

Remembrance Sunday – 8th November 2009

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In 2007 there were five British survivors of the First World War. Last year, just a few days short of the 90th anniversary of its ending, Sydney Lucas died and there were four. After Remembrance Sunday, Claude Sholes died and there were three.

Then in January this year, Bill Stone died. On the 18th July, Henry Allingham, the world's oldest man, died at 113. And precisely a week later, Harry Patch, who had taken over the mantle briefly at 111, also died. {on 25th July}

And with him, the last living link with the First World War was gone.

There's almost a tangible sense of loss. Last year there was a plethora of programmes in the week leading to Remembrance Sunday. Not so this year.

Perhaps the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War, has not enough to say to us.

The last living link with the First World War is broken. Those ordinary men who did extraordinary things, and perhaps themselves became extraordinary because of their length of days, have gone.

Perhaps there has been such a restrained marking of the outbreak of the Second World War, not least by the Government, because in 1939 the conflict only slowly gathered pace. It was, for a time, the phoney war.

On 1st September, a German battleship attacked the Polish port of Gdansk and the war in Europe began.

On 3rd September the ultimatum which Britain had given to Germany expired at 11.00 am and 15 minutes later Prime Minister Chamberlain announced to the nation that we were now at war.

But war is always closer to home than we sometimes care to think. Just three days after the war began, on 6th September the first allied air casualty of the war occurred. Where? In the village I once served as priest. Hintlesham. And there in a field, Pilot Officer Hulton-Harrop lost his life. The Hurricane in which he was flying did not have armour plating behind the pilot's seat. Echoes perhaps of more modern conflicts. He was killed by other Hurricane pilots who mistook his plane for a German fighter. Friendly fire. Another echo.

There will be time yet in years to come to reflect upon the great battles of the Second World War as one by one their anniversaries arrive. But war is fought by ordinary men, and increasingly, by ordinary women too. And at home their families wait for their safe return. And sadly sometimes receive instead the news of death or injury.

It takes enormous courage to fight and to be prepared to die. And sometimes that courage is bolstered by faith. At the end of May 1940 (Sunday 26th) there was a National Day of Prayer and thousands stopped to pray. In Westminster Abbey there was a packed service and the breathless commentator of Pathé News recorded recent events, "No one here today could foresee the grave news that has come from Belgium."

As a result of its fall and the subsequent fall of France, Britain faced the very real prospect of defeat. Chamberlain had been hesitant and ineffective as a war leader and had resigned on 10th May to be succeeded by Winston Churchill. The National Day of Prayer was one of Churchill's earliest public engagements. The same breathless commentator at the Abbey went on, "All the more it is well for us to show the world that we still believe in divine guidance, in the laws of Christianity. May we find inspiration and faith from this solemn day."

Perhaps faith was more easily talked about then than it sometimes is now, but it is just as necessary now as it was then.

The Field of Remembrance outside Westminster Abbey has been opened this week and it contains this year for the first time a special section remembering the dead of “current conflicts”.

So perhaps our focus this year should not be on wars past, but on wars present. In truth this is again a time for prayer, a time when the thick blanket of a distant war settles upon the nation, a time when resolve is necessary but defeat possible according to the present Prime Minister, a time when former Defence Chiefs line up to question Government resolve and support.

Amongst the poppies in the Field of Remembrance is the name of Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, the most senior officer to die in Afghanistan, who spoke about the lack of helicopters for ferrying troops and the consequent dangers of travelling by road. A month later he was killed by an IED, an improvised explosive device. There too are the names of the five men who were killed this week by a policeman they were training. A reminder that the enemy is sometimes within.

With eight deaths this week (the latest this morning), 231 service personnel have now died since the war in Afghanistan began in October 2001. So great is the anguish caused by Afghanistan, and so much is the debate going on, that I want to focus this year on a voice from the present, that of Christina Schmid.

On Thursday she waited for the body of her husband to be flown back home. In moving words she expressed the anguish and the courage of the relatives who share the cost of war. Her husband, Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid, had made safe 64 explosive devices and found 11 bomb-making centres in five months before he was killed on the last day of his tour.

