

Drumhead Service of Remembrance 2018

Address given by General Sir Richard Barrons KCB CBE

As we all know the Great War ended 100 years ago.

Between August 1914, when A and B Batteries deployed from Armoury House for home defence, and November 1918, when the guns were finally silent on all fronts, the Regiment had deployed two infantry battalions and five artillery batteries which had fought in France and Flanders, in Northern Italy, in Egypt, Aden, Palestine and Syria. More than 13,000 members of the Company fought either with the HAC, or (some 4000 on commissioning) with other units. Over 1600 were killed in action, or died of wounds or disease. In the course of 4 years members of the Company were awarded three Victoria Crosses, forty six Distinguished Service Orders, twenty five Distinguished Service Medals, four hundred and fifty-nine Military Crosses, one hundred and twenty-nine military medals and a host of other awards, including ten Distinguished Flying Crosses and sixty overseas awards.

The 1st Battalion, which left Armoury House in September 1914, were the first into action. After hard fighting at Spanbroeck Mollen and Hooge in 1915, at Calonne and Beaumont Hamel in 1916, the Battalion fought at Gavrelle in early 1917 when two of its officers were awarded the Victoria Cross, and many others received other gallantry decorations.

Next into action was B Battery, which was part of the force that seized Aden in mid-1915. This was followed by A Battery, who fought Senussi tribesmen in the Western Desert in late 1915. These two batteries then redeployed to the Suez Canal and were part of Allenby's successful attack on Palestine and Syria in 1917 and 1918.

But so often the strategic focus was on the Western Front and bit by bit more elements of the Regiment were drawn into the fight there. The 2nd Battalion went out in 1916 and suffered heavily at Beaumont Hamel, Bullecourt and Reutel before moving to Northern Italy as part of a force sent to steady the front after the German/Austro Hungarian offensive in October/November 1917. Three further batteries were deployed in 1917, all to the Western Front. All were to take part in the desperate fighting that stemmed the German offensives of Spring 1918, and the last 100 days of victories that culminated with the Armistice on 11th November 1918.

By this time, of course, Turkey had been knocked out of the War in October 1918, and the Austro Hungarian Empire on 4th November 1918. And it was in Italy that the 2nd Battalion had added the final battle honour to the colours of the Regiment when, following a brilliant crossing of a river in spate, it played a critical role in seizing the island of Pappadopoli, forcing the Piave River, and starting a chain of events that led to the Austrians suing for peace.

As the Padre might say, there endeth the lesson – the History lesson.

But, as we sit here today, surrounded by crosses, each one representing a member of our Regiment who died in that great conflict, how should we remember it?

We should remember it for its scale. A war on a scale never seen before. It was fought from Flanders to Italy, from Syria to East Africa. From the Falklands to the eastern seaboard of China. Indian and Chinese soldiers froze in France; men from Lancashire sweated in the jungles of Tanzania, or on the plains of Macedonia.

It was a war of science. Poison gas was used for the first time. The tank made its first appearance. At sea, the submarine threatened and in the air, the flimsy planes of 1914 became the multi-engined behemoths of 1918. Between the trenches, the machine gun reigned supreme and behind the line, men were killed by shells fired from unimaginable distances.

It was a war fought in indescribable filth and misery. We know about the mud of Passchendaele but we forget that in that mud were yesterday's dead, last month's dead, last year's skeletons. The men who fought in France and Flanders in 1917 lived in the detritus of 3 years of war: old wire, unexploded shells, abandoned equipment, rats, and rotting bodies.

But most of all we should also remember it was fought, largely, not by professional soldiers, but by men and women who, in 1914, if they were a clerk like Captain Pollard VC, or a baker, or banker, had every expectation of doing the same thing in 1915, or even 1916. They were people, quite ordinary people, whose lives were completely fragmented by the events of August 1914 and who were called upon to do extraordinary things for four years.

Exactly this is caught in '*Mud and Khaki, the Memoires of an Incomplete Soldier*', where HS Clapham describes the aftermath of the 1st Battalion's attack on Bellewaerde Ridge on 16th June 1915:

We have lost half the battalion and nearly all our officers, including the Colonel and Second in Command. Those of us who are left look worn and old, and our nerves are in tatters. We wake up with a start, and, if a shell burst a mile away, we jump out of ours skins. I am inclined to curse anything and anybody. I suppose that's nerves too.

The next day the Brigadier came around. We were all lying about half asleep at the time and, with a consideration somewhat unusual in a brass hat, he did not have us paraded. We were congratulated, and patted on the back, and told what we had done every good work. And next time we should have a chance on our own. What luck!

These chaps cannot understand that we are not soldiers and that we don't want to be soldiers and, though we will carry on as well as we can, we don't in the least like it, and are not the least pleased at the prospect of a brush with the Hun.

What we really like is the rest field after the brush is over. One can have no idea of the blessed peace of it, after a bad time. To lie on ones back in the sun, to watch the sunset, to wallow in the dirty washing pool, to get a clean shave again, not to be tired all over, to feel against all expectations that one is still alive...

And yet time and time again they rose to the occasion; in France, in Flanders, in Italy, in Palestine, in Syria, inspired by something that they had not known before the war, a culture that imbued the Regiment that they had joined.

As Lieutenant Haine remarked after he had been awarded his Victoria Cross:

“Being in a regiment like the HAC was not a difficult job for an officer because I mean it didn’t matter if you were there or not really, any lance corporal could take them on, or any private for that matter, and they were all equally good, so one doesn’t take credit on oneself in the slightest for these shows”...

It was a code that promoted determination and resilience, initiative, professionalism and self-confidence. A code that you, the members of our Company’ live by today and will pass on to your successors.

We are justly proud of the courage, determination, doggedness and professionalism of our forebears. Not much can really be added to the observation of Sir William Congreve VC, after the Battle of Gavrelle, who told the 1st Battalion on 28th June 1917:

“You had against you the finest troops of the German Army – The Prussian Guard – and you beat him. That is enough...”

Our physical memorial is the stained glass window embodying the figure of St George and the Company Coat of Arms on the Great Stair case in Armoury House, with the Roll of Honour in a vellum book below. This was unveiled by the Duke of Connaught on 4th July 1922. There are many other memorials too: including those at St Botolph’s and also in Finsbury. But the most resilient memorial is in our Regimental Hearts, and our determination to live and serve as they did:

Let us remember them... Arma Pacis Fulcra