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Remembering those who fought, and lost

NOVEMBER 2016

IN REMEMBRANCE...

The Soldier

By Robert Brooke

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by the suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

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NEW

Dedication Wall

Welcome to a NEW feature on the Forces War Records website. In commemoration of all those who fought and lost their lives fighting for freedom, you can now leave a lasting dedication for all to see on the Dedication Wall.

Simply upload your ancestor's photograph, write a short dedication and then share it via social sites with friends and family, to help grow your family tree.

The Poet McCrae

'In Flanders fields....' The iconic poem of war, loss, and remembrance that is largely responsible for the symbolism of the poppy in modern consciousness, is well known to many. However, its author, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, is somewhat less familiar today.

Born in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, McCrae, already a veteran of the Boer War, chose, with the outbreak of World War I, to serve the Empire again as a medical officer with the 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery. An author, artist, and physician, McCrae was on the front lines during the Second Battle of Ypres in the spring of 1915. As he tended scores of wounded men, McCrae's close friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed in action.

Although death was all around him, McCrae was deeply moved by the sudden loss of his comrade, prompting him to write the few lines that have since come to symbolise service and sacrifice. Accounts of the poem's origin vary, including one that says it was written while McCrae periodically gazed at the earthen mound of Helmer's temporary grave. Another says that he penned the lines in only 20 minutes following Helmer's funeral. McCrae, it has been said, was not pleased with the writing, so crumpled the paper, and threw it aside before another soldier convinced him to retain it. McCrae then worked for weeks to perfect the stanzas, finally believing the poem worthy of publication. After editors at The Spectator rejected it, 'In Flanders Fields' was published for the first time in Punch on December 8, 1915. An immediate sensation, it became one of the most popular and enduring poems of the 20th century, resonating with soldiers and civilians alike.

On January 28, 1918, McCrae himself became a casualty of war, dying from pneumonia. He is buried in the Commonwealth Cemetery of Wimereux, France.

Read an extract from McCrae's war diary from our Historic Documents Archive...

A Poet Encounters Tragedy – The Horror of Second Ypres by Lt Col John McCrae

SECTION X
Ypres: The Second Battle
April 22—May 7, 1915
A POET Encounters TRAGEDY
The Horror of Second Ypres
by Lieut.-Colonel John McCrae, M.D.
Author of "In Flanders Fields"

THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR:
Worldwide remembrance

All over Europe and beyond, different nations revere and remember their own Unknown Warriors from the Great War.

Britain and France were the first to inter their symbolic soldiers, while some other countries have only recently selected theirs. Certain warriors have been moved or forgotten, a few are buried far from home. Some of the honoured soldiers have been recovered from battlefields, others exhumed from allocated graveyards. All of the Unknown Warriors have one thing in common, though. They are anonymous, poor souls who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country and left no trace of their identity behind, with not so much as a resting place remaining to comfort their families. They are faceless, and so can be given a thousand faces; in this way, they become the focal point for the outpouring of love and sorrow from a grieving population.

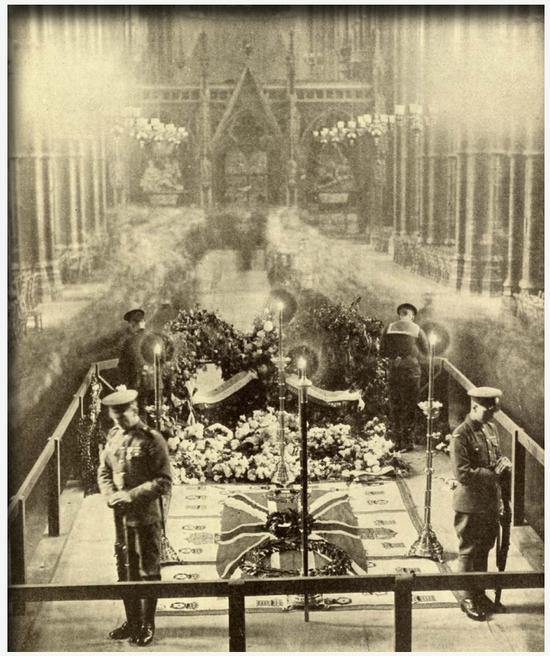
The notion of the Unknown Warrior was first conceived through a chance encounter. Mark Adkin's 'The Western Front Companion' tells how Reverend David Railton, M.C., was heading to his barracks in 191, having just completed a burial service, when he spotted a simple wooden cross on a solitary grave. On that cross was written, "An unknown soldier of the Black Watch". The sight raised a number of emotions in the Padre at once: deep sorrow that this man was dead and lost forever in a strange land; pride and love for the fallen warrior, who reminded him of many brave and cherished friends who had suffered a violent end for King and Country; and gratitude that, though this man had died alone, somebody had found him, buried him, mourned for him, and afforded him the final respect and dignity that his own family would have wished for.

