



SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION OF MILITARY VETERANS (CAPE TOWN BRANCH)

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Cape Town Branch News November 2018

The centenary of the end of World War One

11 November 2018 marks the centenary of the end of the “war to end all wars” World War 1 with Remembrance Services to be held around the world including at the Cenotaph in Cape Town and at Rosedale. It is estimated that there were some 40 million military and civilian casualties in World War 1 including 9463 South Africans.

The last surviving combatant of World War 1, Harry Patch, died in 2009 at the age of 111. George Santayana a Spanish American philosopher said in 1922 “Only the dead have seen the end of war” and how true his words have proved.

Why not join us at Rosedale at 1100 on Sunday 11 November for our Remembrance Service, guests to be seated by 1045. If you would like to stay for lunch afterwards please book at the service centre office between 0900 and 1130 on weekdays. Lunch bookings close at 1200 on Thursday 8 November.

12 World War One facts that you probably didn't know

World War 1 often conjures up images of a horrific bloodbath fought in the trenches of the Western Front. While this certainly captures some of the reality, did you know that the war spread as far as China? Or that it was fought by servicemen from Asia, North America, the Caribbean, Australasia and Africa?

Here are 12 surprising facts about World War One that you probably didn't know.

1. An explosion on the battlefield in France was heard in London

While the war raged on in the mud and trenches, a very different war was taking place beneath the soldiers' feet. A group of miners, operating in total secrecy, dug tunnels up to 100ft underground, to plant and detonate mines beneath the enemy's trenches. Their biggest success was at Messines Ridge in Belgium where over 900,000lbs of explosives were simultaneously detonated in 19 underground tunnels. Much of the German front line was destroyed, and the explosions were heard 140 miles away by the British prime minister in Downing St.



2. Journalists faced execution

A handful of journalists risked their lives to report on the realities of war. As the Government sought to control the flow of information from the frontline at the start of the war, journalists were banned. Reporting on the conflict was, in the opinion of the War Office, helping the enemy. If caught, they faced the death penalty.

3. 12 million letters were delivered to the front every week

Astonishingly, it only took two days for a letter from Britain to reach the front in France. The journey began at a purpose-built sorting depot in Regent's Park before being shipped to the trenches. By the end of the war, two billion letters and 114 million parcels had had been delivered.

4. War work turned some women's skin yellow

When a generation of men went to fight the war, more than a million women took their place in the workforce. They worked long hours, often in poor conditions and with dangerous chemicals. The so-called 'canaries' were women who worked with TNT, which gave them toxic jaundice and turned their skin yellow.

5. WW1 sparked the invention of plastic surgery

Shrapnel was the cause of many facial injuries in WW1 and unlike the straight-line wounds inflicted by bullets, the twisted metal shards produced from a shrapnel blast could easily rip a face off. Horrified by the injuries he saw, surgeon Harold Gillies, took on the task of helping victims and pioneered early techniques of facial reconstruction in the process.

6. Wilfred Owen was unknown at the end of the war

Wilfred Owen is one of the best known poets of the WW1, but when he died on the frontline, just a week before the end of the war, he was relatively unknown. At the time, his view of the war as one of pity and horror was in the minority. It wasn't until the 1960s that a literary elite decided this was the most authentic view of the conflict because it chimed with their own anti-war feelings. This resulted in the publication of two key war poetry anthologies which heavily featured Owen.

7. The youngest British soldier was 12 years old

Sidney Lewis was just 12 years old when he lied about his age and joined the army during World War One. He was one of thousands of eager underage boys who enlisted and ended up fighting alongside their adult counterparts on the front. Some were motivated by patriotism, but for others it was an escape from their dreary lives.

8. WW1 nearly caused a financial meltdown in Britain

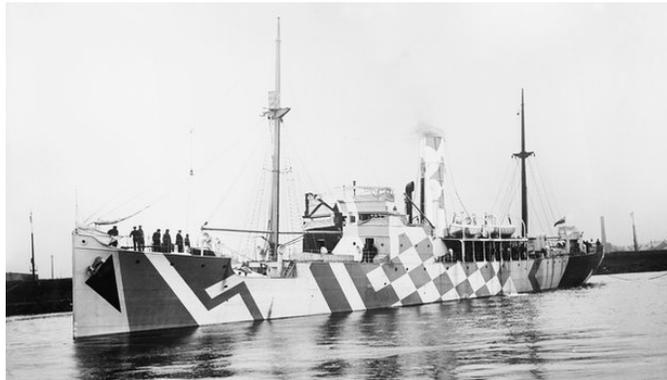
At the turn of the 20th century, Britain was an economic superpower, but the world's first global war would cost more than any that had gone before. For example, the cost of bullets fired in one 24 hour period in September 1918 was nearly four million pounds.

9. Blood banks were developed during WW1

The British Army began the routine use of blood transfusion in treating wounded soldiers. Blood was transferred directly from one person to another. A US Army doctor, Captain Oswald Robertson, established the first blood bank on the Western Front in 1917, using sodium citrate to prevent the blood from coagulating and becoming unusable. Blood was kept on ice for up to 28 days and then transported to casualty clearing stations for use in life-saving surgery where it was needed most.

10. Colourful makeovers meant WW1 ships hid in plain sight

It was crucial to protect the merchant ships carrying the food and military supplies to the front from enemy torpedoes. Norman Wilkinson, an artist and Royal Navy volunteer came up with the idea of covering ships in bold shapes and violent contrasts of colour. The complete opposite of normal camouflage, dazzle camouflage was supposed to confuse the enemy rather than conceal the ships.



11. 9 out of 10 soldiers survived the trenches

Being in the firing line was rare for a British soldier. They constantly moved around the trench system - meaning more often than not they were kept from the dangers of enemy fire. The more typical experience for the British Tommy would have been a life of boredom and regular routine.

12. Generals were banned from going over the top

The stereotype is that the ordinary soldiers of WW1 were lions led by donkeys - the donkeys being incompetent generals who sat out the war in comfort while thousands died unnecessary deaths. In fact, so many of the generals wanted to be closer to the fighting they had to be banned from going over the top because they kept getting killed. The experience required to be a general was too significant to lose.

A Christmas Truce

No Repeat of the Christmas Truce of 1914

In World War Two, there was no truce similar to the one that occurred during Christmas in 1914 in World War One. In that conflict, thousands of British, French and German soldiers, exhausted by the unprecedented slaughter of the previous five months, left their trenches and met the enemy in No Man's Land, exchanging gifts, food and stories. Generals on both

sides saw to it that such activities would be severely punished in the future and so there were no more Christmas truces the rest of that war or the next. But, in December of 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, while the Americans fought for their lives against a massive German onslaught, a tiny shred of human decency happened on Christmas Eve. A German mother made it so.

Three American soldiers, one badly wounded, were lost in the snow-covered Ardennes Forest as they tried to find the American lines. They had been walking for three days while the sounds of battle echoed in the hills and valleys all around them. Then, on Christmas Eve, they came upon a small cabin in the woods.

Elisabeth Vincken and her 12-year-old son, Fritz, had been hoping her husband would arrive to spend Christmas with them, but it was now too late. The Vinckens had been bombed out of their home in Aachen, Germany and had managed to move into the hunting cabin in the Hurtgen Forest about four miles from Monschau near the Belgian border. Fritz's father stayed behind to work and visited them when he could. Their Christmas meal would now have to wait for his arrival. Elisabeth and Fritz were alone in the cabin.

Visitors at the Cabin

There was a knock on the door. Elisabeth blew out the candles and opened the door to find two enemy American soldiers standing at the door and a third lying in the snow. Despite their rough appearance, they seemed hardly older than boys. They were armed and could have simply burst in, but they hadn't, so she invited them inside and they carried their wounded comrade into the warm cabin. Elisabeth didn't speak English and they didn't speak German, but they managed to communicate in broken French. Hearing their story and seeing their condition-- especially the wounded soldier-- Elisabeth started preparing a meal. She sent Fritz to get six potatoes and Hermann the rooster-- his stay of execution, delayed by her husband's absence, rescinded. Hermann's namesake was Hermann Goering, the Nazi leader, who Elisabeth didn't care much for.

More Visitors

While Hermann roasted, there was another knock on the door and Fritz went to open it, thinking there might be more lost Americans, but instead there were four armed German soldiers. Knowing the penalty for harboring the enemy was execution, Elisabeth, white as a ghost, pushed past Fritz and stepped outside. There was a corporal and three very young soldiers, who wished her a Merry Christmas, but they were lost and hungry. Elisabeth told them they were welcome to come into the warmth and eat until the food was all gone, but that there were others inside who they would not consider friends. The corporal asked sharply if there were Americans inside and she said there were three who were lost and cold like they were and one was wounded. The corporal stared hard at her until she said "*Es ist Heiligabend und hier wird nicht geschossen.*" "*It is the Holy Night and there will be no shooting here.*" She insisted they leave their weapons outside. Dazed by these events, they slowly complied and Elisabeth went inside, demanding the same of the Americans. She took their weapons and stacked them outside next to the Germans'.

