

Mayor's Address - Wem Armed Forces Day 24th June 2017

On this Armed Forces Day we remember and show our appreciation for the contribution by all who serve or have served in Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

As my predecessor Cllr Rosemary Dodd noted at last year's Armed Forces Day Thanksgiving, since the beginning of 2014 we have been as a nation reflecting on some of the major events of the First World War through our radio and television programmes and films that have been made. One hundred years ago, this war that was meant to have been 'finished by Christmas' had been dragging on and giving rise to ever greater casualty figures and suffering.

By the war's second year, the conflict had engulfed virtually all the world, from major powers to minor principalities. *Japan had attacked German-held territories in China and the Pacific, while Russia had declared war on the fading Ottoman Empire, leading British, French, and Anzac forces to attempt a disastrous invasion of Turkey through the Dardanelles and up the Gallipoli Peninsula.*

America watched the events with a wary eye, still determined to remain neutral, with President Wilson continuing to preach neutrality. However the war simply got worse as naval blockades resulted in the famous Lusitania being sunk off Ireland by German U Boats and then the Zeppelin airship that had been developed began to rain down fire from the skies on not only troops in the Hell holes of the trenches on the western front but on civilians in cities well away from the front line of the war zones. By March 1917 Wilson's steadfast neutrality was pushed beyond even his limits, when a German telegram was intercepted and deciphered to say "unrestricted submarine warfare" was to be the order of the day and an unfavourable alliance with Mexico planned. On April 6th 1917 America joined in the First World War and on June 1917 (100 years ago this month!) the first American Soldiers, woefully unprepared landed in France to add even greater complexity to the conflict. For those of you who have read Michael Morpurgo's book called 'War Horse'...or even been fortunate to see the play of the same name, as I have, you can see a glimpse of the horror of these times that our Armed Forces went through. Tanks had by now just been invented and were being used with devastating effects on battlefields in Europe replacing horses and so making war even more mechanical. Just a month from now from 31 July to 6 November 1917 the infamous Third Battle of Ypres and better known as Passchendaele was fought in the West Flanders region of northern Belgium. I can still remember now being told just a little about it when I came home in my early years at Wem Grammar School by Jim

Madeley a local man who in his retirement used his skill as a trained gardener to help us out at home. It is remembered as one of the harshest battles of the war, with heavy rain contributing to the Allies gaining only five miles of ground in three months. Poet Siegfried Sassoon described the muddy fields as "hell". Some of World War One's most defining images of futility, mud, gas attacks and trenches come from these very battlefields 100 years ago.

There are 57 names on our War Memorial who gave their lives during these years of World War 1 and although I haven't had opportunity to research more closely, many of these lives would probably have been lost during 1917 in these dark places. There is an epitaph that was written during 1916, attributed to John Maxwell Edmonds (1875-1958) that says so very poignantly what they might well want to say to us today....

"When You Go Home, Tell Them Of Us And Say, For Their Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today"

As the war recedes into the distance, it is our responsibility to not only mark the years that have gone past, but to keep alive the memories of those who sacrificed so much.

Let us also not forget those killed, injured and living with ongoing post-traumatic stress amongst other consequences for those who served in our Armed Forces during World War 2 that followed, just when many thought that the War to end all Wars had come to an end in 1918. Sadly the list goes on....let us not forget those who served and suffered and even died in our Armed Forces that went to the Northern Ireland, Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, to name but a few places, since then. Now we see our Armed Forces as well as other Public Servants putting themselves in harm's way and taking life-threatening risks as they are deployed in anti-terrorist duties as we have encountered the whole scale random murders at Manchester and in London in the last few months. We here today are so very grateful to the men and women who have given their lives or been injured physically or mentally to help protect us so that we enjoy the life we have today.

To help us remember the debt we owe our Armed Forces an informal understanding has been introduced into our public life in 2000. It is called THE Armed Forces Covenant. Armed Forces personnel and their families make many sacrifices in serving their country.

For the serving personnel, ultimately it can mean putting themselves in harm's way, which can result in injury and potential difficulty in integrating back into civilian life.

For families, it can mean having to move around the country every few years. This affects places on NHS waiting lists and children's schooling. Relocating can cause partners difficulty finding jobs, and getting credit or mortgages.

To balance this, the Government created the Armed Forces Covenant. It says that Armed Forces personnel, veterans or their families will not be disadvantaged by their military life when accessing goods and services, compared to other citizens.

TWO Highlights of Covenant achievements from central government, local government and businesses include:

- A government Forces Help to Buy Scheme which helps Armed Forces personnel to get on or stay on the property ladder; a challenge made more difficult by a mobile Military lifestyle
- More than 500 companies both large and small making a range of commitments to Armed Forces personnel such as guaranteed interviews on leaving the Forces
- A £35 million government fund for schemes and projects for mental health and injured Service personnel. This includes organising short holiday breaks for Service family members with additional needs / disabilities, and Combat Stress mental health community outreach programme.
- Career development for Service partners, such as the Royal British Legion 'Industries Lifeworks' for families and the University of Wolverhampton 'Dependents' Business Start Up' programme

I should like to conclude by mentioning our local RAF station at Shawbury and welcoming as our special guest Wing Commander Marcus Collinge. Thank you sir for coming.

RAF Shawbury's Mission Slogan is I believe...."**Delivering now, preparing for the future**"

How do you do this? Your website help us understand a little of the base. It states that in a typical year 1000 students from across the UK defence and international partners are trained to meet the challenges of military service. The Defence Helicopter Flying School trains aircrew for all three military services and the Central Flying School (Helicopter) delivers the next generation of helicopter instructors.

The school of Air Operations Control trains the next generation of controllers delivers specific pre-deployment training to those about to deploy on operations and trains instructors.

The mission of RAF Shawbury is to ensure that personnel are robust and resilient as well as technically second to none. A 'whole force' of military, civil service and contractor personnel work together to deliver Shawbury's output safely and efficiently.

We here in Wem are particularly grateful to our friends from RAF Shawbury, as many of their personnel live in Wem, or choose to live here on leaving the Service, and many of their children attend and contribute greatly to our schools. Indeed I believe you Wing Commander are a Governor at Thomas Adams School, showing indeed how truly your lives on the base are integrated with our own here in Wem – each mutually supporting the other.

Today Wing Commander, we would like you to take back to RAF Shawbury our thanks and appreciation for all you do for us, not only in our locality, but also as part of our Armed Forces who continue to serve, defend and protect our freedom as a nation, and all we hold most precious and dear.

Thank you.

Cllr Edward Towers

RAF Shawbury Mission Statement is: "To provide a safe, efficient, and effective airfield base environment; to enable and support, commanded, lodged and parented units; and to deliver wider Defence and RAF tasks as directed".