

SIR PERCY FITZPATRICK BATTLED FOR ...

# Two minute silence – how it came about

The Cenotaph in London (meaning, empty tomb) was originally made in plaster for a Victory March in 1919, but the public response was such that it was replaced by the present stone structure designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens for the Armistice Service on 11 November 1920.

Its intention – to be a permanent reminder of the carnage of World War 1. Now also World War 2 and subsequent wars are recalled.

The reigning monarch, members of the Royal Family, Members of Parliament, and representatives of the armed forces and other organisations, all place wreaths of poppies on the tomb on the nearest Sunday to 11 November.

So how did the two-minute silence come about?

Sir Percy FitzPatrick, South African author of *Jock of the Bushveld* fame is accredited with the honour of initiating the idea.

Sir Percy had attended a funeral service where a one minute silence was observed for the first South African to fall in World War One. This had a deep effect on him and the entire population of Cape Town.

As it turned out, it was to have far reaching results.

When in December 1917, his son, who had by then become Major Nugent FitzPatrick, was killed in the front line, Sir Percy was deeply affected by the loss.

The then Mayor of Cape Town, at the suggestion of Mr R R Drybone in a letter to the *Cape Times*, instituted a pause of two minutes from 14 May 1918.

The boom of the noon day gun signals the two minute pause during which all activity in the Mother City comes to a halt, heads bowed in silent prayer, remembering those still at the front plus others who gave their lives.

A few months later Sir Percy, seriously ill with diabetes and hospitalized in Scotland read that the Peace was to be signed at 11h00 on 11th day of the 11th month with a two minute silence at that time on that day would give his act of Homage even more impact.

Sir Percy wrote to Lord Northcliffe, who he thought would support the plan but he was disappointed at Northcliffe's reaction. FitzPatrick eventually agreed through *The Times* that though it seemed a fine idea, it was impracticable to be applied throughout the Empire.

Cecile, Sir Percy's sister, felt a direct approach be made to King George V. He then wrote to Lord Milner asking him to approach the king, left for America and on 12 November he was amazed when he read his morning paper and saw headlines: "*The World Stands To Attention*", and to his delight read cables from every part of the World, showing the king's message had been accepted.

The two minute silence was observed at 11h00 on 11 November 1919. An hour or two later Sir Percy received a cable from Lord Long of Wexhall and only then did he realise his proposal had reached the king and that the Cabinet knew the origin of the proposal. Sir Percy later received a confirmatory letter from the King.

Of course there is more to the story but let us cast our minds back to our school days when Armistice Sunday was always observed wherever or whatever one was doing. Trains, buses and private vehicles stopped for two minutes and pedestrians would stop and bow their heads.

Men walking past the Cenotaph wearing hats would remove them and those in uniform would salute the Cenotaph every day of the year, not only on Armistice Sunday.

Alas, Service personnel are no longer obliged to salute when passing the Cenotaph, men no longer remove their hats in passing and where we were told both at school and at home why we had a two minute silence, youngsters are not told or don't want to know these days.

To me the two minute silence is a small price to pay each year to show respect for those who perished in the carnage of war.

**WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.**

**F.G. HARMAFORD**

**Old Bill, Jellicoe Shellhole**