Distant Thunder

The Journal of the Irish Branches of

The Western Front Association

Forty Years Exploring the Great War

1980-2020

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Irish Recruiting Poster

From the Editor

Welcome to Issue No. 3 of *Distant Thunder.* As we enter 2020, it is important to note that this year marks the 40th anniversary of the Western Front Association (WFA). From humble beginnings in 1980, the association has gone from strength to strength with branches located all over the world. In addition to performing its primary task of furthering interest in the history of the Great War, with particular reference to the Western Front, and perpetuating the memory, courage and comradeship of those of all sides who served their countries during the conflict, the WFA has proved to be an association where many new friendships have been formed. Members and those who attend meetings have an opportunity to speak to like-minded people, learn new things and share their own knowledge. Other friendships have been formed through sharing information on social media. If by chance, you are not a member I would ask you to consider joining and help us to write the next chapter in the history of the Western Front Association. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy the articles in this issue and find them informative. If you would like to contribute to the next issue or would like to contact any of the contributors then please feel free to contact me.

Gerry White
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Willie Redmond – The Only Isolated Grave?

Trevor Adams

In Issue 1 of Distant Thunder, Brendan O'Shea wrote an excellent piece on Willie Redmond. Major Redmond lies in a single grave outside the CWGC cemetery at Loker in Belgium. Since that issue, Brendan and I have shared good-natured correspondence about whether Willie Redmond's grave is (a) the only isolated grave on the Western Front, (b) the only Irish isolated grave on the Western Front or (c) the only isolated grave in Flanders*. I should add at this point that the well-known journalist Ronan McGreevy has written about Willie Redmond as well, and has made similar assertions.

Well, I enlisted the help of my friends Steve and Nancy Binks who this year will finish visiting every British and Irish and Commonwealth grave and memorial in France and Belgium after eight years. If anyone knows the answer, they would.

So, to take this in order, let us start with the concept of an 'isolated grave'. Well, according to CWGC Willie Redmond's grave is not 'isolated', as it is a few metres outside the Locre Hospice CWGC cemetery. However, let us not get too hung up on that.

Steve Binks told me that there is an isolated grave on the Marne with possible Irish connections, and sent me some photos of it – La Haute Maison. It transpired that it does indeed have Irish connections, and we will look at them below.

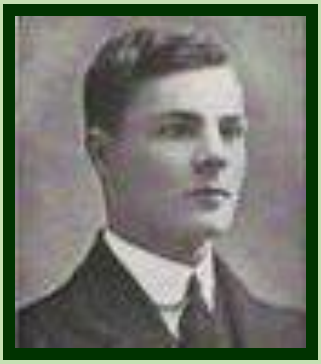
The grave at La Haute Maison is that of two soldiers – Second Lt Harold Alexander Boyd and Rifleman James Cousins, both 2nd Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, and both killed on 7 September 1914. The location is between Meaux and Sancy on the Marne. For an isolated grave to have survived the process of 'concentration' after the war, the land would have to have been bought by the family, so usually they are officer's graves. We know the story behind this incident as the battalion war diary survives, as does a Corporal W.L. Poots' account of the action. The battalion went to France on 23 August and detrained at Bertry in the Pas de Calais, in the early hours of 25 August. The battalion war diary states '27 August 1914, battalion complete. Still in retreat.'

By 7 September, they were down on the Marne. The diary for that day starts 'Villiers. Stood to at 3.30am. Marched off at 12 noon to Ferm petit loge [sic] beyond Maisoncelles.'

That evening, while moving out to take up outpost positions, they encountered a small party of Uhlans (German cavalry), which they drove off and closed up ranks again. The battalion was then fired upon, from woodland, by rifle fire and two enemy batteries at a range of 1,000 to 1,200 yards. The Inniskillings had no artillery but were trying to find the range of the enemy artillery, and in doing so the officers were exposed to enemy fire. Lt Boyd was standing beside an apple tree, was hit by shrapnel and died instantly. Pte Cousins was also killed. Another officer was wounded, as were a further nineteen men, and six were missing. The battalion continued all night in that position and by morning the enemy had retired. Lt Boyd and Pte Cousins were buried in the corner of a field near the farmhouse of La Ferme des Arcieres. The battalion moved out the following morning to the village of Courcelles near La

Ferté, which is an important crossing point over the River Marne. All of this was part of the battle of the Marne which stopped the German advance toward Paris.

