

## **‘What does November 11<sup>th</sup> mean to me?’**

*A speech by Alexander, student at Portobello High School*

We are given two minutes on November 11<sup>th</sup> at precisely 11am to remember those who have died in conflict fighting for our safety. I’ll be honest, as a child, I had no idea what to think about. I knew that the poppy pinned to my chest by my mother was synonymous with war but I couldn’t quite comprehend the gravity of the event. Over the years, through education, literature and even field trips to the site of human atrocities, whether that be World War 1 or World War 2, one belief has become more rounded – I still have no idea of the human sacrifice that took place and the more I learn, the more I marvel at how people, families and nations dug so deep for a courage I don’t think you know you have until it is called for.

During this time of year, I feel a duty to find out more about war. I need to prepare my mind for the two minutes of solitude where I connect to a moment of time, whether in the distant or recent past and think of the sacrifice I know I cannot fully understand. Even though it is impossible, we must always try to acknowledge and remember.

As a generation who has never known large scale conflict, it is hard for us to understand the level of commitment and courage of families three generations ago. I worry that meanings and family stories will be lost as living survivors join the comrades, united in death, after a long life. But this got me thinking: as hard as it is for me to comprehend the suffering, there are those who were haunted by it – their remembrance was incessant, tortuous. It got me thinking that those two minutes of remembrance, through the generations, through the years, must have been spent in many different ways and changed as lives went on, year after year, as wives, mothers, children suffering the loss of a loved one are forced to move on, and progress in their lives. It is the natural order of things.

Imagine a mother at the first local memorial seeing her son’s name for the first time. Surrounded by other mothers who lost their sons in the Great War, what went through her head as the Last Post sounded and the flags lowered for the first two minute silence? There must have been an unbreakable bond of pride and grief for the glorious dead. The feeling of gratitude for their sacrifice yet sadness colliding in their hearts – a stony wall of pain: you must be proud and yet it is a human reaction to wish your boy hadn’t gone, that your sons were still safe in their beds dreaming of their futures. While the common bond of grief must have been a comfort it must also have been a pressure too: war is an unfair mistress taking everything from some people and nothing from others. Imagine a mother losing her son only to see his friends come home, unharmed, and begin to grow and age and settle. As they age, the glorious dead remain forever young – that must have been painful for a mother to see. Remembrance for them was constant, but in those two minutes, no matter who or what you had lost, those who were mourning their loss, and those who are singing their thanks came together in a single moment to pay their respects.

What about the surviving soldiers? How different must their two minutes be? Who or what do they remember? Perhaps it is the friend next door who they signed up with, trained with and fought with in Flanders Fields. Perhaps it is for the life they might have had if they had not been maimed by war, or perhaps it is the enemy soldier who was blown apart at their hands, and never got home to their family.

My generation couched in safety and security has its own challenge: to ensure that the two minutes in our lifetime continues to hold as much value as it does now. What will their two minutes be like in 20, 30, 40 years to come? We must be taught of the sacrifice but we must look beyond that to learn from their sacrifice. We must look backwards and forwards simultaneously if we want to shape our future from the disasters that occurred in the past.

There is always something to learn from two minutes of utter silence.

Every 11<sup>th</sup> November I find that I can't find the right words; I am acutely aware that I have no experience of war, of grief and life really. But I realise that it is the sentiment of remembrance that matters. It doesn't matter if you can't find the right words so long as you try and keep trying. And that is what we must take away at 11:02 every November 11<sup>th</sup>. Whether we succeed or not, we must all try to reflect and reach out to the past in thanks whenever we can.