

Chairman, Chief Master, School Captain, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the fourth of August, I had the honour of joining the assembled European Heads of State and Government in Saint Symphorien Military Cemetery near Mons in Belgium, where they and the families of those buried there marked the beginning of World War One on the day on which 100 years earlier, Britain had declared war on Germany.

At Saint Symphorien, the bodies of 513 German and Commonwealth soldiers lay side by side, 105 of them unknown casualties of this terrible conflict. I say side by side almost figuratively because Saint Symphorien is unusual, if not unique, for a military cemetery and not just because it contains roughly equal numbers of the graves of the soldiers of both sides. Originally a small stone quarry, they had to bury the dead where they could: so it lacks the symmetry that is almost synonymous with military cemeteries and, compared to many of the cemeteries in the area, it is small. However it remains a poignant place, containing the graves of the first¹ and last² Commonwealth and German soldiers to die in the war, stretching from 21st August 1914 right through to 11th November 1918. It is also the site of the grave of the recipient of the first³ of the 628 Victoria Crosses awarded during World War 1.

¹ Private John Parr, Middlesex Regiment, age 17, died 21 Aug 14.

² Private George Ellison, Royal Irish Lancers, Age 40 and Private George Price, Canadian Infantry, Age 25. Both died on 11 Nov 18

³ Lieutenant Maurice Dease, Royal Fusiliers, age 24, died 23 Aug 14 – killed at Nimy Bridge on 23 Aug 14. The bridge was being defended by a single company of the 4th Royal Fusiliers and a machine-gun section with Dease in command. The gun fire was intense, and the casualties very heavy, but Dease went on firing in spite of his wounds, until he was hit for

One hundred years ago tonight the war was barely 2 months old but our forebears would already have been sitting in Belgium and northern France, almost certainly under the common misapprehension that it would all be over by Christmas. To set the scene a little, in those 8 weeks:

- Over 90% of Belgium had been over-run by the German Army, Brussels had surrendered and the Belgian Government had relocated, first to Antwerp and then to Ostend. Paris had been bombed by the Imperial German Air Force and the French government had moved to Bordeaux. The Battles of Mons, Charleroi, Le Cateau, Arras and the first battle of the Marne had been fought;
- The first battles at sea had taken place. The British Expeditionary Force, initially a force of about 120,000, commanded by Field Marshal Sir John French, had arrived in France; the first squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps had flown to France and had already seen action and Naval Infantry had landed in Ostend in Rolls Royce Scout Cars;
- Tonight, the Belgian Army would have been retiring to positions along the River Yser, where their heroic defence would finally halt the German advance through Belgium. Meanwhile, a little further south in the British area, Field Marshals French and

the fifth time and was carried away. "Though two or three times badly wounded he continued to control the fire of his machine guns at Mons on 23rd August until all his men were shot. He died of his wounds" — London Gazette, 16 Nov 14.

Foch had just agreed the joint British/French plan to save the Belgian coast and ports and the so-called Battle for Flanders had just begun – the scene was set for the First Battle of Ypres, which was to begin with the German assault on 20th October.

Within a few short months, by the end of 1914, the old regular British Army had suffered massive casualties and lost most of its fighting strength but had managed to stop the German advance. And so began the years of stalemate on the Western Front and elsewhere that would lead to the deaths of at least 8 million military personnel and some 2½ million civilians from warfare alone. It would also etch into our memories names that have become watchwords for sacrifice and honour: Arras, Passchendaele, the Somme, the Marne, Cambrai, Verdun and, further afield, Gaza and Gallipoli.

And what of King Edward's during WW1? As a microcosm of what was happening across the Nation and the Commonwealth, Old Edwardians played their part. The Roll of Honour is long and illustrious and, at the same time, tells a story of personal sacrifice and suffering. The names of the 254 Old Edwardians who gave their lives during the War Years are recorded on the bronze plaques lining the walls of the Chapel and there's a story behind every entry but let me pick just a few examples:

- The casualties included six known sets of brothers⁴ as well as many others sharing the same surname and who may well have

⁴ Brealey; Busby; Cottrell; Jervis; Mansell; Smith

been related;

