

Sermon: Remembrance Sunday 2009 Preached at St Sepulchre for the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

It has been an eventful and difficult time for our soldiers in Afghanistan and I want to say something about that country later. But we should also recall a very significant event in British military history in which Fusiliers played their part. It is the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Minden, one of our great military successes in the Seven Years War. England and Prussia were allied against France and Austria. On the 1st August 1759 the allied Forces of some 41,000 men under the command of Prince Ferdinand, Duke of Brunswick, assembled in the vicinity of Minden. The British contingent of 10,000 was under the command of Lieutenant General Lord George Sackville.

The French had a Force of 51,000 men and were under command of Marshal Contades. Prince Ferdinand had previously divided his army in an attempt to encourage the French to attack, but by the early hours of 1st August 1759 he had concentrated his troops in a position North West of the town of Minden extending from Minderheide to Petershagen. The fields and hedgerows were full of wild red and yellow roses and the British soldiers picked these and placed them on their hats. It is evocative incidents like this which remind us that wars are fought not just with military machines, the engines of war and tactical deployment, but by real men of flesh and blood, men with feelings and emotions finding beauty even in the midst of carnage.

Owing to a misunderstanding in the transmission of orders, the British infantry brigades, under their Commanders Waldegrave and Kingsley, began to march towards the French. To the surprise of everyone, including Prince Ferdinand and his staff and the French Commanders, the British Infantry marched forwards into a hail of fire and attacked the French cavalry - the first recorded incident of this kind in military history. Despite very heavy losses, the Infantry, supported by two batteries of Artillery, continued their attack and forced the French to retreat.

Lord George Sackville was ordered to attack with the British cavalry to rout the French from the field. Ferdinand called for a British cavalry charge to complete the victory, but Sackville withheld permission for their advance. Ferdinand sent his order several times, but Sackville was estranged from Lord Granby, the force commander. He continued to withhold permission for Granby to *gain glory* through an attack, and the allies lost the opportunity for a decisive victory or a rout. For this action, Sackville was cashiered and sent home. After the decisive attack by the British infantry. the Allied Force advanced and drove the French off the battlefield. Of the 4,434 men who went into battle with 6 British infantry regiments. 78 officers and 1,252 soldiers were killed or wounded. All the regiments still celebrate the 1st August and have the word "Minden" embroidered on their Colours and Battle Honour.

At Todtenhausen, on the road between Minden and Petershagen opposite the Gaststätte Lohrmann. stands a Memorial to those who fell in the Battle, On 1st August it is customary for wreaths to be laid there at a small ceremony arranged by Minden Garrison which is attended by the German Kreis and Stadt authorities and representatives of the British regiments that fought in the Battle, together with representatives of the German Armed Forces.

In Minden Museum there is a special room devoted to the Battle with many interesting relics collected from the battlefield. The churches of St Mary and St Martini hold records of the burials and marriages of British soldiers from the time of the battle. Kingsley Barracks was named after Major General Kingsley who commanded one of the British infantry brigades.

Battles and skirmishes in the Seven Years' War were not restricted to Europe. There was fighting in India, America, Canada and at sea. When the war ended in 1763, Britain emerged as the greatest power among all the nations, but the cost doubled our national debt.

It is right that we commemorate our involvement in so significant a battle as that which took place at Minden. But we should come forward in time and consider the campaign from which Fusiliers have just returned. As we do so, let us not forget that seven men were killed in action on this tour of duty in Afghanistan. We pray for them, that God will give them eternal light, rest and peace. And for God's comfort upon their families and friends. We give thanks for their example, for their courage. And we thank God that Fusiliers are now returned to HQ.

There is no such thing as an easy war, but the campaign in Afghanistan is singularly testing. It continues to provoke controversy and it has its critics. It is not part of my job to enter into the whys and wherefores. Perhaps I might just say **that intractable struggles in Afghanistan belong to a very long tradition**. Fusiliers who fought there this year can see themselves as the successors of those who fought in earlier conflicts in Afghanistan.

The First Anglo–Afghan War lasted from 1839 to 1842. It was one of the early and major conflicts during the Great Game, the 19th century competition for power and influence in Central Asia between Great Britain and Russia. It also marked one of the worst setbacks inflicted on British power in the region after the consolidation of India by the East India Company.

In December 1838, an army of 21,000 British and Indian troops under the command of Sir John Keane (subsequently replaced by Sir Willoughby Cotten and then by Elphinstone) set out from the Punjab. They reached Quetta by late March 1839 and a month later took Kandahar without a battle. In July, after a two-month delay in Kandahar, the British attacked the fortress of Ghazni overlooking a plain leading eastward into the North West Frontier Province, and achieved a decisive victory over Dost Mohammad's troops led by one of his sons.

Unfortunately, in October 1841, disaffected Afghan tribes came flocking to support Dost Mohammad's son, Mohammad Akbar Khan, in Bamian. And in November 1841 a senior British officer, Sir Alexander Sekundar Burnes and his aides were killed by a mob in Kabul. In the following weeks the British commanders tried to negotiate with Akbar Khan, but the three negotiating officers were seized by Akbar's troops. They were murdered and their corpses dismembered and displayed in the bazaar.

In this bitter conflict, victories were followed by setbacks, including the destruction of Elphinstone's army. The upshot was that three decades after the First Anglo-Afghan War the

Russians advanced steadily southward towards Afghanistan. In 1842 the Russian border was on the other side of the Aral Sea from Afghanistan, but five years later the Tsar's outposts had moved to the lower reaches of the Amu Darya. By 1865 Tashkent had been formally annexed, as was Samarkand three years later. Russian control now extended as far as the northern bank of the Amu Darya. And so in 1878, we felt we must invade again, and so began the second Anglo-Afghan War, round two in the Great Game. Today Afghanistan seems as intractable and inhospitable as it was in the 19th century.

We lost those seven men killed in action this year. In the face of such terrible events we must renew our resolve and once again take courage as Fusiliers have done throughout their history. What is it that belonging to the regiment gives to a young man? It gives him a profound sense of belonging, of comradeship. And comradeship teaches the soldier that there is something greater and larger than his own individual life. And that is his relationships with his brother soldiers. His loyalty to them. And their loyalty to him. How remarkable that soldiering which teaches us war also teaches us love!

I should like us to end by mentioning our recently fallen by name:

Fusilier Pat Suesue; Corporal Joseph Etchells; Sergeant Simon Valentine; Fusilier Louis Carter; Fusilier Simon Annis; Lance Corporal James Fullerton; Fusilier Shaun Bush

Rest eternal grant unto them O Lord; and may light perpetual shine upon them