The Flower of Remembrance

In Flanders Fields
In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly.
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

This was the poem written by World War I
Colonel John McCrae, a surgeon with Canada's First
Brigade Artillery. It expressed McCrae's grief over
the "row on row" of graves of soldiers who had died
on Flanders' battlefields, located in a region of western
Belgium and northern France. The poem presented a
striking image of the bright red flowers blooming
among the rows of white crosses and became a
rallying cry to all who fought in the First World War.
The first printed version of it reportedly was in
December 1915, in the British magazine Punch.

McCrace's poem had a huge impact on two
women, Anna E. Guerin of France and Georgia native
Moina Michael. Both worked hard to initiate the sale
of artificial poppies to help orphans and others left
destitute by the war. By the time Guerin established
the first sale in the U.S., in 1920 with the help of the
American Legion, the poppy was well known in the
allied countries — America, Britain, France, Canada,
Australia and New Zealand — as the "Flower of
Remembrance." Proceeds from that first sale went to
the American and French Children's League.

Guerin had troubles with the distribution of the
poppies in early 1922 and sought out Michael for help.
Michael had started a smaller-scaled Poppy Day during
a YMCA conference she was attending in New York
and wanted to use the poppies as a symbol of remem-
brance of the war. Guerin, called the "Poppy Lady of
France" in her homeland, and Michael, later dubbed
"The Poppy Princess" by the Georgia legislature, went
to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) for help.

The poppy was adopted as the official memorial
flower of the VFW at its national convention in
Seattle, Wash., in August 1922, following the first
nationwide distribution of poppies ever conducted by
any veterans organization.

In 1923, faced by a shortage of poppies from
French manufacturers, the VFW relied on New York
florists to make up the difference. This was a huge
setback, however, and led to the idea by VFW officials
to use unemployed and disabled veterans to produce
the artificial flower. This concept was approved in late
1923 and the first poppy factory was built in Pitts-
burgh, Pa., in 1924. This provided a practical means
of assistance to veterans and also ensured a steady,
reliable source of poppies. Veterans at Department of
Veterans Affairs medical facilities and veterans homes
help assemble the poppies, and each year the VFW
distributes roughly 14 million worldwide.

It was around the same time the first poppy
factory was built that the VFW registered the name
"Buddy Poppy" with the U.S. Patent Office. The term
"Buddy" was coined by the poppy makers as a tribute
to their comrades who did not come home from the
war or who were scarred and crippled for life.

The VFW celebrated the 75th anniversary of the
Buddy Poppy as its official flower in 1997. While
profits from its sales have helped countless veterans
and their widows, widowers and orphans over the
years, the poppy itself survives as a perpetual tribute to
those who have given their lives for the nation's
freedom.