

Remembrance 2014

The Battle of Britain ended in Kent with a dinner at Biggin Hill on the 25 October and the next day saw the start of Remembrance events. Many of the events followed a trail that commemorated the history of the Great War in London and Kent.

West Kent Poppy Appeal Launch, Bluewater

It was with some trepidation that Jacqui and I set off on the 26 October to the large shopping complex at Bluewater (and I do have a complex about shopping malls). However it was in a good cause. To mark the centenary year of the Great War and the birth of the poppy as a symbol of Remembrance and hope, Bluewater was supporting the Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal campaign with a two-week mall takeover, beginning with the formal launch of the Poppy Appeal in West Kent.

It started with an external parade of about 150 people, including seventeen standard bearers (Robin Green in charge with the RAFA Area Standard), Veterans, Cadets, Scouts and Cubs in a procession around Bluewater. It was more like a route march led by the RBL Bikers Branch and the 2427 Squadron ATC Band from Biggin Hill round all the car parks before we finally entered the complex. Then there was a further lengthy march through the malls scattering shoppers in all directions. We ended up with a climb up the stairs to form up on the balcony whilst the Military Wives Choir, from Brompton Barracks in Chatham took over the staircase. The dignitaries included the MP for Dartford, the Mayor of Dartford, and the Mayor of Gravesham who joined with RBL Kent County Officers. Following the Military Wives performance the Royal British Legion led a spoken tribute and minute's silence.

The Cadets then went around Malls with poppies and collecting tins whilst Jacqui, Robin and I went for a cup of tea! The Royal British Legion had a presence and a collection point throughout the two weeks until the 11 November when there was a Remembrance Day memorial silence. As you will read below I had to be elsewhere on the 11 November plus the fact that one day in a shopping complex was quite enough.



Poppies at the Tower of London

The major art installation Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red at the Tower of London, ran from 5 August one hundred years since the first full day of Britain's involvement in the until the 11 November 2014. Jacqui and I visited in early September as the first of the 888,246 ceramic poppies were already having a major impact as they were progressively filling the Tower's moat. Each poppy represented a British military fatality during the war that gave a visual display of the magnitude of suffering a hundred years ago.

In late October Jacqui and I took our two eldest grandchildren Oliver (10) and Keira (9) to see work as it approached completion. The impact was significant by just trying to estimate the size of the crowd as a few thousand and then trying to visualise nearly nine million people killed in just four years. As Oliver sorted through some fifty eight photographs he had

taken, the story sunk in as to the horror and the number of those who died as the result of the war.

The piece of art was completed on the 11 November and immediately the task of dismantling began. The poppies had already been sold to individuals to raise millions of pounds to be shared equally amongst six service charities. Three of which directly benefit the Royal Observer Corps Benevolent Fund.

- SSAFA - with its nationwide cover carries out the vast majority of the casework for the ROCBF, enabling the Trustees to make grants to former members in need.
- The Royal British Legion – who also do some casework but mainly assist through their Debt & Money Advisors and Poppy Calls that provides handyman type services.
- COBSEO – who maximise the charitable support to the Armed Forces Community through co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration of organisations. An example of which is a computerised case management system that not only speeds up grant making but where an applicant has served in more than one service the cost of the grant can be shared.

The other charities are:

- Help for Heroes
- Combat Stress - UK's leading military charity specialising in the care of Veterans' mental health
- Coming Home - the fundraising campaign for Haig Housing Trust, which provides adapted homes for seriously injured and disabled Servicemen.

A wonderful visual and emotional experience that has a long lasting legacy, including helping former members of the Observer Corps and Royal Observer Corps.



Lord Mayor of London's Garden of Remembrance, St Paul's Cathedral

After a wonderful Indian summer Monday the 03 November was very seasonal. Following heavy overnight rain it was cold damp and misty as we headed for London. The welcome in the crypt of St Paul's was warm with tea and bacon rolls to set everyone up for the morning's commemorations. There were an estimated 150 guests including the Lord Mayor of London, Masters of the City Livery Companies, representatives from the City's Armed Forces, and other key London institutions. Vice Admiral Peter Wilkinson, RBL President and John Crisford RBL National Chairman were prominent amongst the many guests that included twenty four Standard Bearers (and Jacqui). The occasion was one of the last events for Alderman Fiona Woolf, Lord Mayor of London at the end of her year of office.

