

By James Gray MP  
As the Sun sinks over Wootton Bassett High Street today, the Union Flag which has flown at half-mast beside the War Memorial on so many occasions will be hauled down for the last time, folded neatly, stored overnight in St Bartholomew's Church and ceremonially presented to the people of Oxfordshire the following morning. From 1st September 2011, the bodies of British service personnel who die abroad will be flown into RAF Brize Norton rather than RAF Lyneham. That little ceremony (which sadly I will have to miss) will mark the end of a long and honourable – if dreadfully sad – chapter in the history of this wonderful Wiltshire market town. Without any prompting, organisation or orders; without formality or pomposity, and seeking neither thanks nor recognition of any kind for it, the people of the town, the Royal British Legion, the Mayor and Town Council, joined on as many occasions as I could manage by me, have stood to attention and bowed our heads for a moment or two in all weathers on a total of 150 occasions to mark the passing of 379 soldiers sailors and airmen and women who have given their lives for their country. As I write, it looks as if the tyrannical regime in Libya is finally nearing its end, and we can start to plan for a new democratic future for that troubled land and people. They would not have achieved the overthrow of Gaddafi without our military assistance. When we leave Afghanistan in December 2014, it looks increasingly as if we will be able to leave behind a secure country better able to look after itself, and less inclined to give refuge to International terrorists; and doubt its legality as we may, there is no question that Iraq is a better place after our invasion than it would have been if Saddam was still its dictator. These are great and difficult diplomatic and military equations – we will each have our own opinion. But one thing is for sure: without the sacrifice and determination of our armed services, Britain would not be able to do our bit for the preservation of peace and equality and freedom around the world. The young boys whose bodies we have respected as they pass down our High Street, and their families, understand their duty; and understand the need to make sometimes great sacrifices for the good of the World and our Nation. Arms are the Fulcrum of Peace is my own Regiment's motto, and how true it is. Wootton Bassett's informal and impromptu ceremonies have inspired the country and the world; and they have brought comfort to hundreds of families of the bereaved and to their Regimental friends and colleagues; they have greatly helped maintain the morale of our troops on Operation. Each one has been profoundly moving, yet each of them in different ways. The tolling of the old bell, the absolute silence in a crowd of a few thousands on some occasions bar the sobbing of the bereaved. No-one who has attended a 'Repat' as they have come to be known will forget it for a very long time. James Gray is Member of Parliament for North Wiltshire. Yet it is also right that we should mark the end of that chapter in the town's life and look forward to new ones. Many outsiders have said to me: "Won't the town miss it?" Of course they won't. They will go about their ordinary business in the down-to-earth way they always have. They will look forward to the granting of the Royal Charter on 16th October and will bear their 'Royal' title with pride in commemoration of an important chapter in the life of the town and of the Nation. And they and the people of Lyneham and neighbouring villages will look forward to the arrival of the military technical training centre from later this year. This area has always made our contribution to military excellence, and we are proud of the fact that Lyneham will now be allowed to do so for years to come. It's the end of a chapter, but the beginning of a new and exciting one too.