

Remembrance 2017 given by the Revd.Nicki McNelly

It was 4 am, we had been sitting on the cliffs for nearly an hour, we were waiting for the sun to rise before we began our attack on the camp in the valley below. Code word lechyd da (Welsh for cheers) started the offensive. I picked up my SMG, pointed it down toward the valley but could not pull the trigger. I felt sick and couldn't move from my position.

I was on exercise with members of 42 Commando and the Combined Cadet Force at Episkopi, Cyprus. They needed a female chaperone and I was in my last few weeks in the army before marrying Iain, so had volunteered to go along.

I had been firing guns at targets for nearly eight years, in fact I was classified as a 'marksman', but when it came to actually pointing a weapon at another human being, even though it was loaded with blanks, I just couldn't do it.

I had joined the army to do sport and see the world. Thankfully when I was serving, women were not armed and were not sent into areas of conflict - and to be honest, I did spend most of my time playing sport and travelling.

However, the guys of 42 Commando who were on this Cadet Force exercise with me had been among the first to step onto the Falkland Islands and had experienced things I could never have imagined and would not wish to share with you. They too probably joined the Marines to play sport and see the world, but the military was changing. These men had no choice about pulling their trigger, like the millions before them and those after them, they had been sent into war and had to defend themselves and their country.

I have spent the last forty years attending Remembrance Services with people who were not old enough to remember WWI or WWII, we learnt about it at school or through family members and paraded every year wearing our poppies with pride.

Each year there is much discussion about why people are wearing poppies and when it is appropriate to start wearing them. The younger generation may find it easier to relate Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than WWI to the wearing of the poppy, but that

doesn't mean they have forgotten why we remember.

What everyone is remembering is the sacrifice made. Approximately 4000 a week killed in WWI, 1500 in WWII. Total deaths Malaya, 1443, Korea, 1129, Northern Ireland 1441, 237 killed in the Falklands, 72 killed in Bosnia, 179 killed in Iraq, 454 in Afghanistan. There's also the unknown number, such as one young soldier's funeral that I took, who took her own life on returning from operations. Sadly, a frequent event.

While checking out these figures, I learnt that only two years since the end of WW1 have we suffered no military deaths in areas of conflict – 1968 and 2015.

But we must also not forget the millions of innocent lives affected by these wars and conflicts. The number of families torn apart, people killed, injured, broken by wars and conflicts they did not wish to be a part of.

The cost of hostilities in human terms is enormous.

I received an email a few years back and I would like to share some of its content with you.

“The average British soldier is 19 years old...

He has seen more suffering and death than he should have in his short lifetime. He has wept in public and in private, for friends who have fallen in combat and he is unashamed to show it or admit it. He feels every bugle note of the 'Last Post' or 'Sunset' vibrate through his body while standing rigidly to attention. He's not afraid to reprimand anyone who shows disrespect when the Regimental Colours are on display or the National Anthem is played; yet in an odd twist, he would defend anyone's right to be an individual.

Just as with generations of young people before him, he is paying the price for our freedom.

He is the latest in a long thin line of British Fighting Men that have kept this country free for hundreds of years. He asks for nothing from us except our respect, friendship and understanding.

We may not like what he does, but sometimes he doesn't like it either - he just has it to do. Remember him always, for he has earned our respect and admiration with his blood.

And now we also have brave young women putting themselves in harm's way, doing their part in this tradition of going to war when our nation's politicians call on us to do so.”

Today, as we gather around this holy table, remembering what Jesus did for us, let us also spend this day remembering all those who have died in acts of war and conflict, military and civilian.

Rest eternal grant unto them Lord and let light perpetual shine upon them.

Amen