

## Remembrance Sunday

I have been starting to work through my late parents' belongings in the last week and one poignant thing I stumbled across was a battered little case which turned out to be full of black and white photos, sepia photos, telegrams, forces greetings cards and numerous other items which were clearly of sentimental value dating back nearly to the beginning of the last century.

Obviously I knew roughly how my parents had been involved in the forces during the second world war, but I wasn't familiar with much of this material and as I made a start on looking through it I was struck by a couple of things – first, that in what were clearly very anxious times there had been opportunities to have some fun. There are quite a few pictures of soldiers larking about and mixed groups of happy people and one particularly striking one of my mother in her RAF sergeant's uniform looking really quite glamorous.

And the second thing, as I saw images of now dead grandparents, uncles, aunts and so on, it struck me how much more things military impinged on their lives than they have done on mine and many in my generation. All of them had been involved in one way or another – actively or as supporting family. Though maybe that is changing just a little a bit. With the intensity of the war currently going on in Afghanistan there can't be many people who don't know and fear for someone involved and sadly, many of us will know of people and families who have already been tragically affected in one way or another.

And of course, with the Help for Heroes campaign, the raised profile of the poppy appeal this year and the remarkable tributes given so often by the people of Wootton Bassett to soldiers being repatriated, we have all been made more aware of our armed forces, what they do and how they are part of us and an integral part of our society. And inevitably all these developments bring out people's sensitivities – it's a deeply emotional area where many folk have raw feelings.

So when the British Legion put on events and persuade the X-factor judges to wear poppies in the weeks leading up to Remembrance Day, it gets reactions – I'm not going to go into the details but the response to some criticisms from Legion spokesman Robert Lee is worth quoting I think:

He is unrepentant. "I am glad that they have noticed the change in campaigning. It's a fair cop. There have been criticisms, mainly from older veterans.

"We are the national custodians of remembrance but we are living in contemporary society. Not everything we do with the poppy appeal has to be static and serious, or conducted with a frown. It was very generous of the X Factor wearing poppies – that's caused quite a stir of Twitter, with people asking what they are.

"There is nothing in our appeal or campaigning which supports, or does not support, war: we are totally neutral. We are not a warmongering organisation. We don't have a position on war in Iraq or anywhere else. These boys don't send themselves to Iraq – that's a decision for the politicians.

"We help 160,000 cases a year, servicemen and women and their families. We represent widows at inquests, we fight for compensation for victims who have lost limbs. We are in there, up to our elbows dealing with the cost of conflict."

Two things about that statement strike a chord. I like the bit about not everything being serious. It chimes with those photos of soldiers having fun. The military does not just fight for us and defend us, crucial though that is. They also bring colour and pageant with them which contributes enormously to our world. Earlier this year we were in Lincoln and one morning we went to the cathedral service which turned out to be in the RAF chapel and conducted by an RAF chaplain. It was a good little service and good to know that the cathedral there is regularly involved in the lives of servicemen because that's what churches ought to do – be involved with peoples' whole lives – their joys and their sadnesses.

Then later that same day, we were cycling in the lanes north of Lincoln when there was an almighty roar and suddenly we found ourselves spectators of a red arrows training session in the skies above us. It really was a treat – one of the best free shows I've seen in years. An exuberant display of military precision and fun. I guess if you lived there the novelty might wear off but you'd certainly know there was an air force around.

It's not just Lincolnshire either. My parents used to live on the Isle of Wight and there were some pretty impressive naval events around there over the years. Living in Herefordshire of course we have the SAS and since their job is largely to keep out of sight I suppose we have to resign ourselves to the fact that it's good we don't see too much of them.

But I also admired the bit in the Legion response about being up to their elbows dealing with the cost of conflict. It's good that somebody is. Last autumn I got

round to going to the National Arboretum which is something I think I mentioned last time I stood up here. That wall on the Armed Forces memorial with all the names of those service personnel who have died since the second world war is a most sobering reminder that the individual sacrifices continue to be made in serious numbers. Perhaps even more sobering is the blank space waiting for those yet to die.

It's strange to reflect that Remembrance Sunday is really the only Sunday of the year when the church specifically deals with recent history – that shouldn't mean that it's the only time we remember and support and share fellowship with the individuals in our forces who make this history and their families who fear for them or remember them – who is there for them in their joys, their sadnesses and their sacrifices?