

11/11/08

90 Years On - We Remember

**Branch Chair Jane Backhouse writes about the ceremony at the Cenotaph
Photos by Roy Backhouse**

On November 11 at 11 o'clock, my husband Roy and I were privileged to be in this historic event.

We gathered as usual in King Charles Street and marched into position soon after 10am. Our WFA President and Chairman, together with Howard Giles (the son of our Founder John Giles) and several other prominent WFA members, were already alongside the Cenotaph ready with WFA wreaths.

The BBC was broadcasting a programme of words and poetry spoken by well known actors and descendants of World War one service personnel. There was a Welsh choir and the combined Band of Her Majesty's Royal Marines, the Band of the Grenadier Guards and the Band of the Royal Air Force.



*From left to right: Henry Allingham, Harry Patch, William Stone
'...knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.' (Wilfred Owen - KIA Sambre Canal
November 1918)*

At a quarter to 11, to applause, the three remaining service men of that great conflict came into view together with their escorts:

- with Henry Allingham (112 years) came Flight Lieutenant Michelle Goodman who recently was awarded the DFC.
- with Harry Patch (110 years) came Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry VC;
- with William Stone (108 years) came Marine Mkhusele Jones MC;

The escorts looked incredibly young and innocent, yet they have seen action of the most brutal kind. The touch of a hand on a shoulder or to support the wreath was quietly reassuring.

90 years on, war does not go away.

The Prime Minister and the Duchess of Gloucester looked on from the sidelines, as did the Chiefs of Staff, a bank of photographers and us.

Proudly and with such dignity were 2 wreaths laid. William Stone closed his eyes, Harry looked far away. The young men returned from their proud task of laying the wreaths. Then it was Henry Allingham's turn.

He wished to lay the wreath himself. Heartbreakingly long moments went by - Michelle assisted with wonderful kindness, the Bishop to the Forces assisted.

But it was not to be.

Henry pulled the wreath back towards him and with a kiss allowed the young people to lay it down on the corner of the monument - 'so that I can see it' came the very firm voice.



'..for my friends' - Henry Allingham

The Exhortation was read and all responded in the 90 year old tradition. The silence was palpable. Lumps came up to choke even the most world weary there.

Three great men of our time, the last of the Lost Generation and a taste of the cream of the current generation turned quietly to move back into their position, then gently returned back towards Downing Street.

The WFA wreaths were laid, the Band played, we remembered.



'We WILL remember.'
Westminster Abbey November 2008