- They ranged the ranks from Private to Major⁵,
- And in age from 17 year old 2Lt Conrade William Jacot of the Royal Flying Corps, who was killed on 23 June 1917 whilst undergoing flying training just a few short weeks after he left KES, in fact so soon after joining that he hadn't even been given his Regimental Number: to 44 year old Maj Henry Shaw of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment who was killed in action on the Somme⁶;
- They included Robert "Rob" Quilter Gilson, the son of Chief Master Robert Cary Gilson, killed by shell fire shortly after 7.30am on 1st July 1916 as he led the men of the Cambridgeshires over the top near La Boisselle on the first day of the Battle of the Somme – one of the almost 20,000 British soldiers killed on the deadliest day of fighting in British military history. Less than 3 weeks later, Leigh Stanley Latham Butler who had left the school and enlisted illegally at the age of 16, was also killed on the Somme, aged 18.
- In total, 31 Old Edwardians were among the 125,000 who died during the Battle of the Somme; half of them have no known

⁵ Although MG Robert George Kekewich died on 5 Nov 14 (Age 60 – d.o.b 17 Jun 1854) according to his record on www.AngloBoerWar.com an inquest in Whimble, Devon recorded a verdict of "suicide whilst temporarily insane" having been invalided out of command of a Division on Salisbury Plain. Nevertheless he was afforded a funeral with full military honours on 9 Nov 14 in recognition of his exemplary service, specifically during the defence of Kimberley during the South African War.

⁶ See footnote 5. For the purposes of this speech, Kekewich is not included either as the senior or as the eldest OE to be killed during the actual conduct of WW1, despite appearing on the roll of honour in the Chapel.

grave and are among the 72,000 British and South African war dead commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.

- They are buried across Europe and beyond, in places as far afield as Alexandria, Basra (then in Mesopotamia), Cairo, Homs in Syria, Gallipoli, Jerusalem, Palestine and Salonika;
- Whilst these are sobering statistics, they also tell a story of remarkable leadership, courage and personal example as Old Edwardians distinguished themselves time and again by their actions. Between them, those who died were awarded no less than 2 Distinguished Service Orders for Gallantry, 12 Military Crosses and 8 Mentions in Dispatches. Of the MCs, 2 recipients were awarded a second, or “a bar” posthumously. One of these, Leslie Sayer rose from being a private in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment⁷ to Captain and was killed in action in Arras in August 1918, survived by his brother Alfred, who was commissioned into the same battalion the 3rd Birmingham Pals and who was also awarded the MC and Bar.

However long and illustrious the Roll of Honour, it tells us but a fraction of the story. Such was the scale of this conflict that no accurate records exist of the service and sacrifice of those who were wounded but even the most conservative estimates put the number of wounded at 2½ to 3 times the number of dead. Similarly, no

⁷ 16th (Service) Battalion (3rd Birmingham) – The Birmingham Pals

detailed record exists of the deeds, injuries and sacrifices of those Old Edwardians who fought in World War 1 and lived to tell the tale – but we can safely assume that their achievements reflect equally highly on them and the School! And bear in mind that unlike Oliver, Mark and myself, the majority of them were not professional military men, simply resolute youngsters whose time here taught them to do their duty by answering Lord Kitchener's call "your country needs you", and who predictably gave of their best and leave behind them an example for us to be proud of to this day.

Although the overwhelming majority of Old Edwardians who died were engaged in the Army's land battle, we mustn't forget that the war was fought just as much at sea and in the air. For the Royal Navy, the British Grand Fleet was already in position containing the German High Seas Fleet in its home ports. On 28th August 1914, the battle of the Heligoland Bight I, in which Germany lost 4 battleships and over 1,500 sailors was decisive and led to the Kaiser and his government restricting the actions of the German Fleet, instructing it to remain in port and avoid contact. Later, battles such as Dogger Bank and Jutland would reinforce this and confine the German Fleet to its home ports and coastal waters throughout the war. Whilst perhaps less well-known than some of the land battles, the Royal Navy's set-piece battles and manoeuvring provided a highly effective blockade of German commerce through the North Sea, which ultimately starved the German people and industries and

undoubtedly made an enormous contribution to Germany seeking an Armistice in 1918.

World War 1 also saw the first real use of submarines in warfare and the German U-Boat service was the one – and most costly – exception to the Royal Navy's blockade of the German Fleet.

Although initially smaller than Britain's submarine fleet, Germany's 20 diesel engined U-19s had the range and speed to operate around the entire British coast and their attack on the British Fleet in the North Sea in August 1914 was the first submarine war patrol in history. The sinking of three British cruisers by SM U-9 in less than an hour in September 1914 was to prove, once and for all, that submarine warfare had come of age and, of course, the sinking of the RMS Lusitania by U-20 on 7th May 1915 was to play a prominent part in the United States' decision to join the War in April 1917.

