Service Above Self

One of Rotary’s official mottoes has its origins in 1911 and history has attributed it to a man named Ben Collins. Then the President of the Rotary Club of Minneapolis, Minnesota, Mr. Collins had adopted the phrase “Service, Not Self” as a principle for his club. Hearing this simple statement, Paul Harris asked Mr. Collins to address the Rotary Convention in Portland that year and the motto soon gained popularity.

Neither Ben Collins nor Paul Harris could have foreseen the importance the word “Service” would soon gain. Only four years later, the world became embroiled in “the war to end all wars” and the phrase took on new meaning as millions of military personnel took up arms and entered the services. An estimated nine million combatants and seven million civilians would die in the conflict that followed.

Sadly, “the war to end all wars” was not just that and World War II resulted in an estimated 50-85 million more fatalities. Of course, other wars, skirmishes and military actions followed the end of that war and, even today, military personnel from nations around the world continue to serve, most, like Canadians, in the cause of Peace.

At Rotary’s International Convention in Detroit, in 1950, a slightly changed version of Mr. Collins’ original phrase was formally adopted and “Service Above Self” became enshrined in the Rotary lexicon.

As we consider the word Service this month, let’s pause and pay tribute to those who honoured their obligation to serve. Our modest attempts to live up to the motto seem insignificant when weighed against the multitudes who paid the ultimate price in defending liberty.

Claire Sherwin