What do we know about Lt Boyd and Pte Cousins? Well, there is actually quite a lot known about them. Lt Boyd was born on 19 January 1895 in Ware, Hertfordshire. His father, Alexander James Boyd, was a doctor who had served in the army reserve. His mother was Constance Berkley. His grandfather was Samuel Boyd of Illerton, Killiney, County Dublin, a house which still exists today. Young Harold Boyd had attended the nearby preparatory school at Castle Park, Dalkey. He was then a student at Rugby public school and Trinity College Cambridge where he was reading medicine. He joined the Inniskillings in April 1913 as a special reserve officer. He was subsequently called up and stationed on coastal protection at Lough Swilly, County Donegal. His battalion seems to have gone to France on 23 August 1914, the date given on Pte Cousins' medal record for his disembarkation. One oddity of Lt Boyd's records is that his father was claiming after the war for the 1914 Star which had not been awarded to his son. As Pte Cousins did have the 1914 Star, this seems to have been a bureaucratic oversight, as Lt Boyd is of course recorded as not only being in France in 1914 but being killed there in 1914!



Lieutenant H. A. Boyd

Private James Cousins

Lt Boyd is described in the following terms: 'he was a fine athlete, gaining colours in football, swimming, shooting and cross-country running; and he also won the Royal Humane Society's medal and Dr Duke's cup for lifesaving competition.'

What do we know of Pte James Cousins? He born in March 1889 in Magheralin, Lurgan, to William and Mary Cousins, nee Guiney, and was educated at the National School there. His family are described as damask weavers. He enlisted in the army in July 1905. At some stage, he served two years in China. He had a brother, John, who is listed as being in the RIR at the time of James's death. There is a John Cousins RIR from Lurgan who is listed as being killed on 2 April 1918 and who is buried at Rouen. However, the family information gives the 'wrong' parents, so it is not the brother after all, but may be a cousin. The brother did in fact survive the war and is recorded as being transferred to the army reserve in 1919, so hopefully was reasonably fit at that stage.

So, Willie Redmond's grave is not the only isolated grave on the Western Front and, as we now know thanks to Steve Binks, not the only Irish isolated grave, and indeed as regards graves in Flanders there is even another (English) isolated grave*. None of this takes anything away from the importance of Willie Redmond in Irish history, or the poignancy of his demise

and of his grave. At least he is not alone, even if his grave is, or is not, 'isolated'! I can empathise with the situation only too well as my own grandfather is in a CWGC cemetery, on the Somme, a long way from home.

The inscription reads (in French): 'In memory of Lt Harold A. Boyd of Ware, England and Pte J. Cousins, Belfast Ireland, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, who died for their country in the Great War near this location, 7 September 1914.'

The Grave of Lieutenant Harold A. Boyd and Private James Cousins
Photographs courtesy of Steve Binks

From the CWGC database, there are other isolated graves on the Western Front at Faffemont between Albert and Bapaume – three soldiers of the Royal Fusiliers; at Etricourt in the Pas de Calais – Capt C.R. Tidswell RFC; and at Meteren in Flanders but on the French side of the border – Lt A.G.A. Morris, Kings Own Royal Lancs. There are others in far flung parts of the world - Capt Frederick C. Selous, Royal Fusiliers, in Tanzania and perhaps the most famous at Skyros in the Aegean – Sub Lt Rupert Brooke RNVR.

Captain Frederick Selous was a famous big game hunter and member of the Legion of Frontiersman. This organisation was affiliated to the 25th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers and comprised a collection of colonial adventurers. Lt Morris who is at Meteren had been dug up by the family with the intention of reburying him in England but they were turned back at Calais. So, the family reburied him at the isolated grave in Meteren.