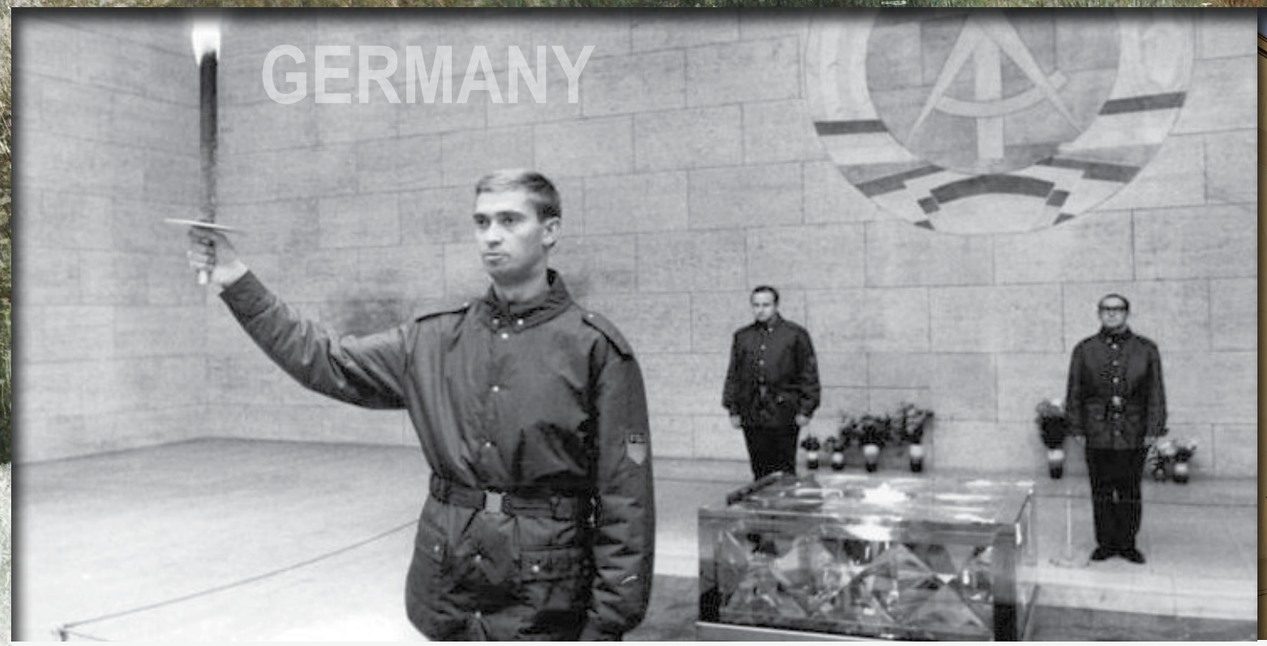
Originally Reverend Railton hoped that this particular man might be taken to Britain to represent all of the nation's unknown dead, but nobody responded to his entreaty. The Reverend didn't give up, though, and in 1920 his cause was supported first by the Dean of Westminster, then by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and finally by King George V. The latter became Chief Mourner when a warrior – not the Black Watch man in the end, so that no regiment could claim him as their own at the expense of other regiments – was brought back to Britain to be laid in state in Westminster Abbey.

The body selected to be so honoured was one of four recovered from the battlefields at the Somme, Aisne, Arras and Ypres, and was chosen at random, so that he could be any one of the unidentified British, Commonwealth and Dominion soldiers who died in those battles. Considering that Norman Fergusson's 'The First World War: a Miscellany' asserts that 54,415 soldiers with no known grave are commemorated on the Menin Gate at Ypres, and 72,203 lost British and South African soldiers are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial at the Somme, that's a lot of families who were able to gain some comfort, thinking that it could be their own son John, brother Fred, father Ted or husband Charlie, no longer far away in France or Belgium, but home, there to be visited, talked to, left flowers and messages, prayed for and wept over. Certainly, nobody would ever prove that it wasn't.

