

Remembrance not Regret



Gen Sir Mark Carleton-Smith

One hundred years ago today in solemn procession through the streets of our capital, tens of thousands gathered as silent witnesses to a national act of remembrance unprecedented in our island's long history. A gun carriage carrying an iron-banded coffin, draped in a union flag and topped by a wreath laid by His Majesty The King bore the 'unknown warrior', whose mortal remains were repatriated from the battlefields in France and transported to London to be buried at the head of the nave in Westminster Abbey among the nation's kings. Lutyens's Cenotaph, an empty tomb, was unveiled that day and together they commemorated 'the many multitude who during the Great War of 1914-1918 gave the most that man can give, life itself. For God, for King and Country, for loved ones, home and Empire, for the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world'. By the time Whitehall reopened to traffic a few days later flowers were stacked 10-feet high around the Cenotaph, over one

and a quarter million had filed past and the words 'they shall grow not old as we that are left grow old....' had become engraved in our national memory.

This simple act of national Remembrance gave a focal point for the country, a moment in which to reflect on individual sacrifice as part of a greater cause. A day of unity where the equality offered by the grave was transmuted to the living, it remains a day of reflection and recollection, of sadness and laughter, a day of humility and gratitude. And it has no creed or colour, simply a nation and a Commonwealth united in honouring our dead, no longer just those from the Great War but all those from a century of subsequent conflicts.



Remembrance seems even more poignant this year; a communion of a nation that continues to suffer from isolation and division – a reminder of the sacrifice it has taken to get here, a reminder of our common bonds and a reminder of our strength together. Nor is it just military personnel who are called upon to give up their lives for the

common good, and this year we have witnessed the striking courage and sacrifice made by our NHS and emergency services and all of those who strived to sustain the nation through the COVID-19 pandemic.

And Remembrance is of course not regret, it is an acknowledgement that our loved ones have not died in vain and that our common cause is stronger for their sacrifice. Indeed, in the military community there is often as much laughter as sadness as those serving and veterans reunite with old comrades and share their stories and memories of those who have gone before.

So, as we go about our business today, spare a thought for those who continue to put their lives in harm's way for the nation be it on active service or closer to home. And when you do, remember not just the fallen but what they have fallen for and be grateful for those who have been spared, for there is hope in the sadness and we can all do with a little hope.

General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith KCB CBE ADC Gen Chief of the General Staff