The Standards were marched on following the band of the Grenadier Guards to begin the official opening of the City of London Garden of Remembrance and to mark the start of a month in which the lives of those lost in war are remembered. After the service and two minutes silence The Lord Mayor planted her cross in memory of those who have given their lives in war, followed by the many guests. Fiona Woolf addressed those gathered by saying

that it was a humbling experience. As Lord Mayor she is President of the City of London Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association, and works to promote the many benefits that reservists can bring to employers.

She mentioned the 10th ('Stockbrokers') Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) – a Pals Battalion with a difference. In a letter dated 12 August 1914, Major the Hon R White wrote: 'Many City employees would be willing to enlist if they were assured that they would serve with their friends'. By the end of August 1914, more than 1600 men had been recruited at the Tower of London, where the Fusiliers were based. The Battalion was sworn in by Lord Mayor and then marched to Colchester for training. Throughout their service they called themselves 'Ditchers' because they had joined up in Tower ditch. In July 1915 the Battalion was sent to France. The Battalion suffered 2,647 casualties. By end of the war only 50 of the original 1600 'Ditchers' were on active service. As the Lord Mayor she is a member of the Council of the London Regiment, which was the first regiment of reservists to be deployed to mainland Europe in the First World War. In the early stages of its deployment, the regiment held a hill near Ypres against the German army. A hundred years later, its men and women are still risking their lives in service, having been an unbroken presence on British military operations for the last decade, while maintaining careers in London and scaling up to meet the challenges of the future. Most recently she had had the privilege to present an Elizabeth Cross to the parents of one of the reservists killed in Afghanistan. As we move through the month there will be music, poems and silence when we will remember all who have paid the ultimate sacrifice over the last century.

As the proceedings were coming to an end it started to rain again. I had to go onto another meeting in London and Jacqui struggled home with the Standard. We both got soaked but with few days to dry out and prepare for the next event.



Field of Remembrance, Westminster Abbey Gardens

The weather was kind, chilly but most importantly it was dry on the 06 November for the day at Westminster Abbey. This was the first opportunity for Jacqui and I to take part in this Act of Remembrance and it was taken with great pride. It was an experience not to be missed. HRH Prince Harry was the VVIP and after the short service he walked around, shook hands with all those in front of the plots and spoke to everyone.

The first Field of Remembrance was held in the grounds of Westminster Abbey in November 1928. That year only two Remembrance Tribute Crosses were planted. But it began a tradition that took root and has grown and grown over the decades. Each Poppy Cross carries a personal message to someone who lost his or her life in the Service of our country. I usually plant one to my father buried at Altdorf, killed whilst on operations with 620 Squadron Bomber Command and another to a fellow Petty Officer, one of seven shipmates from HMS Bulwark killed during operations in Sarawak.

Despite the solemnity of the occasion it was a very relaxed atmosphere. As with Cenotaph Parade there was a great family bond – the services family – amongst those attending. As we waited and after I chatted to the War Widows and the Police either side of our plot and the Burma Star Vets opposite exchanging jungle experiences. I had visitors one from the Royal Engineers and ROC 15 Group (a ROCA member), also Bomber Command Veteran who was ex 5 Group then 4 Group. I knew some of the other attendees from events where I have carried the Group Standard.

We were told that as well as the Westminster, there are five additional fields around the country, at Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Gateshead and Wootton Bassett .



British Torch of Remembrance Service, Dover

Another first for Jacqui and I was an invitation to take the No 1 Group Standard to a service at the Railway War Memorial, Dover Western Docks that commemorates several events. The Memorial is dedicated to the men of the South Eastern & Chatham Railway who gave their lives during the Great War. The service is also in recognition of the Remembrance Torch Delegation of British ex-servicemen en route to Belgium and that, at Dover on 10 November 1920, the body of the Unknown Warrior was landed at Admiralty Pier and taken by train to Victoria Station for internment at Westminster Abbey.

We arrived at Dover on the 08 November where high winds were whipping the sea over the harbour wall as we made our way gratefully into the shelter of the old station to be welcomed with tea, coffee and a reunion with some of the Standard Bearers. Also taking part was one of the Lay Readers to the Port of Dover and a former Crew One member, Malcolm Sawyer. The service was preceded by the Standards being marched on led by a piper from the Royal Gurkha Rifles to form up round the Memorial. The introduction highlighted the fact that the railway played a vital part in both World Wars transporting men and material. Then we were told of the poignant story behind the Torch of Remembrance and the Torch Delegation of British ex-servicemen.

