

Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends

We gather here at Islandbridge, on this the 110th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, to remember—not as separate traditions, not as competing histories, but as one island carrying many stories. To remember the nearly 50,000 names inscribed in the Books of the Fallen. The quiet of this place and the lives recalled in ceremony today all remind us that memory is not a possession. It is a responsibility.

The Somme was one of the darkest chapters of the First World War. On the first day alone, thousands of lives were lost; over the months that followed, the toll grew beyond comprehension. And yet, amid that devastation, men from every corner of Ireland served, suffered, and died together. Here, we honour them not as abstractions of history, but as individuals whose courage and sacrifice still echo across the decades.

We remember in particular the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, whose assault on the Schwaben Redoubt on 1 July 1916 became etched into the story of Ulster itself. Composed largely of Ulster Volunteers—Carson's Army—they captured the heavily fortified Redoubt but suffered more than 5,000 casualties, including over 2,000 fatalities, within the first two days. The men advanced against impossible odds, knowing full well the cost that awaited them. Their bravery was not born of myth or legend; it was lived, minute by minute, in the mud and fire of the front. Their loss was felt in towns and villages across the North—homes marked by silence, families changed forever.

We also remember the men of the 16th (Irish) Division, drawn largely from nationalist Ireland, who fought later that autumn at Guillemont and Ginchy. Their advance at Ginchy cost more than 4,000 casualties in a single day. Today the Ginchy Cross remains a stark symbol of that sacrifice—a wooden cross carved in grief by Irish hands and raised on French soil, binding two far-off communities together in shared remembrance.

But the Somme was not only an Irish tragedy. It was a wound shared across nations, many of whom are represented here today. The Battle of the Somme lasted four and a half months, leaving over one million men dead, wounded, or missing. The British Army suffered catastrophic losses of more than 400,000; French forces fighting beside them lost over 200,000; and German casualties are estimated at more than 450,000. From afar, the men of Australia and New Zealand—ANZAC troops whose courage had already been tested at Gallipoli—fought and fell in their tens of thousands. The Somme became a graveyard of nations, each bearing its own grief, each leaving families and communities forever marked by the names that never came home. To remember the Somme honestly is to acknowledge this shared loss: a human sorrow that crossed borders, languages, and uniforms.

When we think of the Somme, we inevitably think of the war graves—the endless rows of little white headstones concentrated around Thiepval and Guillemont. It is almost impossible to comprehend the sheer scale of the slaughter on both sides, and sometimes it is easier to focus on a few particular individuals.

Today we honour men like Lance Corporal David Johnston, a fisherman from Derryharney in Co. Fermanagh, a Methodist lay preacher who led his men in prayer before they climbed out of the trenches. He was killed on the first day of the Somme.

We remember Private Billy McFadzean, who worked for a linen company in Belfast. Early on the morning of 1 July, as grenades were being handed out, a box was dropped. Without hesitation, McFadzean threw himself on top of it, sacrificing his life for his comrades. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

We honour men like Tom Kettle—scholar, parliamentarian, and officer of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers—who died leading his men in a successful attack on German lines at Ginchy. Kettle volunteered out of a belief that the war was a stand for the rights of small nations. In his final poem to his daughter, he wrote that he had “tried to write Paradise” but could only leave her “the weapons of the spirit.” Those words remind us that idealism can coexist with tragedy, and that love of country can take many forms without diminishing another’s.

We remember Private Thomas Hughes a farm hand and jockey from Castleblaney in Co Monaghan who joined the Connaught Rangers and was wounded four times in an attack at Guillemont but went on to lead his company in a successful attack on a German machine gun post. He was awarded the VC by King George V at Hyde Park in London but injuries to his legs meant he would never walk properly again and he died in poverty in a workhouse.

Stories such as these illuminate the human cost that gave rise to something enduring—the recognition that those who served must be cared for. It was in the aftermath of these losses, in the weight of shared grief and a world exhausted by war, that the British Legion was founded. Created by veterans for veterans, it was born from the belief that the nation owed a lasting duty of care to those who had served.

More than a hundred years later, that mission remains unchanged. We stand for remembrance—not to glorify conflict, but as a commitment to honesty, reconciliation, and reflection. And we stand for care—for the men and women who return from service with physical injuries, invisible wounds, and the complex challenges that military life can bring. The world has changed since 1921, but the needs of veterans—and the promises made to them—remain profoundly human.

As we remember the Somme, we cannot ignore the conflicts shaping lives today. The ongoing war in Ukraine, the conflict in the Middle East, and the civil war in Sudan which is now driving famine on a horrific scale—remind us that instability in one corner of the globe can ripple across many others.

These crises test not only governments and alliances; they test our humanity. They ask whether we still believe in protecting the vulnerable, in offering refuge, in striving for peace even when it feels distant. And they remind us that the cost of war is always borne most deeply by ordinary people: by families who wait for news, by those who flee their homes, by those who return changed, and by those who never return at all.

The men of the Somme—Ulstermen, Dubliners, Belfast dockers, Cork farmhands, Fermanagh fishermen, Louth shopkeepers—fought side by side, bound by the same call to service and the same heavy sacrifices on the field. They rose to that call with courage and steadfastness, meeting the demands of the moment with quiet determination. In remembering them together, we affirm a simple truth: remembrance can build a bridge over divisions, a shared inheritance outlasting separation.

Islandbridge is a place where memory becomes a meeting ground. A place where we acknowledge the full story of this island’s service—complex, intertwined, sometimes painful, but always human. And a place where we can speak honestly about the past while looking toward a future shaped not by what divides us, but by what we honour together.

As President of the Royal British Legion in Northern Ireland, I am deeply conscious of the responsibility we carry. We owe it to those who served in 1916, and to those serving today, to uphold the values of dignity, compassion, and solidarity. Their lives, and the futures they were denied, call us to something larger than ourselves.

So today, as we remember the Battle of the Somme 110 years on, let us do so with humility. Let us recall the bravery of the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division—the poets, the labourers, the volunteers, the men whose names are carved in stone and those known only to their families and to God. Let us honour them by supporting the living, by striving for peace, and by recognising the humanity of those caught in conflict today.

And let us carry forward the simple, profound vow that has guided the Legion for more than a century: That those who serve shall never be forgotten, and those in need shall never stand alone.