

Letter from Scotland

One of the charming characters to come out of the Second World War is Wojtek, the brown bear who became the mascot of the Polish soldiers in the British Eighth Army. Ironically, this animal story humanised the war.

It serves to remind us that war is not just about territory, or freedom, or who wins, but about individual men, women and children – and yes animals – struggling to survive and holding on to our deepest values. It's a lesson for us today when Europe is again at war and the Middle East is again in turmoil.



Remembering VE Day. Wojtek the Bear. Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh

The Polish soldiers came across Wojtek as a cub in a refugee camp in Iran in 1942. He slept in the soldiers hut, he drank coffee with them in the morning and beer at night. He learnt to march, to wrestle and salute. When the soldiers were drafted into Montgomery's Eighth Army as the 2nd Polish Corp in Egypt, he was enlisted as a private, so the men could claim his food ration. He then "fought" alongside the men as they advanced through Europe, carrying boxes of shells at the Battle of Monte Cassino.

At the end of the war his Company was stationed at Winfield Airfield on a farm in the Scottish Borders where again he became a popular attraction with the locals. Finally in 1947, he was "stationed" at Edinburgh Zoo where he died in 1963 aged 21.

But such happy stories are the exception in a war zone. The reality is blood toil tears and sweat. It's utterly depressing to see scenes from the Second World War repeated in Ukraine today. If my uncle and my mother, both junior doctors during the War, were still alive they would be appalled. My uncle Ifan ApThomas was a field-ambulance doctor with the Eighth Army right through war. He would have seen dreadful suffering close up. VE Day would mean a lot to him and to my mother who worked in a hospital in Manchester. Would they blame us for allowing it to happen again ?

We've allowed the United Nations to wither away as a peace-making force. We should have helped Russia recover from Communism after its collapse in 1989 but instead we've tolerated it's decent into Putin's dictatorship. In the Middle East, we've walked by on the other side, like a Pharisee, while Arabs and Israelis extract vicious revenge on each other. Why is there no African peace-making force in Sudan ?

Such are my heavy thoughts, amidst the pomp and ceremony and pop concerts of the VE Day commemorations. In Scotland we've had our fair share, with a two-minute silence at memorials across the country, a service in Glasgow Cathedral, Edinburgh Castle was lit up in poppy-red and the "Shetland Bus" boats arrived in Lerwick from Norway. Five of the original fishing boats made the crossing in two days from Bergen, following the route they took in the winter months of the War, ferrying resistance soldiers and supplies from Shetland to Nazi-occupied Norway and bringing back escaping soldiers and refugees.

That spirit of resistance and the determination to re-build a better world has not survived the last 80 years. Take this week's news, for instance. Beveridge's creaking National Health Service has been promised another 100,000 GP appointments. It sounds a lot but in fact it only works out at one additional appointment per GP every two weeks. The other headline to emerge from the "Programme for Government"

announced by the First Minister, John Swinney, on Tuesday was the scrapping of higher peak-time fares on Scot Rail. You could tell this "Programme" wasn't going to be very radical when Mr Swinney announced there would be no increase in Income Tax this side of the election in May next year.

The opposition parties, quite rightly, mocked these announcements as mere window-dressing. But, of course, they didn't have any alternatives. So things will go on much as they are till next May when the electorate will have their say. Already one opinion poll, by Survation, finds that the protest party Reform will attract 11 per cent of the vote, giving them 21 seats in the Scottish parliament, 3 more than the Labour Party.

The dash for growth received a blow this week when the North Sea oil company Harbour Energy announced it was shedding 250 jobs, a quarter of its workforce in Aberdeen. No sign of a transition to renewables there. We were left clutching the possibility of better returns on our other exports – whisky and salmon – with the new trade deals with India and the US.

The 124 residents on the island of Colonsay may not be pleased to hear that Caledonian MacBrayne has had its government contract renewed for the next 10 years at a cost of £3.9bn. They've had trouble with the ferries for years and complained that their service is the first to be restricted when there's a breakdown in the aging fleet.

But there was more cheerful news from Colonsay this week when the owner of the local Smokehouse, Richard Irvine, now in his 60s, announced he was giving the business away to any young couple who wanted to come and live on the island and swell its dwindling population. It's a fine example of the public spirit that won the War and rebuilt our country. But it's a rare example.