

### *Fusiliers' Remembrance Sermon 2008...*

I spent a very enjoyable half term in Cornwall reading Michael Foss's engrossing history of the Royal Fusiliers with an introduction by General Sir Brian Horrocks. I imagine most of you have read this history, but if you haven't I recommend it warmly. It sets the scene and the tone for the whole 300 years and more of the Regiment. It is a thrilling and a moving story.

In fact of course it is a whole succession of stories from our first founding in 1685 by King James as the garrison of the Tower of London. There was a crisis no sooner the garrison was formed when Monmouth's revolutionaries landed at Lyme. No one knew how London would react – whose side would the capital be on? The Lord Mayor himself said he could not answer for the City and King James immediately declared he would use the guns of the Tower against the City if there were any trouble.

You will know how the Regiment came to bear the name it does. It derives from the old snap-hance musquets which were the same as the French fusil: hence Fusiliers.

Many of the earliest recruits came from very poor backgrounds. As Michael Foss says, *The most likely candidates often came from Newgate and they were offered the army as a hell slightly better than the one in which they already lived.*

Foss quotes Kite in *The Recruiting Officer: If any gentlemen have a mind to serve Her Majesty and pull down the French King: if any apprentices have severed masters, any children have undutiful parents: if any servants have too little wages, or any husband too much wife, let them repair to the noble Sergeant Kite and they shall receive present relief and entertainment.*

The Fusiliers saw action in some strange theatres – at Minorca for example where they were employed as marines under the leadership of Admiral Byng. The campaign was not successful and Admiral Byng notoriously paid the price, immortalised in the ironical comment of Voltaire: *In England it is thought well to kill an Admiral from time to time in order to encourage the others*

And from Minorca to the American War of Independence where they were not properly equipped for the task:

*The Fusiliers, and other British redcoats, in their long coats, breeches, stockings, gaiters and tall hats, carrying more than fifty pounds of equipment, faced men in light leather jackets, open shirts and sensible leather boots who sat in the branches of trees and picked off the opposing officers by their gaudy epaulets.*

Later, Sergeant Cooper's *Rough Notes* reported: *The dress of a soldier was not for use but show, like a child's doll in a toyshop.* And he added this comment on the food: *When a man entered a soldier's life, he should have parted with half his stomach.*

One of our most historic early battles was at Albuera in 1811. Major-General Cole described the action as follows:

*In this attack and carrying the enemy's position, the Fusilier Brigade lost 1000 out of 1500 men and forty-five officers – among whom were three commanding officers – and exhibited an example of steadiness and heroic gallantry which history, I believe, cannot surpass*

The Fusiliers won eight battle honours in the Peninsula, names that resound down the centuries: Talavera, Albuera, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vitoria, Pyrenees, Orthes and Toulouse.

The Crimean campaign was probably one of those wars that should never have happened, the result of diplomatic failure. Michael Foss comments: *The wayward British public, who had not thought of soldiers for nearly fifty years, suddenly found a patriotic voice and shipped the army off to death in the Crimea with great enthusiasm.*

The soldier William Jowett wrote about service in the Crimea: *With the cold and starvation I am at this moment fit to eat my finger ends.*

There were acts of conspicuous gallantry: *At Inkerman, Sir Thomas Troubridge had both legs shot off yet refused to leave the field and continued to encourage his men propped up on a gun carriage.*

At the Crimea, Fusiliers won five of the newly-instituted Victoria Crosses.

The regiment served in Afghanistan and in South Africa and during the First World War 255,476 had worn the Royal Fusilier cap badge. Of that war the soldier George Hawes wrote: *One is either frightened to death or bored to tears.*

*Many City employees would enlist if they were assured that they would serve with their friends. Major White rounded them up and they became the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, known as the Stockbrokers Battalion. Battalion 10b was an intelligence group recruited from linguists and curious university dons. There was also a circus-man who had toured with a troupe of performing bears.*

Fusiliers won thirteen VCs

Over the last few years at this Service of Remembrance, I have reported on Fusiliers in action during the Second World War at Dunkirk, in London, helping to clear up the sad mess caused by the blitz, at Sidi Barrani, in Sudan, Eritrea and Abyssinia and then across to Syria to fight the Vichy French; against Rommel through Tobruk, Benghazi and Tripoli; heroically at Salerno, Anzio and in the terrible and prolonged struggle at Monte Cassino.

So much of the soldier's life is hardship, suffering and privation, heartache and separation from their families. And yet the strongest reflections of the soldiers themselves are affectionate, fierce loyalty and ironical humour. Pacifists and other so called anti-war campaigners – those whom Stalin referred to as *useful idiots* – have got it all wrong when they imagine that the soldier delights in war. A Fusilier called Gowing wrote after his experiences in the Crimea:

*Though a soldier and fully imbued with the spirit of patriotism, I would say with all my heart: From war Good Lord deliver us. The man who delights in war is a madman.*

But Regiments are not about war. They are about belonging. The Regiment provides the soldier with ties of love and loyalty which are perhaps even stronger than those of the family. I heard a man talking on the wireless a few weeks ago. He described what a tearaway he was when he was a young man. Then he was called up for National Service. This is what he said: *At first I hated it. But after three months I would have died for any one of those comrades.*

*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* And among one's comrades. That is what Enoch Powell meant when he answered an incredulous interviewer with the words: *I wish I had been killed in the war*

Sir Brian Horrocks says this:

*Many times, at Old Comrades' gatherings, some old soldier has come up to me and said, referring to one of the World Wars, "They were good times, Sir, weren't they?"*

*They were not good times at all. They were horrible times. But what these men remember and now miss was the comradeship and esprit do corps of the old Regiments.*

I end with the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ: *Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends*