

Edinburgh Councillors commemorate 'The Sporting Battalion'



The weekend has provided me with ample inspiration drawn from the past.

Today, along with some fifty others from, or associated with, Scotland, I attended the ceremony to mark with respect the sacrifice of an earlier generation at Contalmaison in Northern France.



Councillors Rose Jackson and Henderson along with Provost of Falkirk, Pat Reid (and the back of Iain McGill's head...)

It commemorates the dead of the 16th Royal Scots volunteer battalion formed by Sir George McCrae, known as 'The Sporting Battalion', who participated in the First Battle of the Somme, beginning on 1 July 1916. The battalion was notable for its high number of casualties of professional sportsmen and fans drawn from the football clubs, Heart of Midlothian, Hibernian, Raith Rovers, Falkirk and Dunfermline along with a variety of other sporting clubs. The memorial cairn has become something of a pilgrimage for Scottish football fans and sportsmen.



Contalmaison Church

Today's event was made possible by the warm and generous hospitality of the people of Contalmaison (123 inhabitants). The village which was destroyed in the fighting, lost eight of its own men during the First World War and the ceremony

combined Scottish and French remembrance.

The ceremony today was both moving and inspirational. The flags, wreaths, music and a meticulously researched re-telling of the ultimate sacrifice of just one of the young soldiers by Jack Alexander made for a memorable and inspiring ceremony of remembrance. Jack has been the principal driving force behind the commemorative ceremony, perhaps culminating in the erection of the Contalmaison Cairn in 2004.



Two days earlier George Yu, a Chinese Eric Liddell enthusiast, had recreated a famous walk the missionary worker and Olympic hero made to Waverley Station from Hope Terrace in the Grange. On 29 June 1925, a year after his Olympic triumph, thousands of Edinburgh folk lined the route to pay their respects to the Paris gold medallist, Liddell, as he left Edinburgh to become a missionary in China – where he was to die 20 years later in an internment camp.

Two moving events, in which the selfless sacrifice of humans in differing circumstances will surely continue to shape our future.

Mr Yu hopes the “Flying Scotsman” will become an annual event and way of honouring the man who helped inspire the 1981 Oscar-winning film Chariots of Fire. He said:- “My hope is that this will become an annual event celebrating one of Edinburgh and Scotland’s greatest citizens.”

MCCRAE’S BATTALION: Raised in Edinburgh shortly after the start of the Great War, it was perhaps the finest unit in Lord Kitchener’s volunteer army – a brotherhood of sportsmen, bound together by their extraordinary colonel and their loyalty to the famous Gorgie ‘Hearts’. McCrae’s were blooded in the Battle of the Somme, losing three-quarters of their strength on the first day alone. The Colonel himself was invalided home. In time the battalion recovered. It came of age at

Arras, endured the muddy horror of Passchendaele, and held the line unbroken in the face of furious German attacks on the Lys in 1918. For almost a century their story remained untold. It was all but lost forever. Jack Alexander, through 12 years of exacting historical detective work, has reclaimed the 16th Royal Scots for posterity in his book 'McCrae's Battallion'. In it he draws upon interviews with veterans and a unique archive of letters, diaries and photographs, assembled from the families of more than 1,000 of Sir George McCrae's men.

ERIC LIDDELL: Liddell was born in China and moved back there to teach a year after winning an Olympic gold for the 400 metres. Mr Yu, who was born in Tianjin, China, but now lives in South Africa, has been travelling to Edinburgh regularly for the past three years in an effort to learn more about Liddell, who has links to his hometown.