References:

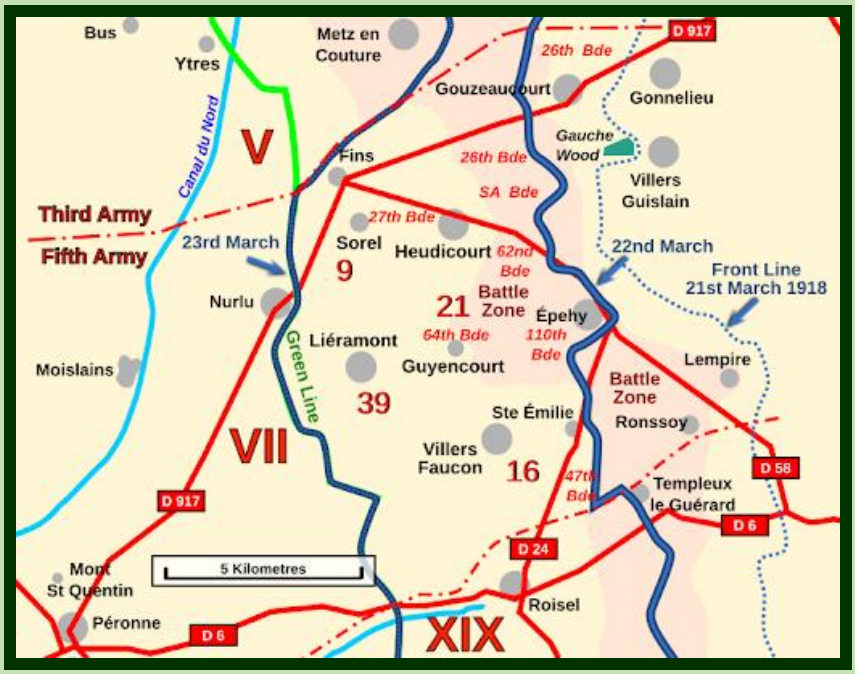
Steve Binks, personal communication
CWGC database
De Ruvigny Roll of Honour 1914-1919
British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards
IWM database 'Lives of the First World War'

The Last Days of the 16th (Irish) Division

Dr Brendan O'Shea
European Trustee

At 4.40am on the morning of 21 March 1918 three German Armies unleashed 6,473 heavy guns and 3,532 trench mortars upon 50 miles of the Western Front then occupied by the Third and Fifth British Armies. Calculating ammunition requirements by the 'train-load' and firing in excesses of three million gas and high explosive shells, a deluge of death and destruction pulverised the exposed soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) for a full five hours. The impact was catastrophic, and created wholesale confusion, but this was only the prelude to a huge follow-on ground offensive designed to break the Allied line, advance and capture Paris, and push the British all the way back to the Channel Ports.

Operation Michael was one of the most decisive moves of the entire war - and in the middle of the Allied front line near the villages of Ronssoy and Lempire stood the 16th (Irish) Division with orders from their Army Commander, General Sir Hubert Gough, amounting to little more than a crude directive to hold their ground and prevent a breakthrough. Outnumbered six to one by virtually the entire German Second Army, the 16th (Irish) Division was about to die on the battlefields of France and the political dream which had inspired its creation four years previously would end amidst the chaos of a battle which could and should have been fought in an entirely different way.



Map of the Fifth Army sector of Western Front on 21 March 1918 showing the deployment of the 16th (Irish) Division.

Had wiser counsel prevailed within the headquarters of the BEF, and had General Gough not decided to defend an un-defendable line, it is reasonable to argue that the result could have been significantly different – at least in terms of the numbers of casualties sustained. At 100 years remove, it is now appropriate to re-examine the last days of the 16th (Irish) Division and the events which led to destruction of a proud Irish fighting force who went to war for many reasons - but primarily 'for the Glory of God and the Honour of Ireland.'

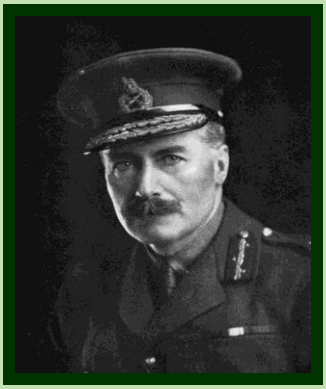
Raised in Ireland in 1915, drawn from every parish in the country, and representing all religious denominations and none, the horrors of this war quickly became apparent when during Easter Week 1916 the Division deployed into the trenches at a place called Hulluch, France and suffered hundreds of casualties when attacked with phosgene and chlorine gas. Later they were moved south to partake in the Battle of the Somme and although distinguishing themselves in victory at Guillemont and Ginchy in September they continued to suffer appalling losses. By the end of 1916 the Division had suffered over 10,000 casualties of whom 20% were fatal.

