

“Memories are like wild flowers. They seed themselves apparently by chance, not by human decision.” So wrote Colonel Gordon Graham in his book “The trees are all young on Garrison Hill.”

His book about Kohima is like a meadow of wild flowers, full of memories of his, his comrades and the people of Nagaland.

On Remembrance Sunday we all solemnly swear, “We will remember them”. Yet very few of us spend our lives living out that vow. But Gordon Graham did as indeed do you who are gathered here today.

And just as his book collates so many memories so this gathering of veterans, relatives and supporters represents another field of memories. All centred on an historic event of military and political importance. The Battle of Kohima. The turning point of the Burma Campaign and of the Second World War itself. A battle and a day when the ambitions of a cruel empire were finally checked.

Lord Mountbatten called the six week struggle “the most horrendous and most important battle of World War Two”.

This was not a battle of high Tec weaponry where missiles are sent on their path of destruction at the click of a mouse; this involved front-line soldiers in hand to hand fighting. It was violent, it was brutal, it was deadly. And it was vicious because the enemy were driven by the suicidal fanaticism of Emperor Worship. It was said of the Japanese that they were “First class soldiers in a third class army”. The cruelty of the enemy was infamous.

Shortly after the end of the Second World War my father was posted to Singapore. We went as a family for both his tours of duty. He was Commanding Officer of the Water Transport Division of the Far Eastern Land Forces. We often drove past the infamous Changi Jail. My father always went silent. He knew of the atrocities endured by British soldiers at the hands of the Japanese. But what he knew by reputation those who fought at Kohima knew by the wounds on their own bodies.

Silence is often the way of soldiers who have known the heat of the battle. Not for them the garrulous recounting of every blow. There's a time to keep silent, and there's a time to speak out, and that speaking out belongs to this day and to your annual memorial when we salute those who fought for us in the valley of the shadow of death.

Whereas the veterans walked into that valley of death and returned, we remember today those who walked into that valley and never returned because they walked through it and to the world beyond. I say 'walked', I mean strode and strove, struggled and fought, hand to hand until their light went out and they left this land of the dying for the world of the truly alive. Their sacrifice their passport, for greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends.

In Colonel Graham's book he recalls how he was once asked by a student to explain what motivated the soldiers of the 2nd Division. It's a compelling question for anyone who has immersed themselves in the horrors of the Burma Campaign and the ferocity of the Battle for Kohima.

Colonel Graham offered four reflections. They are as relevant today as they were 70 years ago. One, Innate decency. Two, Discipline. Three, Pride of Regiment. Four, Comradeship.

Innate decency. The Second World War was, in spite of all the revisionist thinking, in the end a battle of values between cruelty and decency. That particular battle may have ended over 70 years ago but we must be continually vigilant because in our own time and in different places around the world the battle between decency and cruelty continues.

Discipline. The discipline of the military life puts a proper check on human emotions so that in the heat of the fight the soldier's response is strategic and not emotional. Emotion is good and healthy and an essential part of being human and of grieving, but it shouldn't be the dominant force in battle. Feelings are not for the Front Line. They are for times of Remembrance, for times like this.

Pride of Regiment. The history of a regiment, embroidered in its regimental Colours, and its place in the history of the nation is the fibre of military life. All should live with a sense of their own history – personal, family, community, nation – for that is what gives us our identity and our purpose and our pride.

Comradeship. This goes further than even friendship and broader even than brotherhood. It's about shared experiences that forge a bond in the face of death. To quote Gordon Graham again, "death by an unexpected bullet is one thing; and different from hand to hand fighting that is preceded by and accompanied by fear." Friendship forged through shared fears is what makes soldiers comrades.

So today as we salute the heroes of Kohima and remember the native people who sustained the forces of liberty we also salute those four virtues of Decency, Discipline, Regimental Pride and Comradeship. We pray that these virtues may be found in a new generation of service men and women who are called to keep us safe and at peace in the clash of cultures between cruelty and decency.

The Right Reverend James Jones

