

Masnières Service of Remembrance - Address

Sun 01 Dec 24

Senator Monsieur Cambier, Vice-Président Monsieur Siegler, Sous-Préfet Monsieur Douhane, Mairie Monsieur Noblecourt, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here as His Majesty's personal representative to the Bailiwick of Guernsey.

The Bailiwick of Guernsey is made up of the three main islands of Guernsey, Alderney and Sark, which, together, form a Dependency of the Crown. Originally part of the Duchy of Normandy, they were granted three privileges when they chose to side with the English Crown in 1204. One was that Islanders could not be called for military service except to rescue the Sovereign, if captured, or to reconquer England. That held true until 1916, when the Lt-Governor of the day encouraged Guernsey's parliament to raise a local infantry regiment. Some might say the islands had already done enough for the war effort. The first Islanders left in 1914 to join the French Army, while the Royal Guernsey Militia volunteered *en masse* to join the British Army, serving in the 6th Royal Irish Regiment on the Somme in 1915.

It is seven years since the wintry day when a Guernsey granite memorial was unveiled here in Les Rue Vertes, in memory of The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry: the Bailiwick's first – and hopefully last - conscripted soldiers.

British and Commonwealth war memorials are a common sight in this part of France but the one you have in your town is different; because of the people to whose memory it was dedicated. The story of the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry is remarkable, not least due to the men who served in it.

Like most Army Officers, I had an image of the typical British soldier on the Western Front: the long-suffering Tommy, whose command of your beautiful language could move a Frenchman to tears. But I now know that the RGLI was different. The Bailiwick in the early 20th Century was truly Anglo-Norman and the first language of the British soldiers who fought in this street was, in most cases, not English. Neither was their culture: they were Tommies, certainly, but

not what you might call ‘*Rosbifs*’. The 1st Battalion was known as The Norman Ten Hundred, whose men spoke a French patois and knew their King as ‘Notre Duc’. They were farmers, fishermen and quarrymen, who cut the same granite as the piece before us. My guess is they didn’t feel *too* far from home here and would certainly have enjoyed talking with your ancestors. This was a British battalion like no other.

Sadly, that did not save them. With the nephew of Guernsey’s Lt-Governor in command, the Battalion lost around 40 percent of its strength in less than three weeks, with 86 Islanders killed in action and more than 300 wounded, missing, or taken prisoner on one day alone: terrible numbers by any measure. The Regiment’s War Diary reveals that hand-to-hand fighting in and around this street 107 years ago today and tomorrow saw a further 453 Guernsey casualties, of which 216 were reported killed or missing. This street saw the end of a generation, and we are honoured to be here from Guernsey to lay wreaths in their memory.

Overall, it’s estimated that from an island population of just over 30,000, 8,000 fought in the Great War, of whom 1,470 never returned. Many Guernsey women remained unmarried or were forced to leave the Islands to find a husband. The population did not recover to pre-war levels until the 1930’s, shortly before the Channel Islands became the only part of Britain to be occupied by German troops during WWII.

The sacrifice of The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry forged a link between Guernsey and Masnières that can never be broken. I’m very pleased to see that relationship is flourishing and delighted that we shall welcome more students from Masnières to Guernsey next year, as we continue to build on the special friendship between us.

On behalf of His Majesty The King, I wish to thank all those here in France who have made this possible. What began with tragedy has become a story of hope for the future.