Today there will be services and ceremonies in every part of the country. It is a national occasion that brings an extraordinary number of people together. While the cameras and the media will be focused on Whitehall, probably with the occasional scene in Helmand or on the battlefields of Northern France, the reality is that in towns and villages everywhere across the United Kingdom, and across the commonwealth, the same scene is being enacted. The attendance will include young and old, men and women, veterans and families. In many places the only outward sign of the serving military will be the uniforms of sea, army or air cadets and the flags of the branches of the British Legion.

Three years ago I went to Stornoway to lay the wreath. I know that some people were rather surprised that I went there, but I have always felt that it was important for senior military representatives to be in as many places as possible and, when I said this in passing to a Scottish friend he threw me the challenge of the Outer Hebrides. It certainly felt like a trip right into the heart of our community! We stood under the stately Lewis war memorial, which stands on a hill high above the town of Stornoway. We looked out over The Minch and, in the far distance we could see the hills of Sutherland. It was a fine, blustery day with a watery sun. There must have been about 100 people gathered together. A lone pipe player the Flowers of the Forest. Out at the entrance to the harbour were the infamous rocks ‘the Beasts of Holm’ where HMS Iolaire was wrecked in the early hours of 1st January 1919 as she carried around 200 sailors back home. I reflected on the intensity of this sacrifice. To have your loved ones killed in a tragic accident, within sight of home, after surviving the enemy must have been too much to bear. And this happened on an island where today the population is around 12,000; in total 1,151 Lewismen gave their lives in the Great War. It is not difficult to understand why this intense historical experience is still embedded in the culture of the community. And for me it provides a good catalyst for some reflection: is this service still relevant and will it endure?

This is an important day for me, after 40 years in the Army you will not be surprised that I have had plenty of exposure to the high and lows of military operations. I also suspect that it is self-evident that someone like me will take a moment to reflect on the sacrifice that our fallen have made, and that I will feel a sense of duty to spread the word. But I do wonder whether those who have less contact with the Services will feel the same, whether they really understand what they are doing or whether peer pressure makes them conform to a ritual. Indeed there may be a risk that, as time passes, some could privately consider such behaviour to be somewhat self-indulgent. After all are the World Wars now not a part of history? Are the casualties from contemporary operations not volunteers? Are they not engaged in military adventures in far flung places which some may feel bear little relation to the security of Britain? And at its extreme I have heard some say that the Remembrance Ceremony is part of a grand disinformation plan that is designed to distract us from considering ‘whether it was worth it?’ And so my intention today is to set out for you why I believe that this ceremony remains such an important part of our cultural tissue.

I suspect that there are few who would not agree that the legacy of those who gave their lives in the First and Second World Wars has been enduring freedom and prosperity. On both occasions the guns of the enemy could be heard from England, bombs were dropped on our cities and the threat was looming right at the White Cliffs of Dover. Our citizens were fighting on sea, land and air to preserve a way of life. A very large proportion of those who
died were conscripts who had answered the call of duty, who had been given no choice when they were called-up and whose lives were completely turned upside down when they went to war. Not just in Stornoway, but across the country communities went to war and many fewer, particularly of the men, returned from it. The ordered headstones in Portland stone, beautifully maintained by the commonwealth war graves commission provoke images of gardens and peace, the sacrifice represented by those serried ranks shouts out at you. Even as these wars fade into memory the respect for the fallen endures, children are encouraged to visit the battlefields, their anniversaries bring heads of state together, and they still provoke commitments to lasting peace. And in so many of our communities, just as I experienced in the Outer Hebrides, something happened that had such an impact on our way of life that it can and should never be forgotten. This historical focus could easily, over time, become part of a national ritual that looks back on an increasingly distant era. There is a risk that we fail to shift the narrative from the World Wars to include the conflicts of our time.

