



remembrance ni

November 11, 1914 - The Old Contemptibles

November 11, 1914 was the most vital in the history of both this nation and the Allies.



On that date there stood around Ypres (above) the battered remnants of the British Army, that “Contemptible” Little British Army, so designated by the Kaiser. That small and

very much harassed Army, which did not exceed 150,000 men, was on that morning subjected to what was probably one of the most murderous artillery bombardments of the war, considering the small artillery with the British and the shortage of shells, rendering it almost impossible to counter the heavier guns of the Germans, and the fact that there were no elaborate trenches, in most cases each man scooped out a “hole” for himself, and it must always be to those who took part in this battle a miracle that there were any who survived.



THE GERMAN ARMY'S ATTACK.

At 9-30 on that morning, amidst a storm of wind and rain the German Army attacked. That Army consisted of a total of close on 600,000 troops and amongst them were over 13,000 of the crack Prussian Guards, 1st and 2nd: the Kaiser Franz Grenadiers No. 2, the Koningin Augusta

Grenadiers No. 4, and the battalion of the Garde Jager, these were the elite of the German Army. The Kaiser's order was "Victory or Death," and the goal was Calais and the other Channel ports.

The heavy shells of the German artillery had in many cases buried alive many British, and the enemy came on in massed formation. All day long the murderous and unequal struggle continued, and despite the odds against them in men and guns the little British Army held on.

Darkness came and with it no cessation of the attack. Our men were almost exhausted, and the losses had been terrible. Of the 1st Brigade less than four officers and 400 men were surviving. They had lost their Brigade commander, General FitzClarence V.C., and the same could be said of the losses of the other brigades in the line. Despite all the line was held. It is true that the enemy did gain about 500 yards of ground in the battle, but a shorter line was at once dug, organised



and manned, and the barrier to Ypres and the Channel ports was as strong as ever. The American correspondent said of the British troops on that day – “They were like wild beasts, fierce and undaunted. They had, it seemed, given their all, almost their humanity, to save Britain, and may the day never come when Britain will refuse to save them.”

GERMAN BID FOR YPRES.

This attack of November 11 represented the high water mark of the German efforts to capture Ypres and the road to the Channel ports, and as a result of the sacrifice of the little British Army the ebb was a rapid one. The losses of the British were considerable, as can be expected under such odds, but the losses of the Germans on this date were even more so. The figures given were 50,000: the Prussian Guard alone lost 1,200 killed, 4,000 wounded and 1,719 missing. The fact that the enemy did not recoil has obscured the completeness of the great victory, but one judges victory or defeat by the question as to whether an army has or has not reached its objective. The salient fact remains that the Germans did not advance five miles in the whole month of the fighting around Ypres, and in that month's fighting they lost not less than 150,000 men, without any military advantage whatever, gaining only the villages of Gheluvelt, Wytschaete and Messines, of little advantage to them from the military point of view.

HELD THEIR GROUND.

And amidst the many memories which so very naturally return to the minds of survivors of that little British Army of August-November, 1914, on this date each year, none can

ever be more memorable than the date which proved to be very significant to the history of the Allied cause.



Had the German Army broken through the thin khaki line around Ypres and passed on to the possession of the Channel ports what would have been the history of the world to-day? There were no reserves, no supports, behind that British Force that stood at bay on that date. Had they failed the road to the Channel was open, but they held their ground.

One can see to-day the tablet erected on the ruins of the Cloth Hall. Ypres, the words – “On this day, November 11, 1914, the attack of the Prussian Guards was shattered by the little British Army at Ypres, and the road to the Channel Ports was barred.”

