

# Remembrance

Today we remember the many who died in the two world wars of the last century and later conflicts. I will lay wreaths in Burghfield in the morning and Wokingham in the afternoon.

As this year is part of the centenary remembrance of the Great War, there have been plenty of historical films and books of what happened in that prolonged and devastating conflict.

There have been attempts to defend and explain the actions of those in charge of the armies which suffered such terrible losses in attack after attack. All too often the promised impact of preparatory bombardment did not work, leaving the attacking troops to be killed in their thousands as they stumbled through barbed wire onto machine gun emplacements. There was little understanding and little ability to handle the many medical conditions brought on by the water, mud and disease that spread in the trenches, and even less sympathy for the psychological conditions many soldiers developed after prolonged exposure to shells, mortars and bombs.

The recruitment of massed citizens armies made politicians and Generals more blase about the extent of the losses. Wellington in the Peninsula was careful to protect his troops and avoid battles where losses would be large because he knew he could not easily replace his professional small army. In contrast the Generals in the First War on both sides just assumed they could recruit many more replacements. The French had to face a mutiny when troops protested about their mistreatment, whilst many Russians ended up as revolutionaries appalled by the suffering they had experienced in their army.

The bad political failures included the Peace Treaty at the end. The terms of this seemed to help set up another gruesome conflict twenty years later. A war is only successful if after victory the victors secure a stable and well founded peace.

The two wars have cast a shadow over the lives of those of us who came after the carnage, as we have sought to understand the suffering of our grandparents and parents and the sacrifices of many in their generations. It cast a far worse cloud over those who lived through the violence. Twice liberty was defended and the allies were ultimately victorious, but only after herculean effort.

We should take away from the events of more than one hundred years ago the need to expect more of politics to avoid conflicts becoming so violent. Where armed conflict is unavoidable we should expect those who do lead or direct troops into battles to take more care of them, working out how to concentrate and use force more effectively than either side managed for much of the First World War. That war is infamous for the deployment of chemical weapons on a large scale, for the cruel dominance of the machine gun and shell, and for the many heroic but too often futile attempts by infantry to break through massively strong defensive positions.