But no mention of the Royal Navy's contribution and sacrifice during World War 1 would be complete without mention of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, initially formed as a Marine brigade at the outbreak of the war but which, within months, under the orders of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, would expand to division made up of Royal Naval and Royal Marine reservists and volunteers who were not needed for service at sea. Its eight battalions served with distinction throughout the war from the first landing of 4,000 on 27th August 1914 to help defend Ostend, to Gallipoli in 1915 and

back to France later that year and straight into the Battle of the Somme and from there to Passchendaele!

The battle in the air was initially fought by the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service, with the Royal Air Force being formed as late as April 1918 but not before its forebears had distinguished themselves time and again. Initially equipped with balloons, airships and aircraft with iconic names like the Sopwith Pup and Sopwith Camel and whose crews didn't even have parachutes, both services had performed a wide range of vital roles progressively developing its tactics from aerial and artillery observation, to photographic reconnaissance, to coastal patrolling, to aerial bombardment and naval and ground attack. Its aviators were among the first to use the new-fangled invention of wireless telegraphy. As one of the war's many quirks of history, it's also worth mentioning that at the outbreak of the war the RNAS had Britain's only mechanised land forces, having developed and successfully engaged the enemy in armour-plated Rolls Royce scout cars armed with Maxim machine guns, which first saw service at Cassel, near Dunkirk, in early September 1914.

By this time in 1914, both the RFC and the RNAS had already had their first engagements of the war⁸, their first victories⁹, their first

⁸ On 19 August the Corps undertook its first action of the War with two of its aircraft performing aerial reconnaissance. The mission was not a great success. In order to save weight each aircraft carried a pilot only instead of the usual pair of pilot and observer. Because of this, and poor weather, both of the pilots lost their way and only one was able to complete his task.

defeats and the first of their many losses¹⁰. By the time the RAF itself was formed, it was the first and largest air force in the world and we should not underestimate the part its 20,000 aircraft and 300,000 personnel played in the War nor forget the sacrifices they made.

All of them, the few I have named and the many I have not, those who died and those who were injured, were sons of this extraordinary place; all examples of how Old Edwardians have served their country since the School's founding. Of course, Old Edwardians went resolutely to war long before World War 1, and Vyse and Conolly are names that will ring a bell with anyone who, like me, spent his Friday afternoons in the CCF. General Richard Vyse served with distinction under Prince Frederick, "The Grand Old Duke of York", curiously enough given tonight's theme, in Flanders, becoming a General in 1812 but not before serving briefly as the MP for Beverley in 1806-7! As a Lieutenant, Lt Col John Augustus Conolly won the Victoria Cross at Sebastopol on 26th October 1854 where, according to the citation "an attack by the Russians was repulsed and the enemy fell back pursued by men of the 49th

⁹ Also on 22 August 1914, Captain L E O Charlton (Observer) and his Pilot, Lieutenant Vivian Hugh Nicholas Wadham made the crucial observation of the 1st German Army's approach towards the flank of the British Expeditionary Force. This allowed the BEF Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Sir John French to realign his front and save his army around Mons. Next day on 23 August 1914 the RFC found itself fighting in the Battle of Mons and two days after that the Flying Corps gained its first air victory. On 25 August Lt C.W. Wilson and Lt C.E.C. Rabagliati forced down a German Etrich Taube which had approached their aerodrome while they were refuelling their Avro 504. Another RFC machine landed nearby and the RFC observer chased the German pilot into some nearby woods.

¹⁰ On 22 August 1914, the first British aircraft to be shot down by the Germans was lost. The crew, pilot 2Lt Vincent Waterfall and observer Lt. Charles George Gordon Bayly of 5 Squadron flying an Avro 504 over Belgium were killed by infantry fire.

Regiment of Foot, led by Lieutenant Conolly, whose gallant behaviour was most conspicuous in this action. He ultimately fell, dangerously wounded, while in personal encounter with several Russians, in defence of his post.” And, as those around these tables can bear personal witness, they have continued to serve with equal distinction since then too – both between the Wars, during World War 2 and, sadly, much more recently – the latest name, that of Flight Lieutenant Rakesh Chauhan, who was killed on 26 April this year in Afghanistan, will be added to Memorial in the Chapel over this forthcoming Remembrance weekend.

So, a little later on tonight, when we sing the verses of the School Song, verses that are likely still familiar to us all and in which we celebrate the many and varied achievements of Old Edwardians over more than 450 years of proud history of service of all kinds, let us reflect on the true meaning behind the words and remember all those who “plucked the bays of battle” during World War 1 and, in particular, the 254 who fell and “died of service, not of rust”.