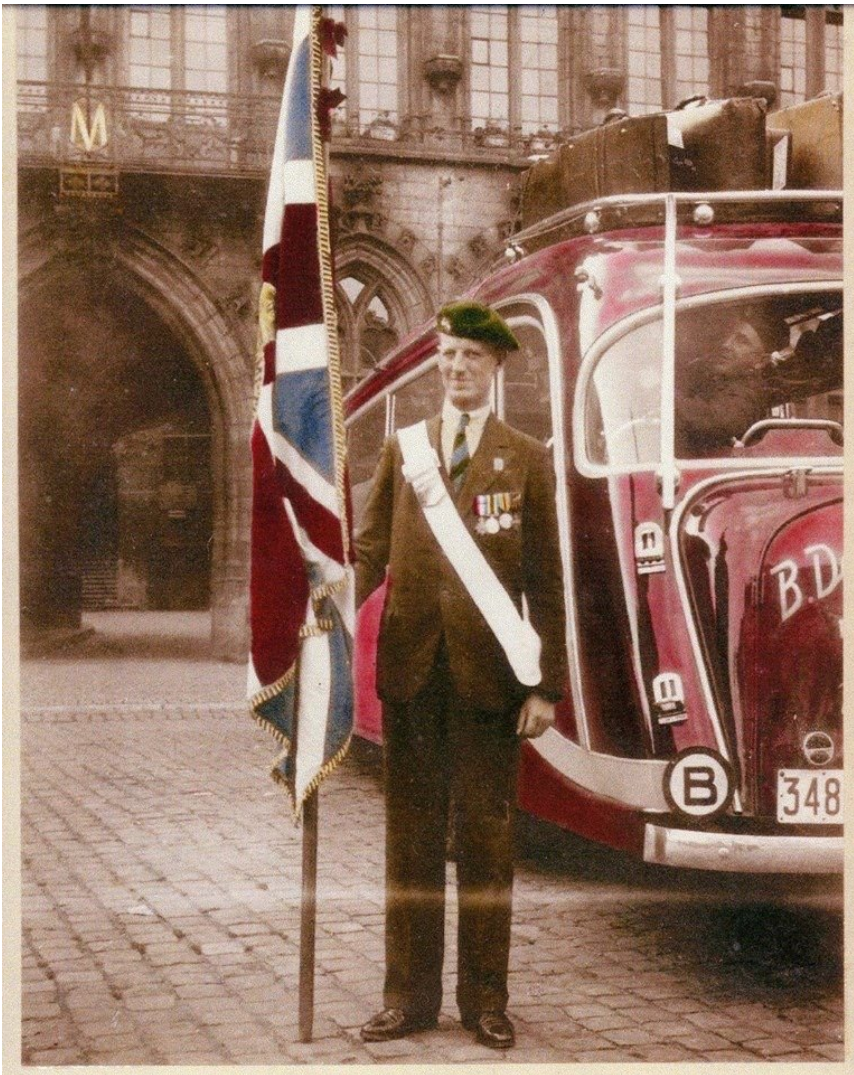
This, then, is the other commemoration which is so deeply remembered by the survivors of the “Contemptible” Little British Army of 1914, when this solemn anniversary in remembrance of all those who gave their lives for their King, Empire and humanity comes to us each year, and we remember the sacrifice of our kith and kin and of our Allies.

The standard bearer of the Belfast Branch of the Old Contemptibles Association

Chum James Ritchie was a founder member of the Belfast Branch of the Old Contemptibles Association of Northern Ireland and acted as Standard Bearer of the Branch’s King’s Colour.

8689 Lance-Sergeant James Ritchie served with the 2nd Battalion, Scots Guards and disembarked at Zeebrugge, as a Lance-Corporal, on 7 October 1914. He had joined the Scots Guards on 3 September 1913 and was discharged on 17 August 1917 due to sickness, being issued with a Silver War Badge. Ritchie was sent his 1914 Star by post on 13 January 1919 and issued with the clasp and roses on 20 February 1920.

In 1937, together with his fellow Chums of the Old Contemptibles Association of Northern Ireland, he made a pilgrimage to the former battlefields of France and Belgium, with Chum Ritchie carrying the King’s Colour at a ceremony held at the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial on 26 August 1937.



In August 1939, The Old Contemptibles Association of Northern Ireland made their fourth annual pilgrimage to the former battlefields of the Great War in France and Flanders.

