DAVE CHAMBERS

"A chance remark by a colleague and the following conversation took my thoughts on a walk. And an unusual dearth of poppies within my sight on that eleventh of November in 1992 led me to write this account of one day as a messenger in the city of London."

THE LONESOME POPPY

"What've you got that on for? It was all over Sunday."

"This," I pointed out loftily, "is Armistice Day."

"No," Dave Evans insisted, "That was Sunday."

"Today is the eleventh," I said. "The Anniversary of 'yer actual' Armistice Day."

"Oh yeah, 'tis isn't it?" he said, then went on thoughtfully, "But didn't they change the rules some years ago?"

"I remember when," I broke in, "the traffic used to stop for two minutes on the eleventh, whether it was a Wednesday or not."

"Oh yes," he said again, his eyebrows rising. "We all used to be pulled out of school and lined up. *Quiet there!"* he imitated one of his teachers, "and we all were - quiet I mean - for two minutes. It was special in those days."

We were both on our way out on the morning walk on a very mild November day in the City of London. One of those rare late autumn, early winter days full of the promised 'cloudy sunshine' that made it a pleasure to be a city messenger.

"Change the rules to suit themselves," I said, "don't they?"

"Yeah," Dave agreed, "cost too much to stop the traffic now, wouldn't it?"

"See you later," I said as we went our separate ways.

It was about ten thirty-five on Wednesday the eleventh of November Nineteen Ninety Two and my mind was now wandering through the Remembrance Days of the Fifties. When, like Dave, I was at school and the teacher told us to keep quiet and the traffic stopped and everyone switched off their engines. Wished they would do that now. Even two minutes would be welcome.

I delivered my letters and documents while my mind was away in the past, so I didn't notice it at first. I came out of a door in Moorgate and I saw the way a tourist gave a curious glance at my poppy. I was used to this because it was not in my lapel, but in the top button of my waistcoat, with my jacket left open, so the red petal fabric was in the middle of my chest. It was only then I realised I had not seen any other poppies that morning.

I began to pay greater attention to my immediate surroundings and tried to remember if I had seen a poppy on Monday or Tuesday, apart from my own. I came up with a blank. Not for the life of me could I recall a poppy on either of the two days; but then I hadn't been looking.

I was now; looking everywhere at lapels, office counters, reception areas, even the fronts of the hundreds of vehicles that are always present in the city. Not one. My little splash of red and the tiny green leaf were quite alone.

The allies advanced a few hundred yards across a muddy Flanders field outside a village called Passchendaele. The sea of poppies on the eleventh is an appropriate reminder that there would be a blood stain on that field for every poppy you see, or at least for six hundred and fifty thousand of the poppies you see.

I looked at my watch and it was getting close to eleven. My deliveries were a little behind so I began to hurry while still keeping an eye out for a companion to my lonesome poppy.

In the next building the lift came quickly, and soon the doors opened to the reception area on the fourth floor. A white-haired old man, tall, back ramrod-straight, looked with distaste at my scruffy appearance. He had the bearing of a military man, possibly an ex-RSM, wishing he could have me on the parade ground for an hour or so. Another man, shorter, younger, glanced at me and then went back to the papers he held in his hand.

"Hello," the receptionist said brightly as she recognised me walking towards her. "What's it like out?" Her perennial question, as there were no windows within her sight.

"Hello," I replied, "it's a lovely day out, but I suppose we could do with some rain."

"Oh you!" she laughed as she took the letter from me. "Still got your poppy on, I see."

I leant on her desk in a conspiratorial manner and said, "Did you know that seventy-four years ago today a treaty was signed that had such punitive conditions that it was probably the start of the Second World War?"

"Oh yes," she said thoughtfully, "this is the eleventh." Then her brow furrowed, "Was it really signed then?"

"I'm not sure, but it took effect then." I stood up and began to turn away. "They're keeping me busy today. See you later."

"See you later," she repeated.

As I got in the lift I noticed the tall man's expression had softened somewhat. There was almost approval now. Not quite, but almost. The lift doors closed and I looked at my watch. It was ten fifty-eight. Two minutes to eleven. Remembrance Day, unlike the Sunday television parade it has become, used to be a personal thing, especially during the two minutes after eleven.

The sun was shining as I walked out into the street, but I was a million miles away again. The tall man reminded me of my Uncle Bob. Why, I don't know. Uncle Bob was short, dark-haired, had a swarthy complexion and had died in his late fifties. The tall man was the opposite in everything, even to being a picture of health in what appeared to be his late sixties.

My thoughts had meandered a long way from Passchendaele and were now amongst the second great European conflict. With such a short time to the fateful hour, I considered standing still for two minutes with my poppy held aloft for all to see. I could not find the courage for such a gesture. At a few seconds to eleven, feelings of nostalgia mingled with the guilt at my lack of conviction. I compromised, placed my walks bag on a small wall and opened it fully to examine my remaining deliveries.

It was exactly eleven o'clock. My head bowed as I looked into the bag. My fingers leafed through the documents, but my mind was on my personal remembrance, enveloping me in a silence of my own, shutting out the noise of the world around me.

