

FACES

Portsmouth. Summer 1914. A city prepares to go to war.

Portsmouth. Summer 2014. A city prepares to remember.

One hundred years have passed since The Great War. The war to end all wars.

A century of remembrance, reconciliation and resolution.

We stand at Armistice in solemn prayer, unable to grieve, seeking instead to try and understand a war largely consigned to the history books. Our memories forever tainted in sepia tinged photographs passed between generations, their faces all but dissipated into the mists of time.

Faces of a father, a lost brother, a great-great grandfather perhaps?

A family name carved into stone.

An unknown wooden cross planted oceans away in Flanders fields.

The truth is that the First World War although truly a global war was one of the most defining moments in Portsmouth's history, and definitely the most costly in terms of casualties and the sheer effect that the conflict had on the town. It affected all the population from volunteers that signed up through the 'Portsmouth Pals Battalions', reservists and underage serviceman, and the local born men serving abroad for Empire in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

The story of Portsmouth's war losses tells the story of the city itself during those dark days, a unique city whose status as a naval dockyard and a garrison town gave it a character all of its own.

Images of the Great War conjure up barbed wire and trench warfare, and of huge land army battles like the Somme. However particularly for Portsmouth the Royal Navy played a crucial role at sea too.

This was due to the Naval / Arms race between Britain and Germany which culminated in the launch of HMS Dreadnought in 1906, her 12 inch guns and speed of 21 knots made all other warships obsolete. Although many of the ships were originally based in Portsmouth, on the eve of war in 1914 the Grand Fleet was relocated up to Scapa Flow in Scotland for the anticipated North Sea battle.

The First World War journals of Commander Andrew Downes RN provide a unique first hand witness to The Battle Of Jutland onboard HMS Birmingham.

Sun Feb 26 1916

‘Met the whole Grand Fleet and carried out exercises. We are in a very high latitude and it is snowing hard but in the intervals it is a marvellous sight – over 30 Dreadnoughts pounding about. Ad. Jellicoe is supposed to have said that there will not be a single light cruiser in the Battle Cruiser Fleet left after an action. From today’s proceedings I should say he was just about right, as we had to go between the lines of our battlefleet and theirs to drive off the destroyers, on which they go all the way to destroy 1/3 of our line. We get the enemy’s shots and our own shots fired at the 60 or 70 destroyers besides the torpedoes from the aforementioned destroyers. However while it lasts, things will be on the move somewhat swiftly!’

Tuesday May 30 1916

‘Landed at 1.30 and spent most of the day under my car, cleaning and oiling. Lovely day. Did a little shopping in Dunfermline. Had tea at 4.30 in the garden of the Elgin Hotel. Little did I think then that in twenty-four hours time I should be in the thick of the greatest Naval battle in history as regards numbers of ships engaged. I went onboard at 6.45 and found a flap on, all ships proceeding to sea when ready. The following description of the action must necessarily be disjointed and incomplete.’

[-] ‘The action between the battle cruisers became very hot and the noise of the shell bursts was appalling. The speed was about 26 knots and our two older battle cruisers seemed to fall astern, but it was hard to see what was happening astern of the line owing to the enormous columns of spray from enemy shot, our gunfire and funnel smoke.’

[-] ‘This is the only time that I honestly felt that I had not ten minutes more to live. The suspense was really awful. We kept our guns trained in the direction of the battle cruisers and waited. We were only going 17 knots and I wondered at the time why the Captain did not go on full speed and clear out, but he was right as usual in the end. I believe he would not go on because increasing speed would have made a large white stern wash which would show up at night and also extra smoke would show from the funnels.’

[-] ‘We were more or less anxiously waiting for news of our Grand Fleet (they were in Scapa Flow and had further to go to reach the position of the battle) and we eventually heard that they were only 30 miles off and coming to help us, for which we thanked God.’

Saturday June 03 1916

‘In the morning papers saw that our losses were Queen Mary (1213 killed), Indefatigable (1064 killed), Invincible, Defence, Warrior, Black Prince (816 killed), Tipperary, Sparrowhawk, Ardent, Fortune. This is a big loss and I hope we have sunk a great many of theirs.’

The war has assumed an almost mythical quality in our collective imagination, but the passage of time has robbed it of its human face, until now..

To fully comprehend, and experience the war we have to see it through the collective humanity of the individuals who were there. Like Commander Downe's diary entries, their story is never more alive. Their personal triumphs and desperate tragedies are being played out tonight across the city in a unique film; that in conjunction with Portsmouth Festivities and the incredible talents of internationally acclaimed video-performance art collective Wilson-Eflerova, have created a timeless piece of art that reminds us - the modern audience- that these people were not so very different from us. Their hopes, their fears, and their passions are like ours. And so we come full circle.

Because their story is also *our story*. We are left saddened, exhilarated, emotional and enlightened.

But we leave forever changed by the experience.

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(Portsmouth, June 2014)

Bibliography

Carden, Arthur. (2012) *The First World War Journals of Commander Andrew Downes RN. Privately Published.*
