

Memories of Those We Treasure

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'The day that Sussex died': these words are written on the Worthing West constituency Royal British Legion wooden cross that I planted on Monday in the Palace of Westminster's New Palace Yard.

The day before the first day of the Battle of the Somme in northern France, men from the Southdowns battalions of the Royal Sussex regiment made a diversionary attack, the Battle of Boar's Head. Within five hours, 17 officers and 349 men were killed, with 1,000 more wounded or taken prisoner.

A modern memorial is within Beach House Park in Worthing. There were 12 pairs of brothers and three from one family. One analyst called the raid a disastrous enterprise that demoralised the British and cheered the Germans opposite. Another view was that the attack led to a great improvement in the fighting value of the 39th Division, and caused the Germans to keep reserves in the area.

At Remembrance Services and Ceremonies at Westminster and in West Sussex, and whenever I stop to read names on Memorials, I recall that the purposes of politics include the responsibility to reduce the likelihood of unnecessary international conflict, and to stop the conditions that lead to high-level persistent civil war.

There will always be the need to take decisions about conflict. Admiral of the Fleet Lord Boyce died this week. As Sir Michael, Chief of the Defence Staff, in 2002 when overseeing the British involvement in the war in Afghanistan, he had reservations about the coming conflict in Iraq.

From 2003 and after the end of his active service, we were friends and colleagues in a variety of causes. Like all the best commanders, he believed in giving responsibility and in high standards, standards higher than those always achieved by ministers.

My view is that ten years later, parliament made an unintended mistake when we failed to back the use of force to prevent the unpopular dictatorial President of Syria using chemical weapons on his own people. His tactics, later backed by Putin's military force, included deliberately targeting hospitals.

The consequences are still rolling around the world, especially in the targets and the brutality of Russian military leaders. We stand in solidarity with his Ukrainian victims and remember the young Russians dying for Putin's mistakes.

Since last year, I have visited Gallipoli to stand with an RBL wreath at the graves and memorials of every constituency man who died in the attempt to force the Dardanelles. This Thursday at the Royal Opening of the Field of Remembrance between Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's in Parliament Square, I will remember them.

On Friday at 11am I will join the ceremony by Worthing Town Hall; on Sunday I will attend the Services at East Preston and then at Kingston Gorse.

The 50th anniversary of the arrival in Britain of the Ugandan Asians was marked last week by a Service hosted in Buckingham Palace: I introduced Mrs Razia Jetha and her nephew Dr Riaz to King Charles. We had enjoyed the two years when she and her late husband shared our home, before Virginia and I became MPs.

Another former refugee present was Lord Sentamu, former Archbishop of York. He is African, not Asian in heritage. President Amin killed hundreds of thousands of Ugandans. When he tried to annex part of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere captured Kampala and ousted Amin. John Sentamu helped the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry and his example shows how the United Kingdom has been enriched by those adding to our historic mixing of people.

We are a nation, not a race. We are outward looking and tolerant, with cooperation between major political parties on what matters most.

Forty years on from the Falklands, we recall how civilians and the Armed Forces, backed by their families, reversed the invasion directed by a dictator. Democracy does matter. Death and destruction seldom follow fair open elections.