

## Remembrance Sunday, 9 November 2025

In a few moments, we'll hear the Epitaph from the battle of Kohima, a hill station on the border of India and Burma almost taken by the Japanese in the Spring of 1944, but they failed, in one of the bloodiest battles of the war thwarted by a small force of British and Indian troops, and Gurkhas, outnumbered at one stage by ten to one. It was a battle that lasted from the 4<sup>th</sup> April until the 22<sup>nd</sup> June when the Japanese finally withdrew leaving 7,000 dead of their own and 4,000 British and Commonwealth troops dead, missing and wounded. At one point, the two forces were separated by only a tennis court and there was much hand to hand fighting. We have to give credit to the RAF also for keeping the fighting troops supplied, with much loss of life in the process. The Japanese were at the very end of their supply lines and many more were to die of starvation as they withdrew, 30,000 more eventually being lost as they were beaten back to Rangoon. I've given these details because I've never heard a gun fired in anger and I can only give witness to the facts that have come down to us since and it's not for me to glory in victory or to denigrate war, but I can quote from a professional soldier who knows what he's talking about. This is from an introduction to a collection of war poems – diaries from Africa and Italy by General Sir John Hackett: commissioned first into the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars, serving in Palestine and Jordan at the beginning of the War and ending it at Arnhem where he commanded the 4th Parachute Brigade.

*'Every war is a private war. Every man, woman or child in anyway involved in it lives in a unique and private world among experiences inaccessible to others. Wartime pressures, physical, moral, spiritual can be very high, often so high that the vessel on which they are brought to bear collapses under them. Even when they can be borne, they leave no one unmarked. None of this experience can be shared. It is private, personal, unique and in its essence uncommunicable. (Not unlike prayer, I would say). But if the experience itself cannot be shared, it is still possible to lighten the load by saying something about it, to seek out the places where truth, pain, beauty, anguish, wonder lay and try to indicate them to others. It brings a measure of relief not only to those who do it but also to those before whom it is done, for it shows that others too were under the hammer and have cried out in language they can understand.'*

It's the essence of remembrance and the Kohima Epitaph.

We weren't there, but we can honour the experience of it for good or ill. And as General Sir John Hackett hints at – it can be an experience hugely deranging to those who survive – which explains perhaps the sense of envy here taken from a poem about prisoners of war captured in Sicily between August and October 1943.

*'Like shabby ghosts down dried-up river beds  
The tired procession slowly leaves the field;  
Dazed and abandoned, just a count of heads.*

*It is ended now. There's no more need to choose,  
To fend and think and act: no need to hate.  
Now all their will is worthless, none will lose  
And none will suffer, though their courage fail.  
The tension in the brain is loosened now,  
It's taught decisions slack: no more alone  
- How I and each one of us have been alone  
Like lone trees which the lightnings all assail –  
They are herded now and have no more to give.  
Even fear is past. And death, so long so near,  
Has suddenly receded to its station  
In the misty end of life. For these will live,  
They we quit of killing and sudden mutilation.  
They no longer cower at the sound of a shell in the air.  
They are safe. And in the glimmer at time's end  
They will return – old, worn maybe, but sure -  
And gather their bits of broken lives to mend.'*

John Jarman, Officer with 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division Anti-tank Unit, served in the Desert, only to return to England and then to be killed in Normandy, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1944.

All we have to do is remember them.

Br John Mayhead  
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour