

Commemoration of the First World War
Monday 4th August 2014

1. July 1914 was by all accounts a gloriously sunny month. Islanders and visitors alike were enjoying it and the Jersey potato season had produced a bumper crop. All seemed well with the world. But the murder of two people in far off Sarajevo on 28th June 1914 was to change everything.

2. At 11 o'clock this evening, a single candle will illuminate the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster at the conclusion of a candlelit vigil. It will mark, to the exact hour, one hundred years since the declaration of a war which was to devastate Europe.

3. This evening we are holding our own ceremony to remember the part which Jersey and its citizens played in the First World War. Mirroring the wider national ceremonies, representatives of the 12 parish communities will extinguish lanterns to leave a single flame burning in the Square. Wreaths will be laid as a mark of respect to those who perished in the conflict – they came from every parish in the Island.

4. We are of course all very aware of the effect of the Second World War on Jersey. It led, after all, to five years of occupation by enemy forces. The effect of the First World War on the Island is less widely known and was less dramatic; but it was equally profound. The declaration of war on 4th August immediately transformed the daily lives of those living in Jersey. Within a month, some 2000 French nationals left the Island in response to the call up received from the French Government. Overnight, Jersey's agricultural labour force was decimated.

5. Within 24 hours of the declaration of war, the States had assembled to pass emergency legislation to ensure that the Island would have sufficient food and fuel to sustain its population. The following week, funds were approved to support the mobilisation of the Militia. A network of observation posts was established around the Island to protect the coastline from attack. As it happened, this never materialised, but the Island, like the rest of Europe suffered in a different way.

6. Few in 1914 could have foreseen the extraordinary scale of the loss of human life at the Front over more than four years. In total, some 16 million people perished, with more than 20 million injured. It is difficult to relate numbers as large as these to a small island like Jersey, but on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the British Army suffered casualties (killed or wounded) greater than the entire population of the Island at the time.

7. The conditions on the Front were truly terrible. I would like to quote from a letter which one British soldier wrote home:-

“Imagine a broad belt 10 miles in width which is littered with the bodies of men and scarified with their rude graves; in which farms, villages and cottages are shapeless heaps of blackened masonry; in which fields, roads and trees are pitted and torn and twisted by shells and disfigured by dead horses, cattle, sheep and goats, scattered in every attitude of repulsive distortion and dismemberment. Day and night are made hideous by the incessant crash and whistle and roar of every sort of projectile, by sinister columns of smoke and flames, by the cries of wounded men, by the piteous call of animals abandoned, starved. Along this terrain of death stretch parallel lines of trenches, hardly visible except to the aeroplanes which continually hover over them, menacing and uncanny harbingers of fresh

showers of destruction. In those trenches crouch men coated in mud, unshaven, hollow-eyed with strain, unable to reply to the everlasting rain of shells hurled at them from 3, 4 or 5 miles away, and positively welcoming an infantry attack as a chance of meeting and matching themselves against human assailants and not against invisible machines.”

8. Jersey contributed its share of young men to the War effort, either as volunteers at the beginning of the War or later as conscripts, when legislation was passed to require men of between 18 and 41 to serve their country. Some of those who joined up freely in the early months of the War responded to a direct call made by the States. On 15th December 2014 States minutes record that *“With unanimous voice the States decided to make a call to the Island, particularly to the Royal Militia of the Island, to put a contingent of Jersey volunteers at the service of the Crown.”*

9. Their story is well told in Ian Ronayne’s book *“Ours: the Jersey Pals in the First World War”* which details the involvement of about 325 men, as members of the Royal Irish Rifles, in some of the bloodiest of the campaigns, including actions at the Somme and Cambrai. A quarter of them were never to return to their native Island.

10. But the Jersey Pals were just a small proportion of islanders who served. Other young Jersey men had already volunteered to join the British Army before the Jersey contingent was established and more would follow later. In all, about 6000 Islanders served in the British forces during the conflict and, if one adds in those who served in the French armed forces or as merchant seamen, the total contribution was some 19% of the population.

- 11.If the extent of the sacrifice could not have been foreseen when war was declared, it was certainly well understood when hostilities ended. Some 1600 men connected with the Island fell in action or died from wounds received in the War. There must have been comparatively few families who were not affected by being left without a son, husband, father or relative.
- 12.Why is it important to mark an event which occurred 100 years ago? I think there are two main reasons. First, we must never forget the sacrifice of those who died. We owe it to them and to their memory. But secondly, we have to learn from the errors of the past. To the present generation it seems inconceivable that, only 21 years after the end of the Great War, with the catastrophic loss of life involved, Europe was once again at war. By recalling the sacrifice and suffering of the First World War as well as the Second, we remind ourselves of the importance of trying to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again.
- 13.So, on this night, let us pay our respects to the brave young men who gave their lives so that we might be free and whose sacrifice is captured so eloquently in the Kohima Epitaph, which we shall hear shortly *“For their tomorrow, we gave our today”*.