

Sermon Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, Remembrance Sunday 2007

It has been a very active period for Fusiliers. For example, Colonel Greg Truman of the Somme Company has movingly described how he managed to deploy at extremely short notice a highly trained unit of 140 troops to southern Afghanistan – one of the most dangerous theatres of war you could imagine. Colonel Truman, of the Londons, of which Somme Company is a part says, “Somme Company tackled and succeeded on a wider range of challenging tough and downright dangerous tasks than any TA Infantry company since the Second World War.”

Colonel Merriman, CO of the 2nd Battalion, reveals just how committed our troops have been: “For only 11 out of 58 weeks did we not have soldiers deployed on operations in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Every company in the Battalion saw active service.”

This involved the difficult and dangerous work of securing logistical sites during the changeover of brigades in Iraq; dealing with the threat from suicide bombers in Kabul; the epic 108 day defence of Now Zad and the quelling of the Taleban’s spring offensive around the village of Sangin. This was ferocious stuff: 79 enemy contacts within the first 20 days tells its own story.

We were very sorry to report a fatal casualty: Guardsman Daryl Hickey of the Grenadier Guards, a member of the Fusilier platoon. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and his comrades, many of whom are present this morning. Others of the regiment were wounded. Among them Sergeant Gibbons, Corporal Williams, Fusilier Fanthome, Fusilier Spencer and Drummer Barlow. We wish them a speedy and full recovery.

Major Milan Torbica reports on an aspect of active service missions which often gets forgotten – and this is the strain on the families of the servicemen. He said: “Running a home and family single-handed is hard and the pressures caused by the potential harm to a loved one only compounds the stress. But Major Torbica tells of something else which will probably not even occur to people who have never seen active service.

He says, “I have always found returning home and the so called normalisation process the hardest. My time away became the normal even at its most extreme; and the return to a regulated work environment and benign home life is stressful. I miss the adrenaline rushes. I would describe these environmental changes akin to a Jumbo jet crash!”

This strange inversion of what you would expect – that soldiers might feel more at home while thousands of miles away on active service – reflects well on both our troops’ sense of duty and upon the excellence and thoroughness of their training. A soldier has to feel that when he is on active service, he is in his element.

Our troops put their lives on the line. They need to know that they have the support of their civilian countrymen who lie abed on Crispin’s Day. Sometimes, regrettably, this support seems to be lacking – especially in certain sections of the media and even, I am sorry to say, among the church hierarchy. There is a natural preference for peace rather than war. Soldiers prefer peace more than anyone else – because it is the

soldiers who know at first hand how terrible war is. There is something shabby and disrespectful about senior churchmen in their palaces – or media moguls at their talkative drinks parties – disdaining the actions of the soldiers on the battlefield.

What these people need to get into their heads is that peace is not the mere absence of fighting. Peace is the life of a free people living under just laws. War is a very bad thing, but it is not – as the pacifists believe – the worst thing. Worse is to be defeated and overcome, to have freedom and justice taken away, to be subjugated by barbarism.

When The First World War broke out, the poet T.E. Hulme joined the Honourable Artillery Company and on 29th December 1914 he was sent to France. He returned to England wounded the following year. In hospital he took up the cudgels against pacifists with articles such as *The Kind of Rubbish We Oppose* and *Why We Are in Favour of This War* He wrote:

“The pacifists’ incapacity to realise the consequences of defeat. It arises from a relativist, utilitarian ethic. They live securely and comfortably, finding a sufficient support in a sceptical rationalism. But individuals in a condition of danger, when the pseudo absolutes melt away into a flux require once more a real absolute to enable them to live”.

Pacifism arises from a progressive outlook that finds no place whatever for the heroic, that deeply discounts the importance of honour and is prepared to sacrifice virtually any principle for the sake of peace. Hulme had nothing but contempt for it. Hulme’s criticism of pacifism has been summed up like this:

“In the humanist view, everything is justified by its results, and the results are justified by their results and so on. The ultimate justification is either future happiness or human survival. This is totally opposed to the outlook that Hulme sometimes calls *religious* and sometimes *classical*. In that view, there are absolute goods, which are not justified by anything they may lead to, but are simply good in themselves. Restraint, courage, self-sacrifice, truthfulness are qualities of this kind. If people have no sense of the reality of these absolute values, they have no standard by which they can perceive the radical imperfection of either man or nature, and they begin to think that life is the source and measure of all values and that man is fundamentally good”

Hulme believed that England ought to fight until Germany was beaten, because a German victory would establish German dominion from the North Sea to the Mediterranean.

And now in our own time listen again to Major Torbica:

“The deployment in Afghanistan was a success and it is a theatre of operations that is of great importance to the defence of our country. The Taleban are an evil enemy and the British Army is achieving much within that country, albeit slowly. I am glad, “says Major Torbica “that I did service to my country there even with all the upheavals.”

Recently, Professor Marcello Pera, President of the Italian Senate asked a question:

“Is there a war on? I answer, yes. In Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ossetia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Palestinian Territories, Egypt, Morocco and much of the Islamic and Arab world, large groups of fundamentalists, radicals, extremists – the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brothers, Islamic Jihad, the Islamic Armed Group and many more – have declared a holy war *jihad* on the West. This is not my imagination. It is a message they have proclaimed, written, communicated, preached and circulated in black and white. Why should we not take note of it?”

Well, the response to Marcello Pera’s question is that, when the bombardments in this war come heavily enough – in New York, in Madrid or in London – we do take note of it. But only for a while. And then, during the ensuing lull, we retire into our drowsy unconcern again. We love our consumerist lifestyle and our secularised permissiveness. We do not want to be reminded about the enemy at the gate and we do not even notice our decadence within.

The President of the Italian Senate describes this mood also:

“A foul wind is blowing through Europe. I am referring to the idea that all we have to do is wait and our troubles will disappear by themselves, so that we can afford to be lenient even with people who threaten us, and that in the end, everything will work out for the best. This same wind blew through Munich in 1938. While the wind might sound like a sigh of relief, it is really a shortness of breath. It could turn out to be the death-rattle of a continent that no longer understands what principles to believe.”

Between us and that death rattle, between us and the collapse of our civilisation, stands the British Army and among them The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. God bless you all.”