Maltese surgeon visits grave of a remarkable war victim

Patrick Cooke

A UK-based Maltese cardiac surgeon last week paid respects at the grave of a British soldier he believes was one of the first in the world to undergo successful heart surgery.

Norman Briffa’s trip to the military cemetery in Pietà to pay his respects to Private Robert Hugh Martin.

Private Martin of the 1st Derbyshire Yeomanry Regiment was on horseback when he was shot in the chest on his 21st birthday in Salonika, Greece, in November 1917.

He had enlisted to fight in World War I despite being underage after a young woman had shown him a white feather, which symbolised cowardice, when he was on his way to Dore and Totley train station in Sheffield.

Wearing a poppy in memory of the war dead, who will be honoured in today’s Remembrance Day services, Mr Briffa, 51, explained that Private Martin was transported to Malta with a bullet lodged in his heart on board the hospital ship Glenart Castle.

One of his stretcher bearers when he arrived in Malta was from the same town as Private Martin and remarked, “It’s a long way from Dore and Totley isn’t it Bob”.

A successful operation to remove the bullet was carried out at St Elmo’s Hospital in Valletta.

The Daily Malta Chronicle reported at the time that the operation “attracted extraordinary interest and attention” and “was the talk of the island”.

Malta was known as the ‘Nurse of the Mediterranean’ in World War I as many injured Allied soldiers were evacuated to the island for treatment.

Despite the success of the operation, Private Martin died of septicaemia in March 1918 and was buried in Pietà.

“It is very touching to see his grave,” said Mr Briffa after he and his wife Susan spent a moment of quiet reflection at Private Martin’s final resting place.

Private Martin’s great-niece brought the case to Mr Briffa’s attention last year after she attended a talk in Sheffield by Mr Briffa on the history of cardiac surgery.

Mr Briffa was initially “respectfully sceptical” about the story as efforts to perform chest and cardiac surgery did not really commence until the 1920s, according to most surgical history books.

“His story deserves to be remembered”

Many text books ascribe initial efforts at surgery to treat heart and major vascular injuries to Dwight Harken, a US Army surgeon stationed in England in World War II.

However, after exhaustive research, Mr Briffa discovered that British surgeons in World War I did attempt to operate on bullet injuries to the heart.

Among them was Sir Charles Bailleul, who worked in Malta during World War I. Mr Briffa, who lives and works in Sheffield, said he enjoys history and he found the story of Private Martin fascinating.

“He story and the story of the surgeon who operated on him deserve to be remembered,” Mr Briffa said.

Ban animal circuses – AD

Alternative Demokratika yesterday called for a ban on circuses that use animals.

At chairman Michael Briguglio said at a press conference, “While AD values circuses as sites of entertainment, these should not be allowed to use animals in the exploitation involved.”

Mr Briguglio said Greece had become the first European country to ban all animals in circuses and the UK Government had passed legislation that would lead to the banning of wild animals in circuses.

Other European countries including Austria, Portugal, Denmark and Croatia have either banned or are phasing out the use of wild animals in circuses.

He said Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay and China had also banned such circuses and the US was considering similar legislation.

WIN A HOT LAP WITH LEWIS HAMILTON

The Sunday Times and Vodafone are offering one lucky reader the chance to sit beside Vodafone McLaren Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton for one hot lap in a Mercedes sports car during his visit to Malta on December 9.

To be in with a chance of sitting in the seat next to the 2008 World Champion, answer the second of four questions appearing in this Sunday Times competition, 341 St Paul Street, Valletta, VLT 1211, by November 28. The winner will be announced on December 2.

QUESTION 2
When did Lewis Hamilton join McLaren?

Name: ______________________________________
Phone: ____________________________________
Address: ___________________________________