

Reflection

Hope in the ashes: A military chaplain's reflection on remembrance, sacrifice, and resurrection

David T. Young

Rev. David T. Young is a Church of Scotland minister and Royal Air Force Chaplain. Ordained in 2007, he has served in parish ministry, university chaplaincy, and the Royal Naval Reserve before taking up full-time service with the RAF.

Abstract

This reflective piece explores the vocation of military chaplaincy through a personal encounter at Reichswald Forest Cemetery in Germany during Remembrance Sunday. Called at short notice to lead the service, the author recounts a profound moment of connection with the grave of Rev. James William Kenny, a fellow chaplain who died ministering amidst the chaos of war. The experience becomes a lens through which themes of sacrifice, remembrance, and resurrection are examined. Drawing on pastoral experiences, the reflection considers the moral and spiritual weight borne by those in uniform, especially chaplains who walk unarmed into places of suffering. The essay engages with John 15:13 as a theological anchor, affirming that remembrance is not merely historical but eschatological – a witness to the enduring hope of Christ's resurrection. In remembering the fallen, the chaplain is also remembered, called anew to faithful presence and ministry. This piece contributes to pastoral theology by articulating the cost and calling of ecclesial service in military contexts, and by affirming the enduring witness of those who have laid down their lives in faith.



Hope in the ashes – remembrance, sacrifice, and resurrection



Remembrance Sunday holds a sacred place in the calendar of military chaplaincy. It is a time when the past and present converge in solemn reflection, when the silence of memorials speaks louder than any sermon. For chaplains, it is not merely a ceremonial duty but a spiritual calling, to stand in the gap between grief and hope, between memory and resurrection. Last November, I found myself unexpectedly called to lead the service at Reichswald Forest Cemetery in Germany, a place I had never visited, yet one that would leave an indelible mark on my ministry such that I felt compelled to write this reflection:

I was not meant to be there. The request came at the last minute, a ping to step in and lead the Remembrance Sunday service at Reichswald Forest Cemetery. No great amount of time for preparation, no time to reflect. Just enough to grab the robes, pack a weekend bag, and go.

Reichswald Forest Cemetery is the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in Germany, a place of solemn beauty and deep historical resonance. It holds the remains of over 7,500 service personnel, many of whom died during the final stages of World War II. To stand in such a place on Remembrance Sunday is to be enveloped by history, sacrifice, and silence.

I stood alone at the lectern. The gathered congregation stood at a distance – 250 people, military and civilians alike – watching in silence. The service had been solemn, the air thick with remembrance. Though the sky was clear and dry, a weight hung over the place, an unspoken reverence that needed no words.

Before me stretched a sea of white headstones. Each a life lost. Each a story unfinished.

The final prayer had been spoken. The wreaths had been laid. The echoes of the “Last Post” had long since faded. And yet, something held me there.

I stepped down from the lectern and began to walk. At first, I simply moved without thought, weaving my way through row upon row of graves. But soon, a weight settled in my chest, pressing in with each step. Something was calling me onward.

Then I stopped. I do not know why. There was nothing special about this headstone – no mark, no sign to draw my attention. And yet, my feet refused to move. I looked down:



Chaplain to the Forces
The Rev. J. W. Kenny
Royal Army Chaplain's Dept.
Airborne
24 March 1945 Age 32

I stared, breath catching in my throat. This was no coincidence. Of all the places in this vast cemetery, of all the thousands of names, why him? Why now?

I knew his story. James William Kenny went into action with the 6th Airborne Brigade shortly after D-Day, ministering to the wounded during the long struggle around Caen. He remained with the dying even as shells fell around him, embodying a chaplain's calling to be present where suffering was greatest. Months later, in the final advance into Germany, he parachuted across the Rhine with his brigade. On Palm Sunday 1945 he was killed whilst tending the wounded – steadfast to the end in his refusal to abandon those entrusted to his care. And now, nearly eighty years later, I, a fellow chaplain, stood before him.

Overwhelmed, I knelt. My fingers traced the cold stone, each letter carved into history. I had come to remember the fallen. And now, the fallen were remembering me.

Was this what it meant to be a military chaplain? To walk unarmed into the world's darkest places? To bear witness in suffering? To stand as Christ stood, beside the broken? And at what cost?

I had read about war. I had ministered in places of suffering. But here, kneeling before the grave of one who had given everything, I felt it.

My thoughts turned to my friend, killed in Afghanistan. To my grandfather, who had survived the Second World War but carried its weight for the rest of his life. The cost of war does not end when the battle is over.

That moment in the cemetery, like so many others I have encountered in my ministry, reminded me of my duty as a chaplain.

Since my ordination in 2007, I have led countless Remembrance services in churches and communities, each one sacred in its own way. I deployed to the Falkland Islands during Memorial Season in 2023 and this was unlike anything I had known. I conducted service after service across



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the islands, honouring those who fell in the 1982 conflict. I stood before British graves, and I stood before Argentinian graves – so many young men lost at sea or buried far from home. I remember weeping. Someone's son, someone's brother, someone's beloved. The cost of war knows no borders.

And yet, nothing prepared me for the experience at Reichswald. The silence. The scale. The unexpected encounter with a fellow chaplain's grave. It was not just remembrance – it was revelation. A call to remember not only the fallen, but the faith that sustained them. To prepare others for the weight of service, and to carry that weight myself with humility and resolve.

A verse surfaced in my mind, unbidden, yet undeniable. *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* (John 15:13)

James William Kenny had lived that truth.

Tears blurred my vision as I whispered a prayer; not just for him, but for all of us who wear the cross on our uniform, who walk where others dare not, who speak hope into suffering: *Lord, I am not worthy to stand in this place. And yet, here I am.*

The war had taken him, but it had not silenced him. His witness endured. His sacrifice remained. His ministry continued – not in words, but in presence, in remembrance, in the quiet pull that led me here.

I placed my hand on his grave one last time. *May I be faithful, as he was faithful. May I stand, as he stood. And if the cost must be great, may I not turn away.*

Then, I rose. I turned and walked back toward the world of the living, carrying his story with me. And as I did, I knew this was not the end. The war had taken him, but it did not have the final word. Not over him. Not over me. Not over the kingdom of God. For in Christ, even death is not the end.

Remembrance is not just about the past. It is a witness to the resurrection, to the God who was, and is, and is to come.