At the 1926 conference of the Federation Nationale des Combattants de Belgique it was suggested that the ex-servicemen would like to have their own personal way of remembering their fallen comrades. It was proposed that a torch should be the symbol of the handing of the torch of freedom from father to son at the national memorial to the Unknown Soldier in Brussels. The ceremony should be held on 11 November each year. Each year nine torches were lit representing the nine provinces of Belgium, assembled and marched in darkness to the national memorial to pay homage, after which the torches were doused. This idea quickly spread and very soon there were some 300 torches being lit by the Burgomasters in villages and towns at local war memorials. This was usually done in the presence of school children. These torches were then taken to the principal town in the province, and after a short ceremony and act of homage, they were doused. The principal town torch ultimately took the road to Brussels, where with other torches it was marched in darkness on the 11 November

each year to pay homage to the eternal flame at the memorial to the Soldat Inconnu (the Unknown Soldier). In the course of time, torches from other countries where Belgian ex-servicemen had settled joined the ceremony. In 1966 the first British torch of remembrance made its journey from London to Brussels.

The Belgian and British national torches of remembrance were lit by the Dean of Westminster at the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in the presence of the Belgian Ambassador and, after the laying of wreaths and a short service, the torch bearers, standard bearers and pilgrims formed up behind the band and marched to the Belgian Embassy where the torches rested overnight. On the morning of the 08 November it travelled to Dover for the service before the pilgrimage continued by ferry to Ostend where there is a ceremony at the town war memorial. There would be visits to war cemeteries en route to Brussels. On 11 November the pilgrimage was present when the King of the Belgians rekindles the eternal flame at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The address by the Chaplain for Rail and British Transport Police staff focussed on Captain Noel Godfrey Chavasse, VC and Bar, MC, RAMC. The bravery of this medical officer was appropriate as Admiralty Pier saw ambulance trains running throughout the Great War. Following the service the Standards led the way to the memorial plaque that records that at Dover on 10 November 1920 the body of the Unknown Warrior was landed at Admiralty Pier and taken by train to Victoria Station for internment at Westminster Abbey

Following the Great War Admiralty Pier returned to its intended role in the Continental Services via the Boat Trains. The Station was converted in 1995 to the Cruise Liner Terminal but in the shell of the building the ghosts of the past remain.



Remembrance Sunday, Maidstone

The Group Standard was at Maidstone for Remembrance Sunday where it was due to be carried by Chris Hayward, escorted by Terry Giles. Unfortunately Chris hurt his ribs and pulled out two days before the event leaving Terry to carry the Standard. Jacqui agreed to act as escort along with their Grandson who was with them for the day. When forming up we found that Robin Green was the sole RAFA member and subsequently a flight of four was formed. Before stepping off there was a chance to speak to ROCA member Tony Webb and Padre Mandy Reynolds who we had met before at the Garrison Church and Medway Armed Forces Days.

The parade led by the Salvation Army Band was headed by two Squadrons of Royal Engineers, a Squadron of the Queen's Gurkha Engineers and 254 Medical Regiment. By the time the Veterans stepped off the band was far distant and inaudible especially amongst the large but appreciative crowds who applauded throughout for the long march down the High Street, across the Medway and up to the War Memorial near to Maidstone East Station. Frank and Brenda Tilley were waiting at The Broadway to take part in the service. It is

several years since I had been to Maidstone and had forgotten the long stand on the slope during the service. The wreaths were laid including one for ROCA by Frank and Brenda (and the Giles family cross by Oliver). The Parade then reformed and once the Civic Party had returned to the Town Hall we stepped off for the return march saluting the Mayor en route.

Although rain threatened briefly during the service the weather held fair for the whole three hour event much to the relief of those taking part in the parade and attending the service not forgetting for the crowds lining the route.



Western Front Association Parade, Victoria Station

Every year on 10 November, a small Remembrance service, organised by The Western Front Association, takes place between platforms 8 and 9 at Victoria Station. This service following the events at Dover two days earlier had additional meaning this year. This year it was a much larger event than usual with representatives from all Services; ten Chelsea Pensioners in ceremonial uniform and Cadets. The camaraderie amongst the attendees that extended to the commuters was exceptional with very positive comments from the public who seemed to be more aware of Remembrance this year

