

Dedication of the RGLI Memorial

Masnières - 30 Nov 2017

Madame Senatrice, Monsieur Député, Monsieur Sous-Préfet and Monsieur le Maire, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today, as the personal representative in the Bailiwick of Guernsey of Her Majesty The Queen, to mark this significant anniversary.

British units that fought at Cambrai in 1917 were mostly made up of conscripts, and the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry was no exception. But there was one important difference: Guernsey was not obliged to introduce conscription.

This peculiarity stemmed from the historic constitutional relationship between the Channel Islands and the United Kingdom. The Islands formed part of the Duchy of Normandy from 933, and helped their Duke, William the Conqueror, to seize the English Crown in 1066. When his successor King Richard lost continental Normandy in 1204, the Islands faced a choice: either to become French or to swear allegiance to the English Crown. A deal was struck: they became personal possessions of the Crown, with privileges that continue to this day; including the concession that islanders cannot be conscripted unless their Sovereign's life is threatened or England faces invasion.

Channel Islanders value their Norman roots. Many family names of the men who fought here are identical to those on French war memorials throughout the Cotentin. The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry's regimental march was based on a Norman marching song, sung at the Battle of Hastings. Men of Guernsey, Alderney and Sark were proud to serve their Sovereign - even if they still called him their Duke, as some still do today. English was seldom their first language. They spoke Norman French, conversing freely with your predecessors. It's fair to say that this was a British battalion like no other.

In 1914 the first Channel Island volunteers fought for France, which was not only nearer than England, but also closer for many in terms of language and blood. Men of the Guernsey Militia volunteered for the British Army in 1915, forming an infantry company that served with the Royal Irish Regiment in Belgium and France.

But the lack of a unit bearing Guernsey's name was keenly felt - especially at Government House. It was largely through pressure from the Lieutenant-Governor, my predecessor Lt-General Sir Reginald Hart, that Guernsey's government voted not only to waive its privilege and introduce conscription, but also to raise an infantry regiment. The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry joined the order of battle shortly before Christmas 1916.

In reality, most men went willingly. On 1st June 1916, 44 Officers and 964 men of the 1st Battalion – affectionately known as *the Norman Ten Hundred* - sailed for England with their mascot Joey, a donkey: the unofficial symbol of Guernsey, whose qualities of stubbornness and determination are still admired by islanders. They would soon be tested.

Earlier this year we welcomed Sénateur Philippe Bas, Monsieur le Maire and French Naval Attaché Captain François Moucheboeuf to Guernsey, to commemorate that centenary.

In August 1917, British generals began planning a large-scale raid against Cambrai, a major rail centre with strong German defences. It would employ massive use of a new technology: the tank. The lack of British success at the Passchendaele and the need to draw attention from the Italian front led the staff to expand the raid into an offensive. The plan was for an attack by two infantry Corps of the 3rd Army, with a Cavalry Corps in reserve. Surprise would be achieved by the lack of a preliminary bombardment, with tanks spearheading the assault.

The offensive launched before dawn on 20th November. Tanks smashed the German defences, terrifying the enemy, and by nightfall the 3rd Army had penetrated 8km, destroying two divisions and capturing 7,500 prisoners. Within the 29th Division, The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry seized Nine Wood (Bois Neuf) near here, with relatively light casualties. In Britain there was jubilation and church bells rang for the first time since 1914.

But the arrival of a fresh German division stalled the offensive. The enemy counterattacked, causing heavy tank losses. German reinforcement of this sector was almost complete by 26th November. The last British attacks were defeated and the Germans switched to offensive operations, targeting the entire salient by striking directly into the original British positions.

On this morning in 1917 a massive German counterattack ripped open the 29th Division's line. The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry was ordered south from the catacombs of Masnières to hold Les Rues Vertes, falling back 500m before retaking this village twice at the point of a bayonet amid heavy and vicious hand-to-hand fighting.

This memorial marks the position held for two days by A Company, while Captain Gee earned his Victoria Cross – Britain's highest gallantry award – nearby. On this spot Private Frederick Mahy sustained injuries that resulted in the loss of his legs, while three men of Sark, an island of less than 5½ km², died fighting here, with a fourth succumbing later. Many still lie here, their remains undiscovered.

When the Battalion was withdrawn on 2nd December it had lost nearly half its total strength. The Commanding Officer of the 29th Division - by coincidence a Guernseyman - wrote to the Bailiff: 'Guernsey has every reason to feel the greatest pride in her sons.' Les Rues Vertes was the end of a generation in Guernsey.

When the battle ended on 5th December the British had lost most of their gains of ground and each side had suffered around 45,000 casualties. Although a tactical stalemate, the importance of Cambrai lay in the use of massed tank attacks and infiltration tactics, which shaped future warfare.

It is estimated that around 8,000 islanders fought in the Great War, of whom 1,470 never returned. Many others came home with life-changing injuries. No local family was left untouched and the population took longer than mainland Britain to return to pre-War levels.

In 1913 Guernsey exported almost half a million tons of granite, so this is a most fitting memorial to the bravery of those who held the British line here, while all around them fell back. It is also a milestone, on a 100-year journey that sees the communities of Masnières and the Bailiwick of Guernsey finally united in peace and freedom.

I know that plans are in place for that relationship to grow and I very much welcome that initiative.