If we are to do so the first thing to recognise is that Remembrance is about respect not sympathy, and it is about individuals not institutions. The fact that the Monarch, the Prime Minister, the Chief of Defence Staff, the General are bowing their heads as a mark of respect at the Cenotaph is because they, no matter how exalted their position, are subordinating themselves to each and every individual who has answered their call of duty and paid the ultimate sacrifice. They are not celebrating a victory, they are acknowledging, no matter how good or bad the direction of the politicians and the plans of the generals, that there are millions of individuals who have responded to a call to arms on behalf of a democratic government and have laid down their lives.

Now we have to be careful, because this is not primarily about heroes nor is it about charity. The first is a label that has become rather overused today; this ceremony is about everyone who has given their life in service, including the poor sailors who drowned in an accident off the Beast of Holm or the mechanic who was crushed by a tank in the assembly area of an attack. They were not heroes, and would probably have been horrified if they knew they were branded as such. Of course I understand why our language has become rather inflated, because when you are confronted by tragedy it does, to a degree, anesthetise some of the pain of loss for the families and friends of those who have died in combat. But we have to be very careful not to undermine our reasons for remembrance by overstating the requirement. For me it is the very fact that so many of our fallen were not heroes, they were just doing their duty, that persuades me that we must continue to recognise their sacrifice. As far as charity is concerned this is a time when one can solicit as much support as possible from a generous public. And of course the millions that are raised by the poppy appeal provides invaluable support to many, although it should not distract a grateful government from paying its dues. But this must not be our primary reason if we want the event to endure. We have a duty to display publically the sense of pride that we have in Tommy Atkins and of course his female counterpart who has given just as much. The fact that they were, and are prepared to act on our behalf whether as conscripts or volunteers, does not matter to me, they demand our respect.

There were over 700 servicemen and women killed in the operation to provide security in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2007. Each one of these was doing their duty for the UK Government. Of course this is not a conflict which can be justified with the relatively simple logic applied to a World War, but our people were following orders and I don’t remember a political debate in London that ever seriously questioned what the Armed Forces were doing in support of the Police. With the end of the operation there is a risk that
the desire for peace and reconciliation overshadows this extraordinary commitment of individuals. We owe it to each of them to continue to respect their sacrifice.

And then there is the young soldier who has given his or her life in the humid, dusty alien conditions of Southern Iraq or the Helmand Valley. Here there has been more debate at home, and there will be more people who are concerned about the Grand Strategic justification for our actions, and the plans of the Generals to achieve these aims. But again this is not the point of this ceremony.

Today I am reflecting on the sacrifice of men and women like Rifleman Edward Vakabua who was killed in a patrol base in Basra when one of his colleagues fired a rifle by mistake. Or Major Vanessa Lang who was killed in a helicopter crash on a reconnaissance mission in Sierra Leone in 2001, or Rifleman Stuart Nash who was shot by the enemy in December 2008 in Nad e Ali, Afghanistan. Each one of these were following our orders, doing their best to achieve our objectives, following the rules of conflict (unlike our enemies) and trying to stay alive. For sure all of them were volunteers, and they understood their terms of service. But they were doing our duty, as part of a team in an institution that reflects the standards and culture of our country. They were all in a position where they knew that they could be killed, but they gave their lives for others and in my view for a greater good – no matter what your view is of the politics. I am also thinking about the families of the fallen, the web of loved-ones and supporters who have played such a significant part in constructing a life only to have it so cruelly taken away. They are part of the sacrifice and we should think about them as well. All of them deserve our respect and two minutes of reflection.

And so I hope I have set out why I believe that this ceremony is so relevant and enduring. We should continue to remember the sacrifice which has played such a decisive part in shaping our culture, and its legacy in the way we live both in local communities and on the national stage. We must be wary of allowing political perceptions, or an emphasis on charity, to distract us from the core requirement – to honour and subordinate ourselves to those individuals who have given their lives for their colleagues, their institution and their country on our behalf in places like the Somme, Casino, the Imjin River, Goose Green, Crossmaglen, Basra and Helmand.