A victory at Messines Ridge in Flanders in June 1917 fighting side by side with the 36th (Ulster) Division was followed by disaster at Frezenberg east of Ypres from 16-18 August when bad senior leadership insisted on a strategy of trying to smash though five interlocking lines of German fortifications. This simply could not work and resulted in another 4,000 casualties.

By January 1918 the Division had returned to the Fifth Army in France and took over 7000 yards of front line previously occupied by the French - but it was now a shadow of its former self. Recruiting in Ireland had effectively ended, Irish identity was being lost, and replacements were drafted in from all over England.

Then the commanding officer, Major-General William Hickie, from Tipperary, became ill and was replaced by Major-General Sir Charles Amyatt Hull, who was working with Irish soldiers for the first time. To make matters worse, every division in the BEF was then reduced by 25%. This was directly related to a blanket refusal by Prime Minister David Lloyd George to release any further reserves to France and Belgium and came at the very moment Germany was re-locating several divisions from the Eastern Front following Russia's capitulation when it signed the punitive Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March.

General Sir Hubert Gough



Major-General Sir Charles Amyatt Hull

Faced with all of these changes, Field Marshal Douglas Haig correctly decided to weight his overall defence in favour of protecting the Channel Ports in the north and to accept risk further south where the Third and Fifth Armies were deployed. In that context it was also incumbent upon him to instruct his General Staff and Army Commanders to minimise that risk by taking proper measures to preserve the lives of his soldiers who were all now seriously exposed. However, rather than develop a concept of mobile defence the General Staff attempted to copy the defensive tactics used by the Germans in Flanders the previous year without fully understanding them or having either the resources or time to construct the fortifications required.

What all divisions in both armies were tasked to do was create a Forward Zone close to the front line to disrupt the first wave of attack, a Battle Zone 2,000 yards further back to engage the enemy from fortified positions, and a Rear Zone four to eight miles further back again from which counter attacks could be launched. Essentially these three zones would constitute the complete defence until they were either over-run or the enemy withdrew.

There was no plan to trade time for space by thinning out the Forward Zone before the main attack, nor to occupy the Battle Zone for only for a limited time before moving back into the Rear Zone from where the enemy could be engaged when most vulnerable. Equally, it appears that nobody paid adequate attention to intelligence assessments or to the information coming from the civilian network of train watchers known as *La Dame Blanche* - all of which clearly identified the size of the force now being massed against them.

Instead both the Third and Fifth Armies effectively locked their troops into rigid static positions which were not properly prepared, were two widely dispersed, could not mutually support each other and were effectively guaranteed to crumble if the German artillery bombardment was successful – which it was.

Therefore, out on the front line near Ronssoy, men from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Royal Munster Fusiliers, Royal Irish Regiment, Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Connaught Rangers all awaited the German attack and on that fateful morning the 16th (Irish) Division and the 66th (East Lancashire) Division beside them suffered the highest fatalities of all other divisions in the line - 721 and 791 respectively. The artillery bombardment pulverised the ground, the dead and dying lay everywhere, German stormtroopers sprinted from the fog like ghostly shadows, and the Forward Zone was overrun in minutes.

German stormtroopers in action during Operation Michael

Thereafter, some heroic actions took place in the Battle Zone but the casualties mounted and ammunition stocks quickly expired. The Fifth Army's defensive system was a shambles and the chaotic withdrawal westwards which ensued was not orderly - it was a rout. At 2 pm. General Gough finally issued orders to his Corps Commanders to begin a fighting retreat but by then it was far too late. The damage had already been done and was typified by the plight of the 7th Battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment who started the battle that morning with 650 all ranks. By 7pm that evening there was just forty-one still standing.

Twenty-four hours after the attack began the Germans had captured almost 150 square miles of terrain and punched a hole twenty miles deep into Allied defences. With casualties still mounting, on 26 March the remaining elements of the 16th (Irish) Division did manage to hold off a German attack for four hours before having to withdraw until by 4 April they could fight no longer. Fortunately, the German offensive also ran out of steam a few miles from the town of Amiens on the same day. Fifteen days of non-stop fighting had resulted in 7,149 casualties for 16th (Irish) Division which when the final cost was calculated would prove to be one of the highest suffered by any division in this particular battle.

And then the recriminations started. Gough was fired and replaced by Rawlinson and a variety of senior officers offered opinions that the Irish had not fought well and were probably affected by political change taking place in Ireland. General Hull to his credit immediately refuted these allegations and pointed out the heroic action of numerous Irish soldiers in the face of impossible adversity.

The reality is that there was nothing whatever to support this whispering campaign nor was there any evidence to suggest that political demoralisation had played any part whatsoever in the Division's performance. They had fought bravely and hopelessly against a powerful enemy who outnumbered them six to one, and General Hubert Gough's failure to plan and execute a proper mobile defence had effectively ensured that this battle could only end in failure. While the Fifth Army fought tenaciously on its retreat of thirty-eight miles, and ultimately did not break, they managed to do this in spite of a coherent plan – not because of one. The 16th (Irish) Division deserved better leadership from their army commander in March 1918 - the reality is they did not get it.

50,000 Officers and Men served with 16th (Irish) Division from 1 Jan 1916 to 4 April 1918. 27,603 of them became casualties and the fatality rate was almost 30%. This is the price one Irish unit paid to restore freedom to France and Belgium. Their endeavours were noble and their cause was just – and their sacrifice should never be forgotten.

Members of the Cork Branch at the memorial to the 16th (Irish) Division at Guillemont

The Notice Board

Irish Branch Details

Antrim and Down Branch

Chairman: Ian Montgomery

Contact

Secretary: Dr Tom Thorpe antrimdownwfa@gmail.com

Website: https://www.antrimanddownwfa.org/

Twitter: @WFA_AntrimDown

Meets at 6.30pm at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) on the second Thursday of each month. We do not meet however in January, July, August or December. A modest donation of £5.00 is normally requested at the door to help fund branch activities.

Forthcoming Events

12 March: 'The Northern Ireland War Memorial's WW1 Collection' by Alan Freeburn.
Note: This talk will take place at **1900hrs** at the Northern Ireland War Memorial at Talbot Street, Belfast.
23 April: 'After the Conflict: Pension Records for Post 1914 Families and Survivors'.
This event is **free** and will take place at the Public Records Office, Belfast from 1400hrs to 1630hrs.
Speakers will include: Bruno Longmore (National Records of Scotland) Cécile Gordon (Military Archives, Dublin) and Dr Tom Thorpe, WFA.

Cork Branch

Chairman: Gerry White

Contact

Secretary: Gerry O'Meara gerryo@gerryomeara.com

Website: https://www.westernfrontassociationcork.com

Facebook: Cork Branch Western Front Association

Usually meets the last Wednesday of each month from September to June at 7:30pm in the College of Commerce, Cork. If the college is not available an alternative venue will be notified. A modest donation of €5.00 is requested to help fund branch activities.

Forthcoming Events

25 March: 'Tomás Mac Curtáin – Lord Mayor of Cork' by Mark Cronin.
29 April: 'The Smyth Brothers and the Murphy Brewing Family in the Great War' by Gerry O'Meara.
27 May: 'The Blackpool Ambush, 14 May 1921 – An Incident in Ireland's Post-War Conflict' by Fiona Forde.
24 June: 'The Killing of the Iron Twelve' by Hedley Malloch

Dublin Branch

Chairman: Ian Chambers

Contact

Ian Chambers: ian1914@eircom.net

Website: https://wfadublin.webs.com/

Meetings held at 2pm on the third Saturday of each month (except for March and August) at Pearse Street Library. A modest donation of €3.00 is requested to help fund branch activities.

Forthcoming Events

04 April: 'Guinness Roll of Honour'. By Nigel Henderson.
16 May: 'The Last General Absolution of the Munsters at Rue du Bois' by Gerry White.
20 June: 'Human Shields or Innocent Victims: The Sinking of the RMS Lusitania, May 7th 1915'
by James Scannell.

