

Esprit de Corps

Most countries will have a specific day of the year when they remember their military personnel and citizens who have died in war. Some nations will commemorate a particular armed conflict while others honour their dead in all wars over the ages.

In the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries this time of solemn reflection is called Remembrance Day, an occasion that always falls on the 11th November. It is on this day that these nations remember those who lost their lives in the First World War of 1914-1918. Known as the Great War, this conflict of immense suffering ended when the German Supreme Command signed the Armistice (surrender document) at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 in a railway carriage in the Compiègne Forest in France.

Of all the symbols associated with the Great War none is more poignant than the red poppy flower found in the fields of Flanders, that region of Western Europe embracing the lowlands of Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Since time immemorial the wild poppy has stood resplendent in countryside of harsh beauty. During the Great War, however, it was replaced by scenes of the worst examples of Man's inhumanity. Today, the modest poppy is worn with humility and serves to remind us of the sacrifices made by others for our sake.

Duty and sacrifice were foremost in the mind of our former Principal, Evan Stewart. Mr. Stewart had served for many years as a volunteer in the Hong Kong defence force, along with a number of St. Paul's College teachers and pupils. The Principal rose to the rank of Major in the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps No. 3 (Machine Gun). On the 18th December 1941, the Japanese attacked Hong Kong. The volunteers stood tall alongside the regular army to protect the people of Hong Kong. Major Stewart and his unit were assigned the task of fighting the Japanese at Wong Nei Chung Gap.

The defence forces were overwhelmed and surrendered on Christmas Day 1941. Major Stewart spent the remainder of the war incarcerated at the prisoner of war camp in Stanley. When Hong Kong was finally liberated he returned to England to recover from years of abuse and suffering at the hands of his captors. Major Stewart came back to Hong Kong in 1948 and led the charge of a band of alumni to re-establish St. Paul's College to its former glory. Evan Stewart never fully recovered from his war time experiences and died at the

modest age of 66 years in December 1958, after being taken suddenly unwell during Assembly. Promoted after the war to the rank of Colonel, our beloved former Principal and his fellow Pauline's will be remembered always for their sacrifice in the defence of Hong Kong.

Like the poppy, they stood tall out of loyalty to their comrades and country. Yet one cannot imagine what was going through their minds when faced by overwhelming firepower and the realisation that they would not be victorious. As with the poppies in the fields of Flanders, their fate was sealed. Although we will never know how they felt at the time of battle, Evan Stewart, the teachers and the boys of St. Paul's must have gained strength in the knowledge that they were in this conflict together. Sadly, we do not know all their names as the College records were destroyed during the Occupation. However, their sacrifice will never be forgotten. I look forward to the day when we commemorate Remembrance Day at St. Paul's College with a service in honour of our heroes.

The human spirit is built on such esprit de corps. Unfortunately, there are some who do not cherish the accomplishments of others. The humble poppy in the fields of Flanders has also become synonymous with over-achievement and success. Some poppies will grow taller than others leaving themselves vulnerable to jealousy and derision. Sadly, tall poppy syndrome is prevalent in all groups of people where the aim is to bring those flourishing poppies down to the level of the majority.

What we must ensure is that the poppy is left to grow as God intended and to recognise that esprit de corps will never equate to mindless conformity. Rather, the human spirit is built on loyalty and service.

We will remember them.

Dr. J.R. Kennard