Christina, spoke eloquently about him in the present tense. “It has been an emotional day, but I’m very, very pleased to have my husband home. He’s an absolute hero. He was a very unique, special man, very brave. There is no other man above him and I’m so proud of him. I’m so happy just to have him home and safe.” She speaks in the present tense but as if somehow in returning he’s now protected.

She speaks about the close bond he has with those who shared his dangerous task as an explosives expert. “He adored his job. He was one of a select, unique few brave men from the RLC (Royal Logistics Corps) – high threat operatives. These men, these select few, put themselves in front of IED devices, hour in, hour out, day after day after day, in Afghanistan – without a break. He absolutely wanted to preserve life – he was a protector, he was not a destroyer.”

And then entirely without self-pity but with thoughts of others she records the moment of his death. “He loved the team that he worked with. It’s so sad that unfortunately on the very last day of actually being there on the ground that this occurred in front of them. And to see his best friends carry him off, it really did me proud today.”

She speaks for many service families when she says, “Regardless of the conflict - I have my own personal views which I don’t wish to share at this moment – but regardless of the conflict, I think most servicemen go into it to protect our country – and they just want to protect, not destroy, and to calm things down.”

We owe a tremendous debt to men like Olaf Schmid, and a tremendous debt to Christina, who speaks with such quiet dignity and pride of a husband and a future she has sacrificed.

It isn’t only the dead but the injured to whom we owe a special debt. Simon Harmer, a paramedic, was on patrol and carrying a heavy pack in case anyone ahead of him was injured. There were twelve men ahead of him on the road. He was the thirteenth. The extra weight he carried was enough to trigger the bomb on which he stepped. He lost one leg and the other had to be

amputated below the knee. He is currently in Selly Oak Hospital, where so many injured have been.

And yet when he came round from the coma, he waved his arms around alarmingly. It seemed he was out of control. What he was really trying to do was give the nurse a “high five” at the sheer joy of being alive. That kind of courage is to be saluted.

This week a moving request has come from 653 Squadron. In January they are to be deployed to Afghanistan and they ask for our prayers. We shall pray for them in a few moments. But we shall also pray in our daily service of Morning Prayer each day that you are away until you return. And we shall pray for your loved ones too.

Faith is important. It is fashionable to believe only in things of short-term value in this instant age. But the things of eternal life are infinitely more important than anything on earth, and faith in God can carry each one of us through the darkest and most testing of times. On earth and into heaven.

Prayer and pastoral care are important. Padre Jason Clarke, of the Grenadier Guards, said that the most important skill was listening to the men and giving them a chance to talk. It was he who dealt with the aftermath of the killing of the five soldiers this week.

Faith is important. And so is courage and determination and a clear goal. Winston Churchill was as obstinately determined as Neville Chamberlain was vacillating. In his first speech to the Commons after his appointment, as he appealed to the House for unity of purpose and resolve, faith was at the core of what he said. “I would say to the House, as I have said to those who have joined this Government: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us.”

His electrifying speech united the House and won a standing ovation.

But who carries the fight? It is – and it always has been - ordinary men and women. They are ordinary, but they do extraordinary things. It was ordinary men – humble fishermen - that Jesus called to leave their nets and follow him. Their journey led them through many dangers to the foot of the cross on which Christ was crucified.

And in the ultimate act of courage and self-sacrifice, Jesus died for us.

For some people, faith in Jesus Christ seems silly. If that’s the case, then I am glad to be called a fool. Those are not my words but those of St Paul, but I share their sentiments. I am glad to be a fool for Christ.

To some the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross looks like a futile act, but his death – and his resurrection – have a lasting effect that is incalculable. The death of Christ has affected and changed the lives of millions.

To have faith in him takes courage and it is not the easy option. But it is the right one. In God alone, all things hold together.

It takes courage too for fighting men to recognise their need of faith, their need of prayer. Prayer is powerful, and prayer is necessary. And so I invite you now to stand and pray for 653 Squadron.

(the Prayer follows on the next page)

Almighty God,
we pray for those who serve in our Armed Forces.
We pray especially for the members of 653 Squadron
and we ask that you would protect them in danger,
and refresh them in rest.
Help them to serve with courage in Afghanistan
and bring them home to safety.
Be with their families and their loved ones
and hold them always in your perfect love.
May your blessing be upon 653 Squadron,
and may they put their trust in you,
through Jesus Christ, the Saviour of us all. Amen.