

SPEECH AT THE SUFFOLK MEMORIAL, WEERT

22ND SEPTEMBER 2017

Alderman, Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good morning

Seventy three years ago, on the morning of the 22nd September, soldiers of the 1st Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment arrived on this spot.

Earlier that year in June, the Battalion had been part of the Normandy invasion force on D Day

They landed in the first wave of 8th Brigade attacks on 6th June at Sword Beach and from there led the advance to take Caen in France.

They were involved in the liberation of Brussels on 3rd September and from there they pushed northwards in support of the Market Garden Offensive.

On the afternoon of 21st September having crossed the border from Belgium they arrived on the outskirts of Weert – just south of the railway line.

There they had to overcome fierce resistance from the defending German forces who in late afternoon retreated in the direction of Nederweert, destroying the railway and road bridges as they went.

By midnight Weert was in no-mans land.

The city was silent

The next morning – it was a Friday – just as this year - the Suffolks pushed on and a column of infantry advanced along the canal to this bridge.

Private Len Carrington who was at the head of the column either clambered or was carried over the wrecked bridge.

He was welcomed on the other side with great joy by the Mayor and members of the resistance and to this day the young Private Carrington is remembered as the liberator of Weert.

By the next day, Saturday the 23rd, the Suffolk Battalion Command had set up their headquarters in the Town Hall.

That same morning, my father an RAF bomber pilot was in England being briefed on a massive bombing strike on Neuss, a major industrial centre on the Rhine.

Just after 7.00 o'clock that evening he took off with 6 other crew members in Halifax EY-S. His aircraft joined over 500 others in the mission.

By about 9.30 they reached their target made their attack and turned for home.

Their route took them west from the Rhine over Limburg. At about 10.00 the Halifax was attacked by a Luftwaffe night fighter. The starboard engines were set on fire and my father gave the order to his crew to bale out.

5 of the seven got out but my father couldn't get a response from the rear gunner so decided to stay with the aircraft and attempt to ride it down.

He failed to land successfully – the aircraft crashed near Massiekerweg - he and his rear gunner lost their lives, were found in the wreckage of the aircraft and taken to the Town Hall

Of the 5 crew who baled out, 3 survived.

One of the survivors, my father's bomb aimer, was picked up by the resistance, and taken to the Suffolk headquarters in the town hall where he identified my father's body.

2 years later, my mother received a letter from the Padre of the Suffolk 1st Battalion – The Reverend Hugh Woodall –

I have that letter - let me continue the story in the Suffolks' Padre's own words –

He wrote

"I was approached by the authorities of the Dutch Resistance Movement to conduct the burial ceremonies which were very impressive.

The Dutch insisted on providing the coffins and a guard of honour for the procession to the cemetery. My battalion the 1st Suffolk also provided a guard of honour at the graveside. A vast crowd of townspeople followed as an act of homage and gratitude for their liberation. They could not have done more

A year later in September 1945, I was able to return to Weert on the anniversary of its liberation and was very impressed to see that the people of Weert have not forgotten the 3 airmen.

They have erected a monument above the graves which reads 'Fallen in the struggle for Freedom' Again the people turned out in huge numbers, the Burgomaster laid a wreath on the graves and the two National Anthems were played."

So you see – nothing much has changed since the Suffolk's Padre wrote that letter over 70 years ago recording your first liberation ceremony in 1945 at my fathers graveside

We are gathered here, once again, to celebrate our freedom and to remember.

By some curious twist of fate and coincidence of timing, the Suffolk Regiment liberated Weert, and 2 days later their Padre officiated at the graveside of my father while members of the Battalion formed a guard of honour.

And so it was, all those years ago, that the Suffolk Regiment became an important part of the history of Weert - and of my life too - and by that coincidence, I have the great honour to have been invited to speak to you today

Since my first visit to Weert in 1962 I've had the good fortune to be made welcome, have made friends, and have come to understand and learn a little about the impositions of occupation by a totalitarian regime – and what freedom means to you.

I've learned about the ruthless imprisonment and extermination of minorities by occupying forces during the Second World War, the misery, hardship, fear and suffering endured by the citizens of Weert and people of the Netherlands. – And your complete loss of freedom

It is no wonder then of the relief and joy at liberation by the Suffolk Regiment when they arrived here on this day 73 years ago

So please, bearing that in mind, let me make 3 points that I'd like you to consider.

First

It is important that we remember

There are those that say we should forget

They say we should not perpetuate the memories and horrors of war

But forgetting is NOT an option – If we do not remember the past, we are surely condemned to repeat it.

Second

We have to remember with care

We must remember that there were, and still are, winners and losers

Third – and probably my most important point

We have to remember how fragile our freedom is

Extremism still exists at either end of the political spectrum – just waiting to exploit weak government

So robust government is essential to protect our freedom – we must use our right to vote – and then - hold those we elect to account

You see – you and I are the guardians of our freedom

So tomorrow morning, and indeed every morning,

When you go to school, or work, or shopping or even walking the dog

Take just a few seconds to think about your freedom

Remind yourself that you're lucky to be free – that by good fortune you live in a free country

Ask yourself why am I free? – How is it that I am free?

Then remember the 22nd September and why the Suffolk Regiment were here 73 years ago

John S R Swanson
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