

## Mid-Month Visit – November 2023

I am not sure whether it is because of the Russia/Ukraine conflict, or what is happening in Israel/Palestine, but 'Poppy Day' seemed to have generated more interest this year than in years gone by. I had a number of requests as to where one could buy the traditional 'poppies', which, years ago were available at stands manned by ex-servicemen (MOTHS). So, I thought, instead of writing about a recent visit, what I would do, is to 'publish' what I have on file relating to '11 November'.

Many people do not know that the 'Two-Minutes Silence' and its association to Armistice Day (11 November) or Remembrance Sunday has a South African origin.

At 5.30a.m. on the morning of 11 November 1918 the Germans signed the Armistice Agreement in a railway carriage on a remote siding in the heart of the forest of Compiègne. Soon wires were humming with the message: 'Hostilities will cease at 11a.m. today, November 11. Troops will stand fast on the line reached at that hour.' Thus, at 11a.m. on 11 November 1918, the guns on the Western Front in France and Flanders fell silent after more than four years of continuous warfare, warfare that had witnessed the most horrific casualties. World War 1 (then known as the Great War) had ended.



*Picture: Signing of Armistice Agreement*

The time and date attained an important significance in the post war years and the moment that hostilities ceased became universally associated with the remembrance of those that died in that and subsequent wars and conflicts. The 'Two-Minutes Silence' to remember all who paid the supreme sacrifice was a result of this expression ... and it all began in Cape Town, South Africa.

When the first casualty lists, recording the horrific loss of life in the Battles of the Somme were announced in Cape Town, Mr. J.A. Eagar, a Cape Town businessman, suggested that the congregation of the church he attended, observe a special silent pause to remember those on the



South African Casualty List read out at the service. It was the church also attended by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick the famous South African author of 'Jock of the Bushveld'.

In May 1918, the Mayor of Cape Town, Councillor H. Hands (later Sir Harry Hands), at a suggestion made by Mr. R.R. Brydon, a Cape Town City Councillor, in a letter to the Cape Times, initiated a daily period of three minutes silence, to remember the events unfolding on the battlefields of Europe and the sacrifices being made there. Mr Brydon's son, Major Walter Brydon, three times wounded and once gassed, had been killed on 12 April 1918.

The pause would follow the firing of the Noon Gun – a tradition instituted in 1902 and fired everyday at 12 midday from Signal Hill. The firing of the gun was the most audible signal with which to co-ordinate the event across the City of Cape Town.

The boom of the gun signalled the midday pause of three minutes for the first time on 14 May 1918.

*Picture: Signal Hill, Cape Town*



Everything came to a dead stop while everyone bowed their heads in silent prayer for those in the trenches in Flanders. As soon as the city fell silent, a trumpeter on the balcony of the Fletcher and Cartwright's Building on the corner of Adderley and Darling Streets sounded the Last Post. Reveille was played at the end of the midday pause.

Articles in the newspapers described how trams, taxis and private vehicles stopped, pedestrians came to a halt and most men bared their heads. People stopped what they were doing at their places of work and sat or stood silently. The result of the Mayor's appeal exceeded all expectations.

A few days later Sir Harry Hands, whose son, Captain Richard Hands, a member of 'Brydon's Battery', had been mortally wounded in the same battle in which Major Brydon had been killed, decided to shorten the duration of the pause to two minutes – in order to better retain its hold on the people. In terms of the meaning of 'two-minutes' it was also argued that the first minute was for thanksgiving for those that survived war, and the second minute is to remember the fallen.

Sir Percy Fitzpatrick had been impressed by the period of silence kept in his local church after the horrific loss of life at Delville Wood became known, and the casualty lists had been read out. He had a personal interest in the daily remembrance as his son, Major Nugent Fitzpatrick, had been killed on 14 December 1917. Sir Percy was understandably deeply affected by the loss of his



favourite son and was also moved by the dignity and effectiveness of the two-minute pause in Cape Town.



Sir Percy Fitzpatrick wrote to Lord Milner and described the silence that fell on the city during this daily ritual.

Taking into consideration that the guns of war finally fell silent at 11a.m. on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month (November), Sir Percy felt that the idea of observing the two-minute silence at that time and on that date, would give the Act of Homage great impact, and proposed that this became an official part of the annual service on Armistice Day throughout the British Empire.

