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## **PRESS RELEASE**

# **Annual Wreath Laying Ceremony Honours Commonwealth Service and Memorial Gates**

## **Women in War**

*9<sup>th</sup> March 2026*

*Memorial Gates, Constitution Hill, London*

A commemoration ceremony is taking place today at the Memorial Gates in central London to honour the extraordinary contribution of women from across the Commonwealth who served during the First and Second World Wars and in subsequent conflicts.

Held annually on Commonwealth Day, the wreath laying ceremony brings together High Commissioners, representatives of the Armed Forces, veterans, faith leaders and members of the public to reflect on the shared sacrifices that shaped the modern world. This year's theme, Women in War, recognises the courage, resilience and leadership of women whose service has too often remained under acknowledged in public memory.

From resistance networks in occupied Europe to military hospitals in South Asia, from the Auxiliary Territorial Service to civil defence organisations across Africa and the Caribbean, women played vital roles in intelligence, communications, nursing, logistics, mobilisation and frontline support. Their service strengthened Allied operations and sustained communities during times of extraordinary strain.

Among those remembered is Noor Inayat Khan, the British Indian Special Operations Executive agent who served in occupied France during the Second World War. Operating under the codename Madeleine, she became the first female wireless operator sent into Nazi occupied territory. Betrayed, captured and executed at Dachau in 1944, her courage and refusal to betray her colleagues remain a powerful symbol of conviction and sacrifice.

Today's ceremony also honours women such as Margaret MacDonald of Canada, Constance Mark of Jamaica, Vivian Bullwinkel of Australia, Comfort Adeoye of Nigeria, Indira Sinha of Sri Lanka and Begum Pasha Shah of India. Their leadership, medical service, mobilisation efforts and post war advocacy form part of a broader educational initiative developed by the Memorial Gates Council.



As part of this year's commemoration, the Council has introduced an education programme entitled Women in War, designed to ensure that a new generation understands the full breadth of Commonwealth service and the central role women played within it.

Through remembrance and education, the Memorial Gates continue to honour the five million men and women from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean who volunteered to serve during the World Wars, and to recognise the enduring contribution of their descendants to British society today.

**Lord Boateng, PC, CVO, Chairman of the Memorial Gates Council, said:**

"The Memorial Gates Foundation highlights on Commonwealth Day the contribution of peoples of every race and creed to the global defence of freedom and justice in the course of two World Wars.

The role of women in those conflicts will be particularly marked in this year and will be central to the act of commemoration. We will remember those women one of whom Connie Marks. I was privileged to know personally as a young man and who have been a source of inspiration to my own and successive generations.

The ideals of service and sacrifice in the defence of liberty which they represent are today particularly relevant in the face of a resurgence of global aggression on the part of authoritarian regimes. We owe those women and men like the recently deceased Major Mani Rai a debt of gratitude for their example and tireless work in the cause of remembrance"

**Ms Shrabani Basu, Author and historian, said:**

"Today we honour not only the women whose names are recorded in history, but also the countless others whose stories were never fully told. Noor Inayat Khan represents the quiet courage of so many Commonwealth women who stepped forward in moments of global crisis. Their service challenges us to widen our understanding of remembrance and to ensure that future generations recognise the full breadth of contribution made in defence of freedom."

**Defence Hindu Chaplain Acharya Krishan K Attri MBE, said:**

On Commonwealth Day we honour the vital role and sacrifice of Indian and Commonwealth women during the two World Wars.



From nurses caring for the wounded on distant fronts to factory workers, miners and labour corps members supporting the Allied effort in India, these women showed extraordinary courage and resilience. During the First World War they led relief efforts and sustained communities at home. In the Second World War thousands served in auxiliary forces, built infrastructure and supported vital production.

Their contributions were often overlooked but were essential to the war effort and remain an important part of the shared history of the Commonwealth. We remember their service and honour their legacy. Their courage and dedication continue to inspire us to build a more just and united world.

**Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Hon Shirley Botchway, said:**

“These Memorial Gates remind us not only of loss, but of unity, of what is possible when people of different faiths, races, languages and cultures stand together against the forces of hatred and oppression.

“This year, we remember in a special way the women of the Commonwealth who served. For every Noor Inayat Khan whose story we can tell, there are countless others whose names we do not know. In doing so, they bound our nations together in shared sacrifice.

“Their example lives on in the quiet determination of nations that continue to choose partnership over division. May we be worthy of that inheritance. May the flame entrusted to us, that precious flame of liberty, solidarity and peace, burn brightly for generations to come.”

**The Royal British Legion’s Director of Remembrance, Philippa Rawlinson, said:**

“The Royal British Legion is proud to support today’s event, highlighting the pivotal part played by people across the Commonwealth who stood together in times of global conflict. It’s important that we come together to recognise the lasting impact they had, and continue to have, on the diversity of British society today.

“We also pay special tribute to Noor Inayat Khan, the only woman named amongst the Victoria and George Cross recipients on the pavilion at the Memorial Gates, whose courage stands as a powerful testament to the role of women in service – a vital role which continues to this day.”



## **Media Materials**

Imagery of the event will be available here.

- ENDS -

## **Notes to Editors:**

For more information and press related opportunities contact Council Secretary, Manpreet Maycock on 07411022929 [mn.maycock@gmail.com](mailto:mn.maycock@gmail.com) / [Memorialgates@gmail.com](mailto:Memorialgates@gmail.com)

## **The Memorial Gates Council**

The Memorial Gates Council is a Charity (Charity number: 1203649) set up to highlight the Commonwealth contribution to the War efforts and to continue the work of the former Memorial Gates Trust.

On the 6th of November 2002 Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II officially inaugurated the Memorial Gates on Constitution Hill, in London. These gates have been erected as a lasting memorial to honour the five million men and women from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean who volunteered to serve with the Armed Forces during the First and Second World Wars. They also celebrate the contribution that these men and women and their descendants, members of the Commonwealth family, continue to make to the rich diversity of British society.

Since Her Late Majesty opened the Memorial Gates on Constitution Hill in 2002, there has been a wreath laying ceremony every year. Recently this has been organised on Commonwealth Day and this year on the 10th of March we pay our respects in the time-honoured way.

*The Memorial Gates Council is made up of the following:*

**Chairman:** The Rt Hon Lord Boateng CVO

**Vice Chairman:** Major General Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter KCVO OBE DL

**Patrons:** Field Marshal The Lord Houghton GCB CBE DL, Field Marshal The Lord Richards, GCB, CBE, DSO, DL, Air Chief Marshal The Lord Peach KG GBE KCB DL, Baroness Scotland, PC, KC

**Council:** Mr Avtar Bahra, The Lord Bilimoria CBE DL, Mr Paul Chambers, Warrant Officer Ashok Kumar Chauhan MBE, Dr Munish Chauhan, Mr Dinesh Dhamija, Dr Richard Evans OBE MPhil, Dr Paul Flather, The Lord Gadhia, Brigadier Karl Harris CBE, Ms Gerardine Hogarth, Dr Yasmin Khan, Ms Nina Maan, Mr Praveen Moman, The Lord Ranger CBE, Mr Rohan Subbarao, Geoffrey Thompson MBE, DL, Lt Col Nana Kofi Twumasi-Ankrah RHG, MVO

**Secretary:** Mrs Manpreet Maycock

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**Charity No: 1203649**

For more information and press related opportunities contact Manpreet Maycock at [Memorialgates@gmail.com](mailto:Memorialgates@gmail.com) or [mn.maycock@gmail.com](mailto:mn.maycock@gmail.com)

## **The Royal British Legion**

The RBL is the UK's largest charity dedicated to bringing society together to recognise, remember, and support the Armed Forces community, and ensuring that their unique contribution is not forgotten. The RBL is well known for the annual Poppy Appeal and its emblem the red poppy. For further information, visit [rbl.org.uk](http://rbl.org.uk).

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