France's Unknown Warrior was buried the same day as Britain's, on the 11th of November, 1920. This warrior was selected among eight servicemen, recovered from the battlefields at Lorraine, Verdun, Champagne, Chemin des Dames, Ile de France, the Somme, Artois and Flanders. The ordinary French citizens were given the chance to pay homage to all eight bodies until just after midnight on the 10th. According to 'The Great War: I was There Part 48', from our Historic Documents Archive, the selection of the serviceman to be interred in pride of place beneath the Arc de Triomphe was made by a lowly Private, Auguste Tain, who had fought at Champagne, Verdun and Alsace, and whose father was one of the "unknown dead". Private Tain laid a bunch of flowers, collected among the Verdun graves, on one of the waiting coffins.

The chosen individual would, in the words of André Maginot, the wounded hero and Minister of Pensions who had been chosen to preside over the ceremony, be paid "Supreme homage, the most splendid that France has ever reserved for one of her children, but which is no whit too great when one considers that he will be an everlasting symbol of the unconquerable valour of the French soldier, whose anonymous sacrifice





Service Cross, the Belgian Croix de Guerre, the British Victoria Cross, the French Medaille Militaire and Croix de Guerre, the Italian Gold Medal for Bravery, the Romanian Virtues Militaria, the Czechoslovak War Cross and the Polish Virtuti Militari. The shower of honours proves how widely the Unknown Warrior is respected, worldwide, as representing not only the humble, but the bravest of the brave – those who gave their all when called by their countries to serve.

Portugal has not one, but two such honoured Unknown Soldiers. They too were brought home in 1921, from Flanders and Portuguese Africa, and taken to the Monastery of Batalha, where they lie beneath the vault of the Chapter House, lit by the "Flame of the Mother Country", an eternal flame. A Guard of Honour watches over the tomb.

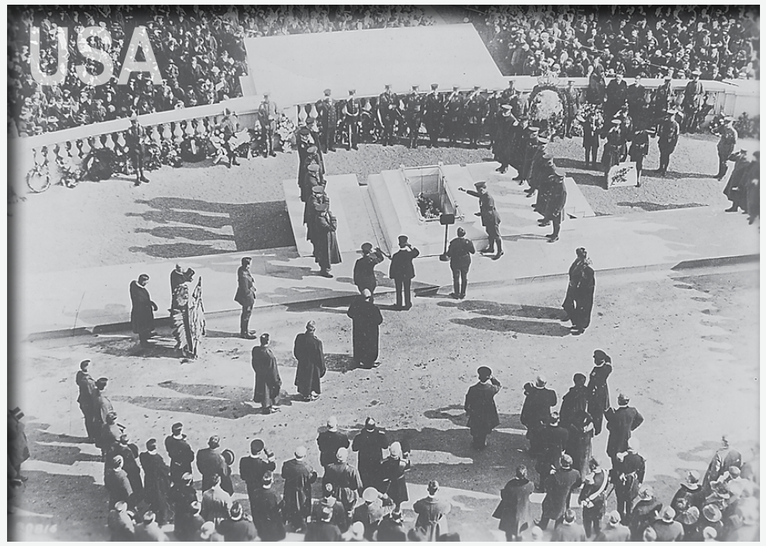
The Italian Unknown Warrior, meanwhile, has been incorporated into the National Monument of Victor Emmanuel II, the tribute to the first king of Unified Italy in 1861. The tomb lies in the Altare della Patria (Alter of the Fatherland). According to www.homeofheroes.com, it is reached by an imposing staircase, and lies beneath a statue of a horseman representing the king, next to another eternal flame, and again it is guarded by a two-man Honour Guard. Inspired by the British and French Unknown Warriors, the Italians petitioned their government for their own similar tribute, which was completed in 1924. The soldier that lies beneath the stone was selected not by a fellow soldier, nor by a dignitary, but by a mother who had lost her son in the war, so that he fittingly represents a lost and much missed generation. The tomb is called "The Alter of the Nation",

which beautifully sums up the raison d'être of the Unknown Warrier... to mean a great deal to many people without truly belonging to any particular group or person.

Of course, there are many Unknown Warriors entombed in Central nations as well as Allied ones, but Germany's story of remembrance is a somewhat unique one. Germany, of course, was left in a sorry state at the end of the war. Its towns were broken, its young men were dead, and all blame for starting the war was laid firmly at its door. The crippling scheme of reparations dictated by the Treaty of Versailles meant that little money was left to rebuild the nation. Many different political parties sprang up, all competing to scoop the credit for piecing Germany back together, and honouring the glorious dead was the last thing on anyone's mind. The nearest thing to a national memorial built for a long time was the Tannenberg Memorial, erected to herald a German victory over the Russians in 1914. Built in 1927, the impressive Octagonal structure housed not one, but 20 unknown soldiers. The one catch? It was located in Poland, so most German families would never have the chance to visit it. The monument was eventually converted into Hindenburg's tomb by the Nazis in 1934, and was later partially destroyed by the Red Army in 1945. So much for eternal glory.

The other German monument to the Unknown Warrior was converted from the long-established Neue Wache guardhouse in 1931, and it has been claimed that an Unknown Warrior was buried there at that time, though there is some confusion as to whether this happened or not. It was originally called 'The Memorial to the Fallen of the War', and the Nazis soon began to feature it in their propaganda efforts, playing on the sentiments of the newly recovered nation. Key Nazi figures were photographed paying their respects, march-pasts were held at the dawn of World War Two, and generally it soon became firmly associated with the party. When the Second Great War, too, ended in defeat for Germany, the memorial was re-marketed as 'monument to the victims of facism and militarism'. When the Berlin Wall fell, it was again re-packaged, according to http://militarybelin.wordpress.com, this time as a 'central memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the victims of war and tyranny'. Finally, in 1969, it underwent a final transformation. This time an eternal flame was lit in the hall, and the remains of both an unknown soldier and a nameless concentration camp victim were laid to rest there, with a permanent Guard of Honour watching over them. At last, Germany could mourn at a monument free of political taint or agenda, something that the people had waited a long time to do.

The proliferation of the Unknown Warrior worldwide shows just how terrible the Great War was, and just how many lives it destroyed. Part of his role is to embody the deep sorrows of war, and so serve as a deterrent to any nation tempted to wage it lightly. Simultaneously, he keeps the memory of loved ones and happy times alive. He represents the best and worst of human actions and emotions, and personifies each member of society, whether noble or humble. He belongs to nobody and to everybody. In other words, he is everything that Reverend Railton hoped he might be – and more.



A British casualty being assisted by his comrades to one of the barges in which the commandos were ferried from warships to the islands of Vaagso and Maaloy

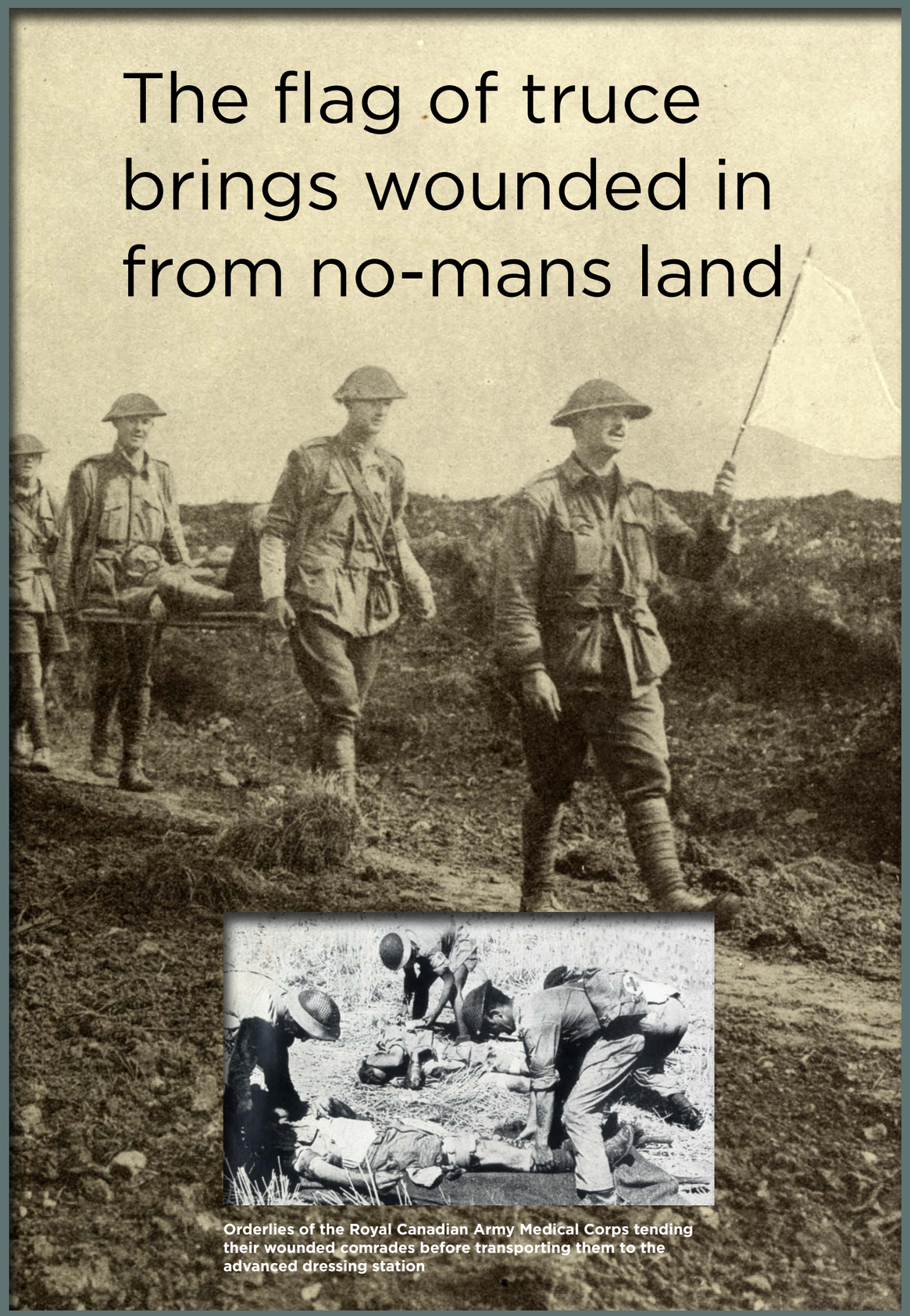
A British officer, his face and uniform splashed with blood is being supported by two comrades as he makes his way to the dressing station

A memorial service is being held at the graveside of war correspondents killed during fighting at Scafati on 28th September 1943

A padre putting a border of stones around a grave in Carnoy Valley, the duty of tending the graves taken on by Army Chaplains

A group of happy warriors recently returned from Greece, smiling cheerily in proof of their undiminished spirit

The flag of truce brings wounded in from no-mans land

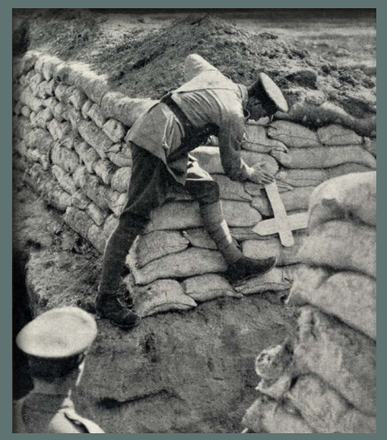


Orderlies of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps tending their wounded comrades before transporting them to the advanced dressing station

British wounded soldiers, Tunisia

Gallipoli 1915 two soldiers marking the grave of a comrade with the only material available a box-lid washed up on the beach

During the burial ceremony, soldiers firing a volley of fire over the grave of the British airmen, killed when jumping from an RAF bomber forced to land in flames in Holland



Mesopotamia 1917, a Graves Registration Officer locating the position of a grave in the trench marked by a rough cross

Gallipoli 1915 an Australian soldier carrying his wounded comrade at Walker's Ridge

A soldier carpenter behind the lines making wooden crosses to mark the graves of the fallen

Stretcher bearers of the 2nd Canadian Division bringing in wounded during the battle of Passchendaele

FEATURE:

Now is the time to draw on the inspiration of *"Our finest hour"*

By Jeremy Holtom, Music Producer and Grandson of Gerald Holtom designer of The Peace Symbol.

As Halloween approached in 1940, and the nights drew in, most people in Britain were still living their lives as if there was no war, though it had yet to really affect them personally. On the night of the 31st October 1940, children were still dressing up for Halloween, oblivious to the horrors from which even they could not be protected in the years to come. In the next four years the war would touch almost everyone. However, Churchill believed the war had already been won, as he called that night "Our finest hour" in anticipation of winning the "Battle Of Britain".

As All Hallows Eve (The real name of Halloween) approached in 1916, the terrible Battle of the Somme had changed the world forever. By its end on 18th November 1916 it had taken the lives of almost half a million brave British young men. Everyone then understood the realities of war even if most had never been near one. On 2nd November 1916 the churches were full on All Souls Day as almost everyone had lost, or knew someone who had, lost a family member.

In 1945 in the period between the end of the war with Germany and the dropping of the first atom bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, my former father in law, Bob Reeves travelled to Florida to begin training to fly for the RAF. He was in his early twenties. Young men like Bob were trained to fight for the Americans against Japan, but Bob never flew in combat. The dropping of the first atom bomb, named Little Boy, put paid to that.

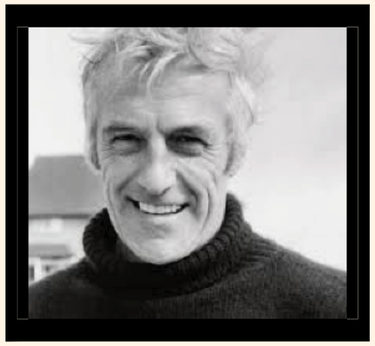
In 1945, as the paths of our families were beginning to converge; my grandfather Gerald Holtom had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector for part of the war. The fear of the destruction and horror of the war that he foresaw caused him and my grandmother to make the heartbreaking decision to send their only son to America for the duration of the war. At the age of three my father, Peter sailed for New York with 1,000 other children to be fostered by someone he had never met called Marjorie Dodson, a descendant of the second American President, John Adams. There were two ships each carrying 500 children. One was torpedoed by the Germans and 500 children died. My father was on the other ship, which meant I was born to write this article in 1957, the year the Soviet Union sent Sputnik, the first satellite into space.

After the war, a climate of caution and fear prevailed. Another potential enemy, the Soviet Union was rising under Stalin. In this climate of fear it was no surprise that safety, rather than a dream, won the battle for a choice of career. Bob joined his wife's family firm and for the next 45 or so years he worked as an optician earning a comfortable living but yearning for a more exciting life. Bob retired, but after a few years tragedy struck, and his wife Sheila, who he had loved faithfully for much of his life, was diagnosed with cancer and tragically died.

Many people in our world today would have settled for a quiet life, but at heart that was never Bob's way. He met a new partner, remarried, sold his house in the UK and went to live in South Africa where his daughters, my first wife Liz and her younger sister Jane had chosen to make a life. Recently Bob returned to the UK, and unbeknown to me, completed a circle. He flew the amazing plane that had played such an important part with courageous young men in stopping us all from falling beneath the jackboot. At the age of 92 Bob flew a Spitfire! I saw the pictures on Facebook and I was so inspired by the sight that I asked Bob if he would mind me writing an article about him.

My grandfather was a designer, and the anger and yearning for a world that did not resort to bombing and killing never left him. During the 1950s, while most people were living under austerity, my grandfather's flame continued to burn. He helped found the 'Ban The Bomb Movement' that became CND in the 1950s. In 1958, for the first of the Aldermaston marches, the symbol he designed first appeared. It was to grow into a powerful worldwide symbol of freedom in the 1960s, championed first by John Lennon and The Beatles. My Grandfather designed the peace symbol.

The image below is of an adventurer at heart, a yearning to go where no man has gone before, to believe in what's possible, and of living life fully every single day. An example, at 92 of the inspiring figures we should all yearn to become, for surely it is better late than never! So Remembrance Day is not only about remembering our countrymen who died, but remembering why we fought for freedom, and this was surely my grandfather's "finest hour".



Gerald Holtom my grandfather

Bob Reeves my former father in law who flew a spitfire for the first time in 2016 at the age of 92

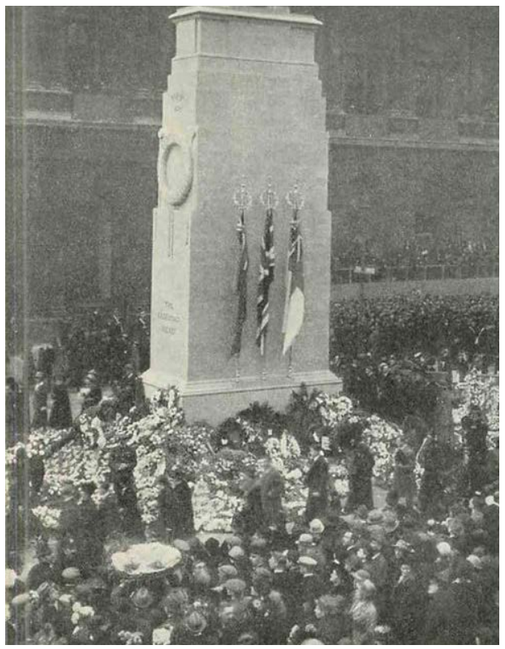
EXTRACT FROM OUR ARCHIVES:

When the Cenotaph was unveiled I stood in the hushed crowds

By James Bone “The Great War, I was there”

The distinguished London editor of the Manchester Guardian, Mr, James Bone, was present at the Cenotaph on the day when the national memorial was unveiled by King George V. The ceremony was combined with the burial In Westminster Abbey of the Unknown Warrior, and Mr. Bone here movingly describes the incidents which took place in Whitehall on that historic occasion on 11th November, 1920.

Today the man from France, does not stare widely round before dashing through the barrier where someone waits crying for him. He is met, but by personages so great. So far above him, that when he was alive they were like figures in mythology to him; perhaps he never even saw one of them except projected on the screen in some picture place. They are the men he made jokes about, felt a vague, strong, historic devotion for; the men on whose plans depended from day to day his own chances of life. They are drawn up now in salute, two lines of six- six admirals at one side, six generals at the other- and between them he is being borne on the gun-carriage.



“We know you well, dear comrade. We know that you these honours would seem the most gigantic of jokes if they were paid to yourself. Your guffaws would burst a coffin. But you understand us. It is hundreds and hundreds of thousands we are honouring in you person. Because you are nameless and were forgotten we chose you. You represent them all.”

The coffin, under its Union Jack is borne on the shoulders of ten men, their feet moving with the unanimous shuffle of a many-legged insect, and gently deposited on the gun-carriage.

Behind the bodyguard marches slowly a curious, miscellaneous procession – top hatted, pot-hatted men, some in soft hats, some in caps, some tall, some short, some maimed, some sturdy, some pale and ill, some with many ribbons on their coats, some with only a badge. They are discharged soldiers. In different ways-in dislocated lives, in shell-shock and injuries, in nerve strain and lost opportunities-they, too, have paid. They offered their lives; other things were taken from them instead.

As the dark procession became apparent out of the haze of Whitehall at the House Guards there was gathered to meet it at the Cenotaph an assembly representative of the Empire. With the King at the head, all tuned to face the unknown body on the gun-carriage.

Behind the King stood the Princes, and gathering representing the Statesmen of England and the Dominions, as well as the Forces and all the Churches.

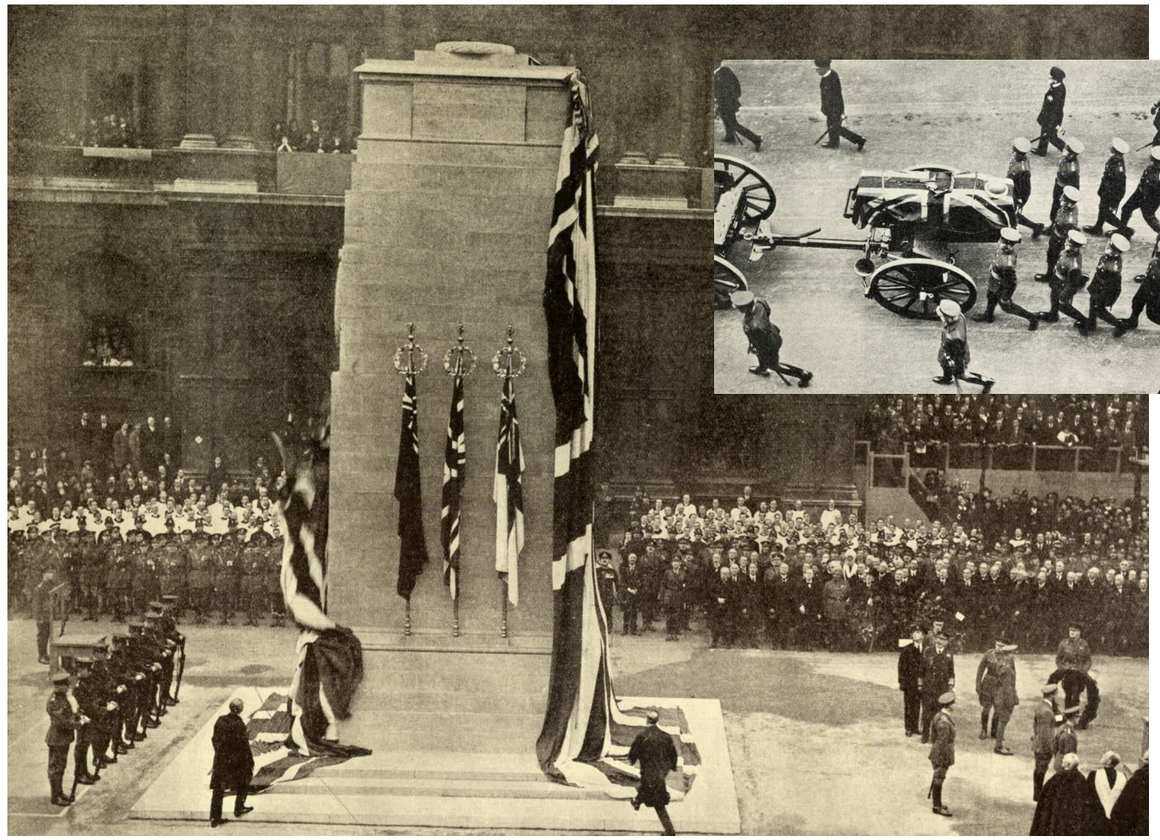
The Cenotaph seemed taller than its model because of the great Union Jacks that veiled it. Sir Edwin Lutyens stood near it in another company of officials. The crowd filed every inch of pavement, packed close and orderly like slates on a roof. So it was as far as the eye could see till the curtain of mist descended, a hundred yards on, and shut out the rest of the world from the ceremony at the Cenotaph.

The Assembly at the Cenotaph was now in exact formation, leaving a great open space. The Foot Guards at a certain distance began a beautiful swerve which took them to the west of the Cenotaph, which they passed and fell into position on the Abby side. The gun-carriage, with the Union Jack on the coffin came straight on and turned athwart the same opposite the King, who with all the officers present stood at the salute, the pall-bearers, all Admirals, Generals and Field-Marshals, falling into line on the north.

The music had stopper and there was a pause. Then the King stepped forward with a wreath and placed it on the coffin beside the steel helmet. Then the choir sang “O God, our help in ages past,” and another pause and the Archbishop of Canterbury’s voice was heard reciting the Lord’s Prayers, in which the King and people joined. The King then turned south and, touching a mechanism on the road, unveiled the Cenotaph, the two great Union Jacks falling to the ground with a tiny cloud of dust, settling in two coloured masses at the base.

The Cenotaph, its new Portland stone a pale lemon, rose before us naked and beautiful, focusing the growing light that was coming through the mist, and by its sudden apparition drawing all the significance of the moment to itself.

After that the great silence, when the last boom of Big Ben had ceased to



quiver in the air. All were uncovered, standing with bent heads. There was no motion even from the horses standing in the gun-carriage, but in the air some pigeons flew over to the Park. It was not complete silence, for there was a high, monotonous screaming from some boat on the river, like a far-away keening for the dead. The people stood frozen.

At last the King lifted his head, and motion returned to the crowd. A woman fainted, and she was carried away on a stretcher. She was almost a girl. A small bunch of lilies that she had dropped had been placed carefully behind her. The Last Post was sounded and the procession re-formed, after a beautiful evolution of the firing party of Guardsmen, who reversed arms and treaded their way wonderfully through the bands and resumed their position at the head.

The King and Princes walked to the Abby immediately behind the gun-carriage with the body, and behind them came the assembled statesmen and representatives of the Dominions, the great procession began which lasted with only a few pauses, all the day.

The V.C’s marched together, naval captains, gunners of the R.F.A, sergeants and soldiers of foot regiments, side by side with field officers, men in ordinary civilian clothes-they filed past inconspicuously, except that everyone was looking for them. Detachments from all branches of the Air Service and from the Mercantile Marine passed along, and a body of a gentlemen in plain clothes, wearing miniature medals, and many other parties about whom the crowd wished information. One man had a girl with him of eight or nine, dressed as an R.F.A gunner but without a hat, her long hair falling on her shoulders.

The organized bodies of ex-soldiers and ex-sailors handed over their wreaths as they passed, and soon the Cenotaph rose out of a wonderful garden. Daring a long pause while rails were being put up around the monument, an extraordinary sight was seen. A hundred policemen in their bulky coats suddenly appeared at a quick step, all carrying huge wreaths of flowers, sent for official placing. It was expressive of the emotional tension of the scene that no one wanted to smile at this sight.

The official part of the ceremony over, the great crowds that had gathered then began their pilgrimage; but a more moving sight appeared in six green motor coaches filled with men in hospital blue. In one coach there were men who had lost limbs. In another were blinded soldiers; in another soldiers with terrible injuries who could not rise like the others in their coaches as they came to the Cenotaph. Some of them must have envied their comrade who was to be buried in Westminster Abbey; some of them must have envied anyone who is dead. Men without legs, in hospital blue, passed along working their hand tricycles.

Other war legacies were the hearts of the countless women in black who were filing past. The police on horseback had carried to the crowd, “People with flowers this way.” The women in the crowd with flowers had raised them above their heads so that they could be helped to get into the road and so one saw all along Whitehall the black mass suddenly blooming in white blossom like hedgerows in April.

(From the Great War, I Was There – Forces War Records Historic Archive)