*Picture: Sir Percy Fitzpatrick*

The meaning behind Sir Percy's proposal was stated as:

*It is due to the women, who have lost and suffered and borne so much, with whom the thought is ever present. It is due to the children that they know to whom they owe their dearly fought freedom. It is due to the men, and from them, as men. But far and away, above all else, it is due to those who gave their all, sought no recompense, and with whom we can never re-pay – our Glorious and Immortal Dead.*

Sir Percy Fitzpatrick's letter was received by Lord Milner on 4 November 1919, reviewed and accepted by the War Cabinet the following day (5 November), and was immediately approved by King George V. The King, shortly afterwards, on 7 November, proclaimed by decree – *"Tuesday next, November 11<sup>th</sup>, is the first anniversary of the Armistice, which stayed the worldwide carnage of the four preceding years and the victory of Right and Freedom. I believe that my people in every part of the Empire fervently wish to perpetuate the meaning of the Great Deliverance, and of those who laid down their lives to achieve it. To afford an opportunity for the universal expression of their feeling, it is my desire and hope that at the hour when the Armistice comes into force, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, there may be for a brief space of two minutes, a complete suspension of all our normal activity that at the hour when the Armistice came into force, so that in perfect stillness, the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the glorious dead."*

Sir Percy Fitzpatrick was thanked for his suggestion of the 'two-minute silence' by Lord Stamfordham, the King's Private Secretary who wrote:

*Dear Sir Percy, The King, who learns that you are shortly to leave for South Africa, desires me to assure you that he ever gratefully remembers that the idea of the Two Minute Pause on Armistice Day was due to your initiation, a suggestion readily adopted and carried out with heartfelt sympathy throughout the Empire. Signed – Stamfordham*

And so the tradition of two-minutes of silence during remembrance occasions was born, a simple peaceful gesture that in deep solitude remembers the end of all war – not the beginning.



## And why the poppy?

John McCrae wrote a poem 'In Flanders Fields' after the death of a close friend, which led to the adoption of the poppy as the Flower of Remembrance for the British and Commonwealth war dead.



### **In Flanders Fields (by John McCrae)**

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

John McCrae was born in Ontario, Canada and studied medicine at the University of Toronto. He served in the Boer War in South Africa as an artillery subaltern in the Canadian Contingent from 1899 to 1900, was promoted to the rank of major in 1904, and reenlisted in the First Canadian Contingent soon after the start of World War 1. McCrae became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and was the first Canadian to be appointed consulting surgeon to the British Army.

McCrae's well-known poem 'In Flanders Fields' memorializes the April 1915 battle in Belgium's Ypres salient. For 17 days, McCrae tended those injured in the battle. The poem was first published in Punch Magazine.



In 1915, McCrae was transferred to Boulogne No.3 General Hospital to oversee medicine. He worked there until his pneumonia-related death on 28 January 1918, at the age of 45.

McCrae was buried with full military honours in Wimereux Cemetery near Boulogne, France.

*Picture: John McCrae's Grave*



However, another related story to 11 November, is that of the **'Unknown Soldier'**.



On 7 November 1920, in strictest secrecy, the bodies of four unidentified British soldiers were exhumed from temporary battlefield cemeteries at Ypres, Arras, the Asine and the Somme. None of the soldiers who did the digging were told why.

The bodies were taken by field ambulance to GHQ at St-Pol-Sur-Ter Noise. Once there, the bodies were each draped with the Union Jack. Sentries were posted and Brigadier-General Wyatt and Colonel Gell selected one body at random. The other three were reburied.

A French Honour Guard was selected and stood by the coffin of the chosen soldier overnight.

On the morning of 8 November, a specially designed coffin made of oak from the grounds of Hampton Court arrived and the Unknown Warrior was placed inside. On top was placed a crusaders sword and a shield on which was inscribed:

*"A British Warrior who fell in the GREAT WAR 1914-1918 for King and Country"*

On 9 of November, the Unknown Warrior was taken by horse-drawn carriage through Guards of Honour and the sound of tolling bells and bugle calls to the quayside.

There, he was saluted by Marechal Foch and loaded onto HMS Vernon bound for Dover. The coffin stood on the deck covered in wreaths, surrounded by the French Honour Guard.



Upon arrival at Dover, the Unknown Warrior was met by a nineteen-gun salute – something that was normally only reserved for Field Marshals. A special train had been arranged and he was then conveyed to Victoria Station, London. He remained there overnight, and, on the morning of 11 November, he was finally taken to Westminster Abbey.

The idea of the Unknown Warrior was thought of by a Padre called David Railton who had served on the front line during the Great War. The Union Jack he had used as an altar cloth whilst at the front, was the one that had been draped over the coffin. It was his intention that all of the relatives of the 517 773 combatants whose bodies had not been identified could believe that the Unknown Warrior could very well be their lost husband, father, brother or son.

This is another reason we wear poppies. We do not glorify war.

We remember – with humility – the great and ultimate sacrifices that were made, not just in this war, but in every war and conflict where our service personnel have fought – to ensure the liberty and freedom that we now take for granted. Every year, on 11 November, we remember the Unknown Warrior.

***'At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.'***

So, after all that, maybe next year, all those who haven't worn poppies on 11 November, might just be moved to find somewhere where they are on sale, and purchase one, to be worn with pride – should your poppy have a leaf the leaf is to be positioned in the 11 o'clock position!

And if by chance you spot a purple poppy, this is in remembrance of animals that lost their lives at war. They are remembered as well.



**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) - for regular updates and news.

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Page 6