Tension and Roast Hermann

Understandably, there was a lot of fear and tension in the cabin as the Germans and Americans eyed each other warily, but the warmth and smell of roast Hermann and potatoes began to take the edge off. The Germans produced a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread. While Elisabeth tended to the cooking, one of the German soldiers, an ex-medical student

examined the wounded American. In English, he explained that the cold had prevented infection but he'd lost a lot of blood. He needed food and rest.

By the time the meal was ready, the atmosphere was more relaxed. Two of the Germans were only sixteen; the corporal was 23. As Elisabeth said grace, Fritz noticed tears in the exhausted soldiers' eyes-- both German and American.

Parting Company

The truce lasted through the night and into the morning. Looking at the Americans' map, the corporal told them the best way to get back to their lines and provided them with a compass. When asked whether they should instead go to Monschau, the corporal shook his head and said it was now in German hands. Elisabeth returned all their weapons and the enemies shook hands and left, in opposite directions. Soon they were all out of sight; the truce was over.

Your Mother Saved My Life

Fritz and his parents survived the war. His mother and father passed away in the Sixties and by then he was married and living in Hawaii. For years he tried to locate any of the German or American soldiers without luck, hoping to corroborate the story and see how they had fared. President Reagan heard of his story and referenced it in a 1985 speech he gave in Germany as an example of peace and reconciliation. But it wasn't until the television program *Unsolved Mysteries* broadcast the story in 1995, that it was discovered that a man living in a Maryland retirement home had been telling the same story for years. Fritz flew to Frederick in January 1996 and met with Ralph Blank, one of the American soldiers who still had the German compass and map. Ralph told Fritz "Your mother saved my life". Fritz said the reunion was the high point of his life.

Fritz Vincken also managed to later contact one of the other Americans, but none of the Germans. He died in on December 8, 2002, almost 58 years to the day of the Christmas truce.

A Christmas message from Rev. Ralph Thornley

We are now moving into the season of Advent in preparation for Christmas. Advent comes from the Latin word "Adventus" meaning the arrival. One cannot miss the ongoing preparations especially in the supermarkets and departmental stores. It is the time of year for Christmas trees, glossy baubles, tinsel, artificial snow and Father Christmas. Of course one must not forget the carols that started sometime in October. It is the time when the tills ring out loudly the season and business owners rub their hands with glee regardless of their religious or non-religious persuasion. Perhaps they may quietly say to themselves "What a friend we have in Jesus!" Of course He is the reason for the season. There was discussion some time ago of doing away with religious holidays – commerce would never allow it. With all this noise and paraphernalia what are we really celebrating? In the Gospel of John chapter 3 verse 16 we read. "**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.**" That is what Christmas is all about - God's FREE gift of salvation to the world. Take it with both hands for there is no greater gift and without it there is nothing to celebrate. Christmas is John3:16.

Every Blessing for a Christ filled Christmas and a happy and peaceful New Year.

Ralph R. Thornley (Rev)
Chaplain SA Legion (Cape Town Branch)

Branch Update

Poppy Day Collection

It's not too late to volunteer to collect on Saturday 10 November or to make a donation. Funds raised are used for the welfare of veterans and there is no shortage of veterans seeking assistance.

To those of you who have already offered your assistance thank you for your support.

Remembrance Service

The annual Rosedale Remembrance service takes place at 1100 on Sunday 11 November. Rev Ralph Thornley will officiate and the band of the Cape Town Rifles (Dukes) will provide the music.

Annual General Meeting

A reminder that the annual general meeting takes place at Rosedale at 1630 on Thursday 15 November

Heritage Day Food Fair

Well done to the Rosedale Service Centre Committee who organized a very successful food fair on Heritage Day. The day was well supported with a variety of food and refreshments available. If you didn't make it this year the good news is that it is likely to become an annual event.

Year-end social

Another year has come and gone and 2019 looms. You are invited to attend the branch yearend get together at Rosedale from 1700 onwards on Thursday 6 December. R35 will cover the cost of substantial snacks and a cash bar will be open.

RSVP to david.sal@mweb.co.za or 021 6899771 by Friday 30 November.

Hope to see you there!