

WESTMINSTER ABBEY ADDRESS

By Mrs Sara Jones

When there are countless worthy causes crying out for our support, why is the Army Benevolent Fund such a special one? Fortunately, in this gathering, I don't need to explain it but I am honoured to have been invited to say a few words about the charity in celebration of its Diamond Jubilee.

In 1944, like so many, both the Devons and the Dorsets were fighting in Normandy. They had paid a heavy price but, as a result of this and many other battles, things in Europe were looking better. The end of the war was in sight.

Back in London, however, The Times was reporting that 'when men and women on an enormous scale are compulsorily withdrawn from their normal pursuits, to serve the nation in the fighting forces, hundreds of thousands of homes are beset with troubles bewildering in their variety'. Of course, there were systems in place which addressed many of those problems but there was still a yawning gap that needed to be filled.

It then told the nation that the Army Benevolent Fund - 'a Fund for the Soldier' - with the King as its Patron, had been founded. It would not duplicate existing efforts, but rather would seek to extend their scope and scale. It concluded by saying it was 'an object which none could question'.

By the end of its first year the pump had been primed and grants were being made. From the outset, the principle of co-operation between the ABF and Corps' and Regimental funds had been firmly established - arguably the cornerstone of how cases have been processed for 60 years - and I have seen how it works, first hand, at the Regimental meetings I have attended over the years. Before the ABF is approached, the initial tranche of financial support is still found by Regiments and Corps - and it is very apt to have them all represented today at this celebration.

Every year since 1944 our soldiers have been on operations in support of peace and freedom. We think at once of Korea, of Malaya and Borneo, of Kenya and the Middle East, of Northern Ireland and the Falklands, of Bosnia and Kosovo, of Afghanistan and Iraq - and there are others.

During this time the ABF has worked continuously - in a spirit of a hand-up - to help soldiers, former soldiers and their families who have been in need – dealing in various ways with 3 million cases and disbursing £265 million in today's money.

Every case is different and I meet some of them at the Field of Remembrance each November and in many other places. Examples are endless; the widow of a 1st World War Royal Fusilier was starving herself to pay her gas bill, a 2nd World War Gloster lived with shrapnel in his hip for 50 years, a Royal Green Jacket suffering from stress after service in Northern Ireland became homeless and a National Service 17th/21st Lancer returned from Zimbabwe with nothing.

My son, a serving Devon and Dorset, tells me of an ex-corporal with MS who, with a specially adapted wheelchair, was able to return to his civilian employment - and he reminds me of the £30,000 worth of help his Regiment received last year to help solve another 60 cases - encompassing the very elderly to the very young.

All this shows how the charity is involved in care from the cradle to the grave.

Today, this costs £4 million a year – half of which goes to help individuals, like those I have mentioned, and half to some 80 or more other charities which, in turn, help our people. In this latter respect, I remember so well the financial assistance the ABF gave to many of those who went on the 20th anniversary pilgrimage to the Falklands in 2002, prompting such comments afterwards as - 'I slept properly last night, for the first time in two decades'. And from a Parachute Regiment soldier's wife - 'On my husband's return I met the man I married over 20 years ago'.

It is a charity both run and supported by people, for people, and they are all represented here today - from our Patron to our volunteers and supporters from counties all over the United Kingdom and, of course, some of those for whom this charity exists – those from the Army Family who needed help.

Two or three years ago I was invited to open a fundraising event close to where I live in Wiltshire and I remember it well. I stood between an ABF Director and the volunteer event organiser; on either side of them were two serving Regimental Sergeant Majors from the Army and, on the outside holding the ribbon, were two Chelsea Pensioners representing the flagship of Army benevolence. It seemed to me that this was a snapshot of how it all comes together – the need, and the effort to find the means to help.

This service today is to give thanks for the ABF's remarkable record over the last 60 years; it is a proud day for the Army Benevolent Fund – a relatively small charity but one with a big name and with a vital job to do. Today, the 1st Battalion of the Devon and Dorsets is training for another tour of operational duty– and thus begins another cycle. It will know, as the whole of the Army does, that it has a safety net in which to catch those who need help.

The 'Fund for the Soldier' is, as The Times said in 1944, 'an object none can question' – because the soldier is what this is all about. I know all of us will say thank you to the Army Benevolent Fund and will wish it the best of good fortune for the next 60 years. To me the whole reason for the Fund is summed up in one of the most poignant epitaphs I have seen . It read 'To the world he was a soldier; to us he was the world'.

NOTE TO EDITOR

Mrs Sara Jones is the widow of Falklands hero Lt Col H Jones VC OBE. Lt Col Jones was awarded the Victoria Cross for an outstanding act of gallantry whilst leading his Battalion against Argentinian forces during the Falklands War.

Mrs Jones is involved with a number of service and other charities and she also works as a magistrate.