On his return, Chum **James Ritchie (left)** described his impressions of the trip and his

feelings as war clouds again gathered over Europe:

“In all our wanderings, we were deeply impressed by the calmness of the Belgian and French peoples in (the) face of threatening war clouds. Here and there in the little villages of Belgium one could see an anxious mother with tears in her eyes as the gendarmes passed from house to house issuing the calling-up papers for three classes, and those of us who had served during the Great War knew that the mothers remembered the holocaust the Belgian nation endured in those early days of 1914.

As one wanders over the lands of France and Belgium, fertile and well-filled, one often wonders are the stones of

the war cemeteries not a noble memorial to the insane uselessness of war. Is it again to be that at the bidding of one man, one German, or by his actions, that land must again be wrecked by shells and drenched with pitiless poison gas? Must the cemeteries, British, Belgian, French, and German, large as they are, be made more full still, and beautiful towns, cities, and homes destroyed? It is a crude interpretation of civilisation to think that at the dictates of one man this should ever happen again.”

The Unknown Warrior.

On November 7th, 1920, in strictest secrecy, four unidentified British bodies were exhumed from temporary battlefield cemeteries at Ypres, Arras, the Asine and the Somme.

None of the soldiers who did the digging were told why.

The bodies were taken by field ambulance to GHQ at St-Pol-Sur-Ter Noise. Once there, the bodies were draped with the union flag.

Sentries were posted and Brigadier-General Wyatt and a Colonel Gell selected one body at random. The other three were reburied.

A French Honour Guard was selected and stood by the coffin overnight of the chosen soldier.

On the morning of the 8th November, a specially designed coffin made of oak from the grounds of Hampton Court arrived and the Unknown Warrior was placed inside.

On top was placed a crusaders sword and a shield on which was inscribed:

"A British Warrior who fell in the GREAT WAR 1914-1918 for King and Country".

On the 9th of November, the Unknown Warrior was taken by horse-drawn carriage through Guards of Honour and the sound of tolling bells and bugle calls to the quayside.

There, he was saluted by Marechal Foch and loaded onto HMS Vernon bound for Dover. The coffin stood on the deck covered in wreaths, surrounded by the French Honour Guard.

Upon arrival at Dover, the Unknown Warrior was met with a nineteen gun salute - something that was normally only reserved for Field Marshals.

A special train had been arranged and he was then conveyed to Victoria Station, London.

He remained there overnight, and, on the morning of the 11th of November, he was finally taken to Westminster Abbey.

The idea of the unknown warrior was thought of by Padre David Railton who had served on the front line during the Great War. The union flag he had used as an altar cloth

whilst at the front, was the one that had been draped over the coffin.

It was his intention that all of the relatives of the 517,773 combatants whose bodies had not been identified could believe that the Unknown Warrior could very well be their lost husband, father, brother or son...

Every year, on the 11th of November, we remember the Unknown Warrior.

Belfast origin of Remembrance silence

In 1916 a decision was made by the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland to cancel the annual 12th July celebrations.

Sir Crawford McCullagh instead requested that all businesses be suspended for the duration of 5 minutes from noon till 12.05pm. He asked that street traffic be at a complete standstill for 5 minutes, so that the City's tribute to the heroes of the Ulster Division would thus be impressive and universal.

Trains stopped in their tracks, the city's trams came to a halt and the Police Courts were adjourned. As men and women on factory floors, in hospitals, in shops and in homes all over Ulster bowed their heads in respect of the 36th Ulster Division who had lost their lives at the Battle of the Somme.

Silence echoed through the streets of Belfast as the city came to a complete standstill.

This silence was the precursor of the 2 minute silence which is now recognized world wide.

It can be argued that Sir Crawford McCullagh was the first recorded person to publicly call for a period of silence to honour those who have fallen in battle.

We will remember them on the anniversary of the Armistice when we will again bow our heads on 11th November.



On November 9, 1918 – Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicates after the German Revolution, and Germany is proclaimed a Republic.

Acknowledgments

The photograph of Chum James Ritchie, taken at Mons on 23 August 1937, is courtesy of Melville Patterson.

Letter by James Ritchie published in The Larne Times on 14 November 1936.

New York Herald

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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