I was playing in the street. I was the commando. My pals were "Them". I didn't like it the other way about, but we all had to take our turn. It was the late Forties, early Fifties and we were all born during the war. We lived on the tales of heroism, real and fictional, that were in the papers and comics of the day.

Not many of us actually knew anyone who was killed in the war; we only knew of them. They had left home before we were born. We knew the ones who came back. My elder brothers were too young and my father too old, so it was my uncles who went to war. All but one returned. It was a road accident many miles from the front line. He was the only one who did not see action. Even at that tender age, I felt there were some terrible injustices in war.

Uncle Bob came back. He became my favourite Uncle. He always had time to look at whatever I had to show him, time to listen to my latest adventure. I just liked being in his company. My mother used to take me on her fortnightly visit, and one of the most vividly clear memories of my childhood happened on one of those visits. It was just before Armistice Day. I would have been about nine or ten years old.

"Where's Uncle Bob?" I said brightly.

"He's in the bedroom, getting ready for the parade," Aunt Daisy said.

"It's not today," I said, incredulous at the thought of him getting ready a couple of days early.

"No," she laughed, "He's just making sure everything's all shiny." She must have seen my puzzled look, for she went on, "Go in and see him and ask if he wants a cup of tea." I was puzzled again. Why did she just not shout like she usually did? The house was like ours, not that big. But she insisted, "Go on, ask him."

So I went. I pushed the door open and walked into the room.

"Uncle Bob do you wa..." I stopped and my mouth fell open.

He was standing quietly in the small room staring at the bed. On it was a dark suit neatly ironed and a regimental tie. He was not looking at them. His gaze was fixed on a large piece of felt laid out at

the foot of the bed. I can still see them, a row of medals glistening in the light from the back window. I felt my eyes growing with every second.

"Uncle Bob," I almost shouted, "What did you get them for?"

He reached out and with one flowing movement flicked the cloth over the medals and growled.

"For killin' men." I had never heard him speak like that before and have never heard such anger in anyone's voice since.

The medals made a thump as they dropped into the small wooden box that looked just big enough for them. The anger in his voice startled me and I wished I had not asked. I felt despair at my uncle's anger. It was clear he was not angry with me, and he did not look a bit like the hero in the comics or the films. No proud accolade here.

For killin' men. They were men, not Jerrys or Eye-ties or Japs. Not even The Enemy, they were men.

I had been startled because I did not know about the medals. I only knew of proud men wearing long rows of medals in big parades as shown at the Pathe News at the picture house or in the newspapers. Uncle Bob was someone I knew, an ordinary man, and he was not proud, but angry. The medals were never again mentioned in my company and I could not ever bring the subject to my lips. As young as I was, I knew they were not to be talked about. I never got to know what they were - my one glimpse couldn't tell - and I certainly never found out what the official citation said. What Uncle Bob said was quite enough.

It wasn't so good being the commando in the street any more. I still didn't like being Them, but the game was different somehow.

I woke as I looked at my watch and it said two minutes past. I picked up my bag and glanced self-consciously around. I blinked and blew my nose while furtively dabbing at my eyes.

"Hello, you old sod!" I was startled again as I saw an ex-colleague walking towards me. Don had left to take a messenger's job with another city firm and we would meet in this way every couple of months.

"See the beard's coming along. Pity you can't grow some on your head!" He always spoke loudly and people tended to look.

"Thanks," I cringed and again looked self-consciously around, "I'll pay you a compliment someday, if you ever actually deserve one."

"Take care of that," he said, pointing at the poppy, "It won't stand much more washing and ironing. It's been going twenty years that I know of."

"Nineteen," I replied, the beginnings of a smile on my lips.

"Well, I haven't got all day to stand around gassing to you, old mate. We work for a living at my firm," he said as he walked on past me, laughing.

"That'll be the day!" I was laughing too by now. Don had dragged me back into nineteen ninety-two, but my smile began to fade as I thought again about the day.

The horrors of war are being brought to us every morning in the papers straight from the place we used to know as Yugoslavia. Before that it was the Balkan Republics. And Sarajevo was the capital city of the Republic of Bosnia when a young man assassinated the Archduke Ferdinand and started the spiral into The Great War.

It was quite worrying that my thoughts were coming full circle. Remembering the heroes of war has been relegated to a Sunday Parade in November in which our political leaders spare the time to walk down Whitehall with groups of ex-servicemen and lay wreaths of poppies after a two minute silence. The rest of us lesser mortals watch from our armchairs and feel sorry for them if it rains.

My search continued, but still I did not see another poppy until late evening when a television news item showed several people with poppies prominently in their lapels. It was not unusual for there to be comparatively few poppies around after Remembrance Sunday, but to see none all day was different.

Perhaps, on the next anniversary I could persuade a few more people with memories of their own reluctant heroes to strike a silent blow for remembrance and wear their poppies on the day. And think for two minutes at eleven o'clock, and pray that no one else's Uncle Bob will feel that anger, or get medals, for killin' men.