

Good evening Bre and welcome to this very special ceremony. In these troubled times it is heartening to see so many of you gathered together, albeit virtually, to pay our respects in an act of Remembrance for those who have had their lives taken from them in the course of their duties - in the service of, and for the benefit of others. Our recollection of their passing may indeed be a time of sadness and grief; but their actions and sacrifice also give us inspiration and hope for the future.

As we inch towards the end of 2020, “thankfully” as many people will say, we can look back on a year of several significant Remembrances. Amongst these have been the 75th Anniversary of VE Day, celebrated memorably as I recall through our Face Book posts on the 8th May; our virtual Provincial Meeting on 16th July with over 500 brethren on one Zoom Conference - perhaps we should have applied for an entry in the Guinness Book of Records for that one! The 75th anniversary of VJ Day in August which marked the end of World War II; and on Saturday night past, we watched a very different Ceremony of Remembrance from a near empty Royal Albert Hall. At that event the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall made fitting references, not only to those who gave their lives fighting for flag and country during armed conflicts, but also for those in our Health Service, who have joined in the battle against that silent, unseen and deadly enemy, which is Covid-19.

During the past week we have seen HM the Queen laying her traditional spray at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, this year itself being the Centenary of that anonymous soldier being laid to rest in Westminster Abbey, and which today at the 11th hour, on this the 11th Day of the 11th month, and was again the focus of attention for a special centenary service and commemoration. Prince Charles laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, which for me was all the more poignant, as the ribbons adorning the wreath, were in the red and blue colours of our Mark Degree.

Last Sunday's Remembrance Day Service at the Cenotaph (itself 100 years old since its unveiling by King George V) was a stark reminder of the power of that Coronavirus and the steps which the authorities are obliged to take to protect us from its deadly consequences. The pavements may have been empty of the usual large crowds of spectators, but the ceremony went ahead as always, in the presence of Religious Leaders of many Faiths, representatives of the Armed Forces, Politicians, Commonwealth High Commissioners and many others from civilian organizations. And of course in the presence of the Queen and other senior members of the Royal Family, including our Craft Grand Master, HRH the Duke of Kent. Whitehall may have been emptier than past years but the street was filled with all the usual traditional music, poignant ceremonial and proud memories of the bravery and sacrifice of those, who we ourselves have gathered together this very evening, to honour.

This week too, members of the public are being encouraged to share family histories and place messages of remembrance online by the Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden. He is inviting everyone to get involved from their own homes, to watch the various events on television and research their family history. If you will indulge me a few personal memories Brethren, I have done just that, for during these past months of lockdown and suspension, I've had the opportunity to do more research into my own and Eunice's family background.

On my father's side I have discovered that my great grandfather was a soldier in the Irish Army and was part of the 38th Regiment of Foot, which defended the town of Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny. Here is a contemporary drawing showing the uniforms which Queen Victoria's soldiers wore there in the 1850s.

On my mother's side my great, great grandfather served in the 51st Highland Light Infantry and saw service in the West Indies and in the Crimean War. Again this is a photograph of some pretty tough looking Highlanders in that conflict.

In the last century, my mother's father was a sergeant in the Royal Scots and won the Military Medal for bravery when he saved an Officer's life on the front line, in the trenches of WW1.

My own father was also part of the D-Day Landings in WW2 – also in the Royal Scots .

My wife Eunice's Great Uncle was a volunteer in the Cameron Highlanders and despite being wounded at Ypres, returned to the Front Line where he also was the recipient of the Military Medal for bravery.

Eunice's cousin still has his medals, preserved just as he wore them on Armistice Days after the Great War.

I have found great enjoyment doing this research – so much is available on-line these days: and for those of you for whom I have sparked an interest in doing your own research, then I wish you good luck and many happy hours trying to unravel the past.

Brethren before handing over to our Provincial Grand Tyler to propose the Toast, for which we are gathered here this evening, I have 2 very important duties to perform. The first is my list of sincere thank you's – to Bro Ameet Watts who is the inspired creator of this special event and who has managed the technical aspects of the Zoom session; Secondly; to V W Bro. Mark Corcoran, our hard working Provincial Grand Tyler who has composed a special Toast for this occasion, and lastly and most especially, to you all for your unstinting support of events such as these and for our wonderful Mark Province of London in general.

And I have one final announcement. As I am sure you are all well aware, the fundraising activities of the Royal British Legion, which does such great work looking after our ex-Service Men and Women, have been severely curtailed this year as Poppy Sellers have not been able to get out and about on our streets and other major fund raising activities have had to be cancelled. The Mark Province of London will be making a donation of £1,000 to the Royal British Legion, on your behalf and with the money which has been raised through your efforts and subscriptions.

Mark Brethren of London I salute your past generosity and send you heartfelt good wishes for your continued health and well being.

Stay safe Brethren all, and Mark Well.

Tom