Reflections on Remembrance

Assembly by Chris Eldridge, Head of History, November 2019

In the last days of half term 32 of you plus Mr Lancey, Miss Tout, Mr Broderick and myself spent four days exploring the beaches and battlefields of Normandy. 75 years ago, from June-August 1944 the German forces in Normandy fought an Allied army chiefly of British and Americans but also French, Polish, Czech and Canadian. Approximately 400,000 soldiers and civilians died – and this is a tiny fraction of the estimated 60 million who died in World War Two, the single greatest calamity in modern history.

Amongst many evocative places the site that captured my imagination particularly was Hill 112, an unassuming elevation commanding a strategic view of the city of Caen and central to the German defence. In two bloody days in July 18,000 men from the 43rd Wessex Division, many from Somerset, fought the same number of Germans from the Waffen SS's II Panzer Corps for possession of a few villages, an open windswept plain and possession of two small woods at the top. In the space of a couple of square miles 8,500 men were killed or wounded. Such numbers on their own are just that, numbers – so I try and visualise what they went through in a series of smaller stories – of the teenagers of the SS Hitler Youth division some as young as 15 who were burned alive in the village of Maltot by British flamethrowers, of the ordinary conscripted men of the Somerset Light infantry, from Wells, from Glastonbury, from Shepton and a dozen small places like it who charged up that barren, open plain and held the ridge for 48 hours against the worst that the SS could throw at them, or of their comrades in the Duke of Cornwall's Light infantry who advanced through them and held an orchard within enemy lines and were attacked on three sides. Over 80% of those men and boys, German and British, were killed or wounded. To this day the land there is full of unexploded shells, human bone fragments and other detritus of war. All for one small hill.

It was to remember the fallen of Hill 112 and thousands of places like it in World War One and World War Two that it was decided that the nation needed an annual act of remembrance. It began in 1919 with a small service around a temporary monument to all the fallen of the First World War known as the cenotaph in central London. At this service the attendees wore poppies – the first flower to re-grow in the shell ravaged landscape of the Western Front. The time chosen was 11 am, 11th November – the moment that the ceasefire which ended World War One the year previously came into effect. This symbolism struck a perfect chord with the sentiments of a grieving nation, and as a consequence the cenotaph was rebuilt in stone, the wearing of poppies and the observation of a period of silence for the fallen became the established means of remembrance which has endured to the present.

War's grim harvest must never be forgotten. But there is cause for hope – as I speak a smaller proportion of the world's population are involved in war than at any time in history. Syria's hideous ongoing civil war is a tragedy but mercifully an increasingly rare one. World War Two's slaughter and the legacy which followed was so appalling that it seems to have turned the greater part of humanity from war forever. Or let us hope so – the veterans of the Second World War are diminishing rapidly now – all are in their 90s or older. As they depart from our midst we cannot, must not, let the memory of what they endured disappear with them. World War Two was both tragedy and victory, and we should celebrate the victory of freedom 75 years ago against those who, in Winston Churchill's words, sought to sink the world into a new Dark Age of terror and slaughter, and above all celebrate the staggering heroism of the ordinary men and women who made this victory possible. But the greatest tribute we can give to them, living and dead, is to ensure that through our memories and our values will future generations be spared from repeating it.