

## **I Believe in Freemasonry. (Remembrance Day)**

Presented at Old Light Lodge #184 Lucknow 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011

When one thinks of the Grand Master's theme it is normally in respect to present day, and our own local lodges and districts but at this time of year, so close to Remembrance Day, it takes on a different meaning for me. In this day and age in Canada we have the freedom to do as we wish, join what we want and also the freedom to **not** do anything. I believe at times we take the latter freedom for granted. We all know Brethren who don't attend Lodge on a regular basis or not at all. We have all heard the excuses and reasons, some valid some not so valid. Tonight I would like to talk about Freemasonry during the time of war and how Masons went to extraordinary means to continue on with their Masonic endeavors against great difficulties.

The first recorded mention of Masonry amongst POW was during the Seven Years' War 1756 – 1763 and during the Napoleonic wars but I would like to concentrate on the Second World War.

During WWII there are numerous examples of Masons risking everything to carry on with their Masonic lives. In various German POW camps brethren got together and carried out lodges of instruction and some meetings. In one camp, Stalag 383, they had monthly meetings with an average attendance of 60 men. Wouldn't we all like to have these numbers? That number was from a total of 82 members from 4 constitutions. At those meetings the VSL was opened, minutes were kept and read, and "accounts presented. Subscriptions were paid in cigarettes, which were

recorded in the "accounts". These were used to purchase cups of tea, and surpluses were placed in a charity fund. It is recorded that they had 16 meetings between 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1943 and 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1945 although the group first met earlier, in March 1943. In addition, rehearsals were carried out which were not minuted and also talks were given on various topics of interest.

But of a greater interest to me was what happened in the Far East. In the Far East the Masonic activities of the Brethren is fairly well documented. Although there are some documents on Masonic activities in Siam, Sumatra, Hong Kong and Shanghai, by far the most documented was in Singapore. After the fall of Singapore in 1942 civilian internees and POW's were imprisoned in the notorious Changi Prison Camp. Civilians were imprisoned in Changi Jail while the POW's were in Changi POW Camp, which was a number of camps surrounding the jail. There was little communication between the jail and the camps or between the separate camps. Initially the civilian internees numbered about 3000 of whom approx. 250 were Freemasons and the Servicemen about 55,000, no numbers on how many Masons.

One of the civilians was a W. Bro Baldwin Lowick who was the District Deputy Grand Master of the Eastern Archipelago. He was given full Authority from the GM of the Eastern Archipelago, who was ill. As all the local lodges were well represented he gave dispensation for the lodges to have meetings for business purposes only, and without regalia. Altogether he gave gave 42 dispensations for the lodges to meet. One lodge St Georges actually had enough members to elect Masters in the accepted succession. These meetings continued until 10<sup>th</sup> October 1943

when a number of Chinese prisoners were massacred. After that, the camp was under such harsh and vigilant supervision, and also the number of internees had risen to 5000, that this made it impossible to find any privacy. Some Brethren carried out small lodges of instruction and study groups but meetings were no longer viable.

On the military side a meeting of imprisoned Brethren was held as early as June 8<sup>th</sup> 1942 at which 45 were present. This was presided by W. Bro. H.W. Wylie PGD of GLoE and Past Assistant District Grand Master. He asked for permission from the British **Commandant** Lieut. General A.E. Percival, who was not a Mason, and the General then asked the area commanders, as well as the Japanese. The commanders agreed but the Japanese didn't give permission, saying they had to send to Tokyo for an answer. Hearing no answer from the Japanese, the **Commandant** gave permission because, as he said, quote:

“the project supplied yet another means of preventing the deterioration of character and morale which began to show itself in some parts of the large camp, at any rate in the early stages”, and “anything which will assist in the preservation of the discipline for which, I believe your Craft is universally noted, will undoubtedly prove valuable to me in the enormous difficulties I see already arising.”

Authority was given, under the auspices of Lodge St George No 1152, Singapore, for meetings to be held for the practice of ritual and lectures. Skilled craftsmen of the lodge made tools, wands

and tracing boards. Some of those tools etc. are on display outside Changi Prison. Weekly meetings were held in the English, Scottish and Irish workings. Preparations were always made to convert the room into something of a different nature in case of surprises.

