



Ministry
of Defence



MINISTÈRE
DES ARMÉES

A Shared History

United Kingdom and France



Britain's and France's Armed Forces have a long-shared history of common service stretching back well over a century. Not a month passes when British and French representatives are not standing together somewhere to mark where our soldiers, sailors and airmen served together; often paying the ultimate sacrifice for freedom, as symbolised by the British poppy and the French bleuet.



As far back as the 1850s, over 400,000 French and British Soldiers and Sailors served alongside each other during the Crimean War, in the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Far East.



British-French fleet bombarding Russian fortifications in the Baltic during the Crimean War

The First World War saw conflict on a previously unprecedented scale. Nearly 3,000,000 Commonwealth and French soldiers fought together during the Battle of the Somme alone. And it saw the Royal Air Force established as the first independent Air Force, with a number of squadrons tracing their formation to French airfields.



Soldiers of The Royal Fusiliers rest with their French comrades during the Battle of the Somme



Officers and aircraft of No. 1 Squadron RAF at Clairmarais aerodrome near St. Omer, 1918

The establishment of a united military Command also traces back to the appointment of Marshal Foch as Supreme Allied Commander in March 1918. The centenary was jointly marked in March 2018 at his statue in Victoria in London.



Field Marshal Haig and Marshal Foch 1918



Marshal Foch Centenary 2018

British and French soldiers, sailors and airmen served together again in the cause of freedom during the Second World War, in Europe and overseas.



Pierre Henri Clostermann, Free French pilot in RAF



Free French and British soldiers, June 1942

Our service personnel have continued to serve together as NATO Allies throughout the Cold War and beyond in our collective defence. And since the end of the Cold War, they have increasingly served together around the world, including on major sustained operations in the Middle East, the Balkans, Afghanistan and Africa.



UK and French Gazelles in the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait



HMS Grafton with the Foch in the Adriatic in 1999: The first Royal Navy ship under French tactical command since the Crimean War

This joint service rightly continues to be marked jointly by both countries, including through the centenary commemorations for the First World War, and by the award of France's Legion d'Honneur to British veterans of the liberation of France in the Second World War.



French and British Defence Secretaries planting poppies at the “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” art installation at the Tower of London, November 2014



French Ambassador presenting the Legion d'Honneur to Chelsea Pensioners who fought for the liberation of France, 2017



