

“Today is Peace Day”

That was the headline in the Manchester Guardian on 11th November 1919 on the first remembering of Armistice Day, one year after the ceasefire that ended the bloodshed of World War 1. “Today is Peace Day”... that was no platitude or cliché in 1919. It was a statement filled with hope and longing from a nation with searing and heart-wrenching loss at its core.

Today is Peace Day, is a sentence which has within it a statement of such hope and longing that surely ‘this is enough’ to end all war. How much more trauma does a world have to see, to realise that peace must surpass all, and that love not envy, should crown all things. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George said in the House of Commons on 11th November 1918 "At eleven o'clock this morning came to an end the cruellest and most terrible War that has ever scourged mankind. I hope we may say that thus; this fateful morning, came to an end all wars." It is in that hope, that we meet here this morning, however wishful, however aspirant or ambitious a hope it may have been. We meet so that we may rekindle that hope and longing as we say, year in and year out, Today is Peace Day, in the hope that one day that might actually be true as was hoped to have been. A day of commemoration, of mourning and of hope that out of turmoil may one day come peace.

This morning’s reading from the Old Testament, creates a wonderful image of peace for our imagination to play with. It speaks of weapons of war; like swords, being turned into tools of creativity and sustainability; like ploughs. A wonderful image of hope and longing that not only will there be no war, but there will also be true peace.

Some months after the cease fire of world war one, Lloyd George said in the house of commons:

"What is our task? To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in."

Because of course, in 1918, Britain wasn’t fit for heroes. While victory parades took place marking the end of WW1, Britain was a land of unemployment and poor housing; a land which saw ex-servicemen out of work, and women who had previously stepped up to the plate, dismissed from their work or payed much less to their male counterparts. For those who lived through the aftermath of World War I, they were not ready for victory parades. So much so that a number of ex-servicemen boycotted the triumphant victory parades which followed the end of WWI that spoke of heroes and victories in a land which felt very far from victory. In November 1919, however, as armistice day was remembered for the first time, we see not a day of victory, not a day of waving union jacks with pride, but a day of commemoration, of mourning and a day that yearned for peace from the great cost that had been paid.

The message that this is peace day is truly timeless.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 men signed up in their thousands and amongst them was a young man called Reginald or Reggie and two older brothers. Reggie was a trained teacher, gaining a Bachelor of Science Degree from Reading Teacher Training college. However, when the war came Reggie’s teaching career was put on hold, and Reggie became a Captain in the 13th Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, his eldest brother served as a Civil Servant in the Admiralty and his other brother as a Sargent in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Reggie however 100 years ago this year, after surviving 3 years of active service, was killed by an exploding shell on 3rd May 1917 at the Battle of Arras. Reggie did not make his teaching career. And a few days after hearing the news of her youngest son’s death, Laura, Reggie’s Mother died in grief, leaving Joseph, Reggie’s father widowed and without his youngest son. Stories like these are commonplace. So many families have narratives such as these in their pasts, stories of families being torn apart in both world wars and in conflicts since.

The story of Reggie, however is part of my family story. Reggie is my great, great uncle and exactly 100 years separate Reggie and I. He was born in 1894 and I was born in 1994. This year of 2017 I am here today in relative peacetime at the age of 23, Reggie at the age of 23 was called to make the ultimate sacrifice; it is a stark

contrast. So many people have stories like these, of families, comrades and friends, who bare such grief, due to the ravages of war. In 1918 how must it have felt, for mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, to lose their loved ones while they live in a country that is still economically and socially on its knees. I feel I can say with relative confidence, that following the end of both world wars and conflicts since, not many people would attend a victory parade with hearts filled with pride, but with longing. Surely the price they paid must be enough for peace.

In this 99th anniversary year of the guns falling silent, marking the ceasefire of world war one, as we begin to approach the anniversary of 100 years after the ceasefire of world war one, the Royal British Legion remind us, through their work, to remember, both the cost of the lives of those who have paid the ultimate price throughout the years, but also those left behind. Their comrades, their families and friends, as we echo this morning *their* sufferings poured out on armistice day. We meet every year so that we may rekindle *their* searing hope and longing of so many who have lost loved ones in conflicts throughout the ages, as we echo the words; Today is Peace Day. However wishful, however aspirant or ambitious a hope it may be, that one day, out of so much suffering may come, not destruction but creativity, not war but true peace.