in background]

Imagine! The fear, the excitement, the hysteria, the posters, the propaganda, the songs

PAPER VENDOR

[reading the poster in a loud voice]

"It's always fair weather when good fellows get together

You'll find a lot of good fellows in

THE KILTIES

Why Not

JOIN THEM!

God Save the King!

[WW1 SONG PLAYS; It's A Lovely War becomes louder so the words can be heard]

"Up to your waist in water,

Up to your eyes in slush

Using the kind of language,

That makes your sergeant blush;

Who wouldn't join the army?

"Oh! Oh! Oh! It's a lovely war

Who wouldn't be a soldier eh?

Oh! It's a shame to take the pay...

Oh! Oh! Oh! It's a lovely war...

NARRATOR

Imagine! The men and women, as well as the underage and the overage, all joining to help their country.

Crowds gather at stations to wave good-bye. Three 17-year-old boys — Jim and his two friends — board

the train to Winnipeg to join the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada.

[PAUSE]

Why remember?

Imagine if you're the soldier in the trench that first Christmas Eve — 1914. You hear voices in the enemy trenches 200 feet across no-man's land, singing a familiar carol in a foreign language [in German]

"Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Alles schläft ..."

And you join in [in English]

"...all is bright

'Round yon virgin Mother and Child..."

Then a white flag goes up in each opposing trench and you all crawl out of the your trenches and share cigarettes and memories, pictures and laughter...[FADING]

[PAUSE]

And the next day you shoot that friend.
Imagine...

[VOICE FADING]

...sitting in trenches full of filth and grime.

SOLDIER

France, March 9/16

(Messines, south of Ypres, Belgium)

My Dear Mother,

Well Mother, how is the weather in Manitoba? We had snow here two or three days ago and the trenches were certainly in some mess while the wet weather continued although nearly everybody gets long rubber boots in the trenches and so keeps his feet dry. It is nearly all gone by now.

I received your letter today and one also from the Bible class. It certainly is a fine day today with the sun shining bright.

Mac and I are what they call wirers, that is fixing wires up in front of the trenches and having to work by night time and sleep in the daytime and we have to do our own cooking. You would be surprised to hear of what good dishes we have sometimes. The average dugout in the front line holds about two and you have to curl up in some peculiar shapes in some of them. There are three of us in the one dugout now and one lad had some rolled oats and we made porridge. It was the first porridge I've had since I left England and it was certainly good. We get the raw rations and ham to cook them ourselves. The greatest shortage we have is bread and all the troops in France seem to be short of the same thing. The food is good though and nothing to kick at.

This is all the news for now.

Your loving son Jim.

NARRATOR

Imagine. Seeing a greenish-yellow cloud rolling across no-man's land towards you — burning your lungs, searing your eyes — and you don't know what it is or how to fight this new enemy — certainly not with guns or bayonets as you have been trained.

[VOICE FADING]

Imagine. Seeing your friends shot and wounded and killed...

"The Battle of Mount Sorrel was underway with the Germans eventually capturing key Allied positions — Mount Sorrel, and Hills 61 and 62, Maple Copse, Sanctuary Woods."

Jim writes in his field diary:

SOLDIER

June 3, 1916

Moved into the Communication trench between Maple Copse and Sanctuary Wood as a front line.

NARRATOR

On June 4, 1916 the 43rd Cameron Highlanders cleared Maple Copse, occupied Border Lane, and successfully repulsed a counter-attack.

On June 5th Jim writes in his diary:

SOLDIER

June 5, 1916

Moved into trench in Maple Copse in strong point. Bombardment very heavy. Several killed.

June 7th

Got relieved by the 52nd Battalion and went to the Belgian Chateau

June 9th

Left Belgian Chateau and went up to the trenches. No. 2 platoon went to S.P.

June 11th

Left S.P. and marched to the Belgian Chateau.

June 13th

Left Belgian Chateau on a forced march to Tillebeke dugouts and stayed there till the next evening. Rained for the last couple of days and trenches in bad mess

13th and 16th Batt. took back trenches lost on June 2nd and took quite a few prisoners. Quite a few casualties.

June 17th /16

Dear Mother and Father

I guess you've been anxious about me. We have been having quite a time these last two weeks but I came through it safe. Don't worry. I am in fine health and a good rest will fix us all up fine.

NARRATOR

Imagine. If you were wounded and lying in the mud with rats and decomposing bodies and you knew there were no antibiotics to fight this filth... Imagine how your family would feel receiving this letter:

NURSE

26 General Hospital

B.E.F. France

Ward 10

October 12, 1916

Dear Mrs. Fargey,

You will have heard that your son has been seriously wounded in the right leg, and although his condition is serious at present; we hope to send him to England as soon as he is fit to travel.

He is very good & brave & hopes this news will not worry you too much. He is getting every attention here & just now is not in very much pain. Your son will be able to write himself soon & I will let you know again how he is getting on.

Yours sincerely

A. Sadleir

Staff Nurse-in-Charge Ward 10

NARRATOR

And this one...

SOLDIER

On Active Service

WITH THE BRITISH

EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

France Oct 13/16

My Dear Mother,

Sister told me she has written and explained the nature of the wound. Now Mother I expect you will have heard of me being wounded long ago as they took my name and number at battalion dressing station but this letter will satisfy you more.

I am under the best of treatment and there is no danger at all. It will be some time before I get any of your

mail but I will write regular myself.

It is nice to be lying in a bed again and being fed on the best of food. I had porridge this morning, the first for months.

I hope that Lance Corporal hasn't confused you as I just got made one a couple of days before I went up to the trenches.

Well, Mother, this is all for now.

With love to all

From your loving son Jim

P.S. Now Mother Dear don't worry much about me as I will get alright.

NARRATOR

[WITH SADNESS]

And this one...

NURSE

15th October 1916

Dear Mrs. Fargey

Your grief will be great when you know that your son passed quietly away this morning. He was so good and brave and did not murmur once.

He was anxious that you would receive his Bible and just a few things he had with him. He sent his love to all & then peacefully gave himself up. He was one of the finest lads I have ever seen—& an absolute hero; & I am afraid your sorrow will be great as he spoke continually of you & hoped it would not worry you too much.

It may be a little comfort to you to know that everything that was possible was done for your boy, & know that all the soldiers' graves are well kept & I shall put flowers on your boy's cross with your love.

With sincere sympathy for you in your great loss.

Believe me

Yours sincerely,

Angela M. Sadleir

NARRATOR

[IN A THOUGHTFUL VOICE]

And imagine... other families and other fathers and mothers, sons and daughters and all who believed and worked for a peaceful world:

WW11, Korea, Kosovo, Afghanistan — the list goes on...

[PAUSE]

And remember...

"At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them."

We will not forget!

[PLAYING OF LAST POST]

Web Link: www.WW1photos.com/WW1Musicindex.html