Following the muster played by the Band of the Fusilier Association thirty four standards (including the No 1 Group Standard) were marched on to the concourse. The plaque at Victoria Station that commemorates the event was the focus for the service. The opening remarks started with the history behind of how the Unknown Warrior was selected and its journey leaving France on the destroyer, HMS *Verdun*, piped aboard with an admiral's call. The *Verdun* sailed with an escort of six warships. As the flotilla carrying the casket closed on Dover Castle it received a 19-gun Field Marshal's salute. It was landed at Dover Marine Railway Station, Western Docks on 10 November. The coffin was carried to London in South Eastern and Chatham Railway General Utility Van No.132, which had previously carried the bodies of Edith Cavell and Charles Fryatt. (The van has been preserved by the Kent and East Sussex Railway). The train went to Victoria Station, where it arrived at platform 8 at 20.32 that evening and remained overnight.

The Last Post played note perfect by four buglers echoed around the Station and ensured that many of the commuters delayed their journey home. The exhortation, silence and reveille were followed with wreaths laid by many organisations. The first on behalf of HM The Queen laid the Warrant Officer in charge of the Queen's Colour Squadron RAF Regiment. The final wreath by a Normandy Veteran who the passed a Union Flag folded as it would be following a funeral to a young boy to ensure that there was a future. A short but moving parade and service that drew in the public before, during and after the event



St George's Chapel, Biggin Hill

At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month saw Jacqui and I at St George's Chapel, the last enclave of RAF Biggin Hill, for a service to mark the moment the Great War ended. We moved outside the Chapel to lower the Union Flag for the two minutes silence. Following the short act of Remembrance we waited to hear the Merlin engines of two Spitfires run up in preparation for a poppy drop on two of the chalk cross memorials cut into the North Down hillside. The first at Shoreham, Kent here the 100ft cross on the hill above the village is a memorial to the 50 villagers who were killed in the Great War. Then onto Lenham where there is a cross commemorating casualties of the two world wars, situated about a mile north of village. The cross was constructed in 1922 as a war memorial from donated funds from the village.

As we adjourned to the Chapel where the Flags of the Commonwealth and Allied countries whose pilots served at Biggin Hill are placed each side of the altar. A comment was made that there are 453 names of the aircrew from the fifty two Squadrons of Biggin Hill Sector who made the supreme sacrifice during the Second World War inscribed on the reredos. The same number as the British Forces killed during the recently ended campaign in Afghanistan.

With the future of the Chapel in doubt as the MoD state it is not essential to the Defence Estate it is worth recalling the words of Sir Winston Churchill who said "My personal association with Biggin Hill during the Battle of Britain lives in my mind. As a nation we have short memories and it is well that Memorials such as this should bring to our remembrance the cost of our victory in the days when one of our fighter pilots had to be worth ten. They died without seeing the reward of their efforts; we live to hold their reward inviolate and unfading"

For the Chapel the battle for survival continues in order to remember all those who heroically served at this iconic 11 Group Fighter Command Station not least the often forgotten three Military Medals awarded to WAAF's during the Battle of Britain.



We Will Remember Them, Wellington Arch

Remembrance Day ended with an invitation from English Heritage and War Memorials Trust to a reception at the Wellington Arch, with its unique views over Hyde Park Corner and the important collection of war memorials in its vicinity. Although the invitation was for my role as a Regional Volunteer with the War Memorials Trust, it was also of great interest to Jacqui in her role as a Trustee of the War Memorial Hall in St Mary Cray. The Memorial Plaques to the employees of Joynson Paper Mill was unveiled at the Mill in 1920. The Hall was built by the owners to relocate their Memorial when the mill closed in 1930. It was an opportunity to visit the exhibition *We Will Remember Them: London's Great War Memorials*. The inspiring exhibition highlighted some of London's war memorials in the care of English Heritage as well as looking at some of the grant, conservation and listing work undertaken by the two organisations over recent years.

The purpose of the event was to provide an insight the plans for the centenary of the First World War. Both organisations have challenges ahead, English Heritage to list 2500 during the period and the War Memorials Trust has been given access to £3m by the DCMS for restoration and repair of war memorials in England and Wales. Both need people on the ground. Have you looked at your local war memorial recently and is there any need for some attention. Is there a new role Observers who have eyes on the ground rather than the skies?

The underlying message was one of protecting our heritage a strong message that the ROC Association has picked up.

A closing thought on Remembrance

Whilst we all know the fourth verse of the poem 'For The Fallen' by Laurence Binyon it is worth reflecting on the message that he wrote to the Nation.

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.

Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.

**They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning;
We will remember them.**

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the night.

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain