

## We Will Remember Them

**T**he eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month marks the coming into force of the armistice which signalled the end of World War One. At 11 a.m. on 11 November 1918 the guns fell silent after more than four years of continuous, aggressive warfare.

Armistice Day, now known as Remembrance Day, is set aside for us to remember those who gave their lives in both World Wars, as well as the many others who have died in conflicts since 1945. Tragically, most of the names still being added to war memorials throughout the UK are those who sacrificed their lives while only young. Many, many others have survived but carry with them terrible injuries and scars, both physical and mental. To be silent to remember them all for only two minutes in the course of a year seems too little in the light of such overwhelming sacrifice.

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On Remembrance Day we reflect as we recite words from the poem 'For the Fallen', written by Laurence Binyon:

They shall not grow 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.<sup>1</sup>

What emotions of gratitude and grief, pride and perplexity, submission and sorrow fill our minds in the quiet moments of meditation, especially as memories of loved ones are stirred.

Flanders, the western part of Belgium, was the scene of some of the most concentrated fighting in World War One. When there was utter devastation of buildings, roads and trees, only the poppy survived. John McCrae, a doctor serving with the Canadian Armed Forces, was so moved by what he saw that, in 1915, he scribbled in his pocket notebook the following poem:

'In Flanders Fields'  
In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

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We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.<sup>2</sup>

Later that year the poem was published by *Punch* magazine, and so the poppy became the symbol of soldiers who died in battle.

Individual battles during World War One conjure up particular details in our minds. With the Battle of the Somme, you think of over-the-top charges and thousands of British soldiers mown down by German machine guns. With Passchendaele, you think of carnage and mud. Just over 100 years have elapsed since that campaign ended in ignominious abandonment, but the images have entered our collective psyche and are still with us today.

It is well known that it rained, and that it rained hard. In fact, the rainfall in low-lying Belgium in August 1917 was the worst that they had experienced for thirty years. Living and fighting in these conditions are far removed from those of modern

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warfare; we struggle to imagine what it must have been like.<sup>3</sup>

While today's battlefields look very different from those of a century ago, the challenges and sacrifices continue. We need to remember those who have fallen, as well as those affected by the traumas of war.

As we stand and remember each year, what can we say? Is there any hope for our world? When will we call 'time' on these wars and bloody battles? Can peace ever be brokered in our world? In the battles of our personal lives?

What follows is the true story of former Scots Guardsman Gavin Dickson (First Battalion Scots Guards, 2000–2013). He recalls his life as a serving soldier in the British Army but honestly shares how he has found lasting peace amid the challenges and mess of everyday life ...

## **A Soldier's Story – ASR Gavin Dickson**

My cousin Adrian was in the Royal Signals. Every time he came home, he would tell us many stories of his life in the forces. My uncle was based in Germany too. Many recruits come from a military background, so it was not unusual for me to want to follow in my family's footsteps. At the age of sixteen I probably could have joined any regiment but I chose the Scots Guards, which is an infantry unit.

However, I was very small for my age and had been bullied for it at school. I was only eight stone with a small frame. When I had my army daysack on my back, the straps would fall off because my shoulders were so slight!

I would say that when I enlisted I was smart but didn't have much common sense. It took me a long time to gain some traction in the military.

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The early days of my military career could be described as my not really knowing much nor grasping what I was supposed to be doing. Most of my peers who joined at the same time were in the same boat as me. Being young, the majority of us didn't progress up the ranks into leadership roles as much as we should have.

My training commenced at Glencorse in Penicuik, Scotland on the junior leadership programme, which lasted six months. After that I was posted to Catterick, North Yorkshire for Phase 2 at the Infantry Training Centre. Then I headed down south to London, where I was to experience my first taste of the 'real' army as a Queen's Guardsman with F Company in the First Battalion Scots Guards. As this is the ceremonial company, it involved donning their bright red uniform and wearing their furry hat!<sup>4</sup>

I was in London for about three years. At first this was with F Company in Chelsea Barracks, which was demolished on 26 September 2008 after the site was sold for a housing development. I then moved to C Company as a rifleman. We were based at Wellington Barracks in Birdcage Walk, which is right beside Buckingham Palace, and the battalion took its turn guarding the palace. We also took part in leading the Queen's birthday parade: Trooping the Colour. When we were not guarding the Queen, we did a lot of

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military exercises, training to be ready for war or any other event that needed military intervention.

One such intervention came during the Fire Brigade strikes in 2002 and 2003; we became temporary firefighters. It was an interesting time, to say the least! Once my friend Kenny and I were getting a hose out. I would usually be the standpipe man responsible for turning the water on and then I would join the others extending the rest of the hose. That day Kenny and I were putting on the very thin nozzle together. But with both of us being slightly built, and the water pressure being so great, we were blown back into a greenhouse, smashing all the glass, which then fell on top of us!

We did a lot of good in this temporary role and we travelled all around London as well. However, the Fire Brigade strikes stopped my regiment going on an important training exercise in Kenya. This in turn stopped my regiment from being available for the Iraq invasion. Having said that, I would have two operational tours of Iraq: Telic 5 in 2005 and Telic 7 in 2007.

Salisbury Plain was one of the places where we did lots of exercises and military manoeuvres. During my first military exercise with F Company, I very quickly found myself involved with signals, using and carrying radio equipment. I also did a similar role in Sennybridge (the third largest

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military training area in the UK, which lies to the north of the Brecon Beacons National Park in Wales). I had quite an affinity with radio communications, which I maintained all through my army career, whether in a fighting platoon, in the Signals or in the Operations Room in Battalion Headquarters.

Having been based in London, we were then moved to Europe, where we spent six years in Munster, Germany. During that time, we left the role of light infantry and went into armoured infantry, in particular using the Warrior vehicles. These are tracked infantry fighting vehicles – ones that move on caterpillar treads across rough terrain. The Warrior is armed with a 30mm Rarden L21A1 cannon and a 7.62mm chain gun, as well as having a turret that can traverse 360 degrees.<sup>5</sup> I enjoyed this period very much – it was the most stable time I experienced.

### **Personal battles**

Regretfully, I was never the most moral of people. When I got to Germany, I would visit what Germans called ‘nightclubs’, but what we might recognise as whorehouses, to use prostitutes. I was also known as the man to go and see if you wanted pornography. I had quite a lot of it – a cupboard full of the stuff. This was a good number of years ago, so there wasn’t so much of the easy



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access that the Internet provides today. Men would come to me to borrow the literature I had stashed away.

Men and alcohol are also never far away from each other. Looking back I would describe myself as 'alcohol dependent'. It was not unusual for me to be found in the gutter, totally inebriated. One time, after a very heavy night of drinking, I got into a taxi and was delivered to the wrong camp in Germany! Instead of trying to find my way around, I just slept on the pavement. The next morning was very 'interesting' as, having been delivered back to my camp, I then had to face the Regimental Sergeant Major. I had been lifted from my bed and put into, or rather poured into, my uniform, shaved and then posted at his door, where he tore me apart by shouting very loudly at me for several minutes. It was very uncomfortable, but totally deserved.

I was not the worst kind of guy in the world; I was not the best sort of person either. While not religious, I thought of myself as 'good' and did not really see myself as a 'sinner'. Like many of the young soldiers who join the army, my home life was not straightforward: I can't say that I was raised in a very happy home. When I was a small child, my dad was violent towards my mother, which I witnessed several times. My mum and dad divorced when I was aged about eight. After that

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most contact with my father was severed until my late teens when I resumed contact with him. This was followed by another lapse in communication until a few years ago. It is only recently that I have felt the beginnings of a relationship with him, both of us being different people from those violent home days.

When I was twelve, my mother met and married my stepdad. With her I grew up in a non-religious home but my mother was very superstitious. She would visit gypsy tents and take part in tarot card readings. Later on in life she loved to watch programmes such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. She would want to emulate what she saw, even though this travellers' way of life is not in our DNA. It seemed she was drawn to that culture, with its big dresses and superstition, as well as being attracted to occult practices such as psychics, Ouija boards and the like.

My mother tried very hard to give us a 'good life' as she saw it, and even more so during those years as a single mother. She would work all the hours she could to provide me and my sister with lots of stuff. However, with my mother working so hard, my sister and I were often left to ourselves. I would get up at 6 a.m., then wake my sister at 8 a.m. to get her up before going to primary school. After work, my mother was often extremely tired. She became unwell, being diagnosed after