Tyler's were placed at strategic points and Bro Wylie tells of one meeting in which four rings of six Tylers' were employed, 24 in all. Membership rose from 50 to over 100 members and parties from the Australian area of the camp joined in. This eventually stopped when many prisoners were moved out of the camp to work on the railroads towards the end of 1942.

Some Brethren, in another area of the camp, continued to hold meetings of an "Association" but they were actually held as lodges with WM and Officers. This continued for some time, holding meetings with attendances of 116, 149, 169, 133, during which only lectures were given, as it was not secure enough to do ritual. Over a period of 17 months 21 meetings were held but towards the end of 1943 things in the camp became very difficult as the tide of war was turning. A Brother was brought into the hospital, who at the time of his arrest, a book of ritual had been found on his person, for which he received a severe beating. On May 4<sup>th</sup> 1944 the last meeting of the Association was held. Bro Wylie wrote a fitting epitaph, which said:

"The peace and tranquility of those meetings stood out in great contrast against the turmoil and irritations of the day. Although it was hot, and most of the time all of us were in rags, ill, hungry, tired and dirty, yet it was possible during those meetings, almost completely to forget the normal

conditions of our lives as prisoners of war. To sit quietly among proven friends and listen to the Ceremonies, took one's thoughts very far from a prison camp and lifted the mind above the reach of petty annoyances, restored one's balance and demonstrated the possibility of victory of mind over matter, a very important factor at that point of time."

My Brethren, these actions, in my opinion, are examples of men who truly believe in Masonry. Men who risked even live itself to continue with their Masonic ceremonies as best they could, who found some form of meaning in their lives and brought a certain level of peace, even in such terrible conditions.

That belief is still there within our present day members of the armed forces. In Kandahar, Afghanistan, under the Jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Canada is a Lodge, "Canada Lodge UD, Kandahar," which meets and has even initiated men into the craft. First time for initiation was on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2010. As the meeting closed there was a rocket attack at which time everyone dropped to the floor until it ended. There was another event that night which is of military and Masonic note. One of the Brethren, Brother Gardiner rose and removed a small clear plastic envelope from his pocket, which contained a Masonic coin. He proceeded to tell them – his voice slightly quivering – that this coin was found on the body of Brother Sergeant Shawn Eades after he was killed in an IED blast in August 2008. His wife had requested that the coin travel to Canada Lodge with Sgt. Gardiner. The WM Brother Fulford, directed the coin to be placed on the alter, until such time as it was returned back to Bro. Eades widow, by Sgt. Gardiner. It was laid

beside the VSL as a memorial to our brother-in-arms, our brother in the Craft. There are also Prince Hall Lodges in Afghanistan and even an Order of the Eastern Star. Unfortunately there does not appear to be any Lodges represented by American Grand Lodges other than Prince Hall but there are meetings for education, and fellowship throughout Afghanistan. If we in Lodge we can inspire just a fraction of that belief and enthusiasm to our membership, Masonry in this Jurisdiction, this District and each and every lodge will be much stronger, more appreciated and hopefully more beneficial to the Brethren than what appears to be so today.

Brethren, the more I read about Masonry in the past, what it meant to the Brethren of that time, the more I believe we need to reach out to each other and work together, to recreate the strengths found within the Brethren of that time. We cannot go back to the past, nor should we, but we need to reach out, using the best from the past, towards the future. We need to make that future better and brighter than what it appears to be at this time.

In my talks I have been trying to point out ways to hopefully bring Brethren back into Lodge, improve lodge meetings, engage our present Brethren into "Believing in Freemasonry" and encourage them to bring a Brother back to Lodge. This is what our Grand Master has challenged us to do; this is what I challenge you to do. The Master's and Officers need to lead but every Brother needs to join in these challenges. Masonry belongs to you; its future belongs to you, but more importantly its future depends on you.

And finally my Brethren, just Last Saturday Canada lost another soldier in Afghanistan, Master Corporal Bryon Greff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, so I again encourage everyone of you to attend a Remembrance Day Ceremony or if unable to, then at least pause for a moment at 11.00am on the 11<sup>th</sup> November to remember "Those who dared and died and also those who dared and returned, they too deserve our gratitude, our prayers and our thoughts."

Thank you my Brethren