Podcasts Available!

A large (and growing) number of excellent podcasts on different aspects of the Great War have been recorded by Dr Tom Thorpe, the WFA Public Relations Officer and Secretary of the Antrim and Down Branch. The latest podcasts are free and can be heard via your smart phone's podcast app such as Acast, iTunes or Stitcher. Just search for the name 'Mentioned in Dispatches' to listen to the latest episodes. The back catalogue can be heard at: https://www.kensingtons.org.uk/

Looking for a New Video to Watch?

If you are looking for a new video on the Great War then why not visit the Western Front Association's You Tube channel? This contains recordings of a range of interesting and informative talks given by a number of historian and academics.
You can access the video library at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/user/WesternFrontAssoc

Visit the Western Front Association Website

You can see the above and plenty of other interesting items by visiting the association website which can be accessed at this link: https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/

New Material Wanted!

If you would like to contribute an item to this newsletter (an article, notice, photograph, poem or letter) then please send same to the editor at: gerrywhitecork@yahoo.co.uk

New material is welcome and all contributions will be considered for inclusion. Material from Northern Ireland or of Irish interest from branches in the United Kingdom or the USA would be particularly welcome!

Facebook and Twitter

There are many interesting articles and facts available on the association's Facebook and Twitter pages. Readers who use social media are encouraged to visit these sites, 'like' what they see and share or retweet. Doing so will spread the word about the association!

'Project Alias'

Are you interested in talking part? Please visit the WFA website for further details!

A 'Mere Six Weeks'? Examining the Longevity of Infantry Officers' Frontline Service During the Great War

Dr Tom Thorpe,
Secretary, Antrim & Down Branch.

'A soldier [during the Great War]…could count on no more than three months' trench service before being wounded or killed; a junior officer, a mere six weeks.'

Robert Graves, former Captain, Royal Welch Fusiliers[1]

Introduction

A popular legend tells us that infantry officers in the Great War served six weeks or less in the frontline before death or injury took them away. John Stempel-Lewis, in his 2012 book on subalterns on the Western Front, used this figure as the title of his publication. He took this statistic from Graves, cited above.[2] Junior officers, Stempel-Lewis asserted, suffered 'something like a holocaust', pointing out that they had twice the casualty rate of other ranks.[3] This view shaped public perceptions over the decades and even after the Great War's Centenary, many people still accepted this figure unquestioningly.[4]

There is considerable veteran testimony to support the notion that officers served a matter of weeks in the trenches.[5] In February 1917, Captain Frank Hitchcock, 2nd Battalion, Leinster Regiment, noted a 'company officer's life with the…Leinsters worked out under six weeks.'[6] In 1931, Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, who served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers, wrote that 'the "life" of an infantry officer at the front…was very short…a mathematical average of a few weeks'.[7] Dick Read, commissioned into the Sussex Regiment in November 1917, recalled that the average life of an infantry subaltern in France was a month.[8] Finally, John Lucy, a pre-war NCO in the 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles (2/RIR) and commissioned to that unit in 1917, pondered before he arrived at the front, 'how I would acquit myself as an officer [knowing]…that the average life of a second lieutenant was only three weeks'.[9]

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[1] R. Graves, 'A Kaiser's War: A British Point of View', in G.A. Panichas (ed), *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918* (London, 1968), p. 10.

[2] J. Stempel-Lewis, *Six Weeks* (London, 2011), p.7, p.7, footnote 3.

[3] J. Stempel-Lewis, *Six Weeks* (London, 2011), p.7.

[4] For example, see J. Hughes-Wilson, 'The Slaughter of the Subalterns', *Despatches, the magazine of the International Guild of Battlefield Guides*, Winter 2018, pp.28-29.

[5] See C. Wilson, *Anatomy of Courage* (London, 1945), p.117.

[6] F.C. Hitchcock, *"Stand To". A Diary of the Trenches 1915-1918* (Heathfield, 1936), p.258.

[7] L.W. Griffith, *Up to Mametz…and Beyond* (Barnsley, 2010), p. 55.

[8] I.L. Read, *Of Those We Loved* (Barnsley, 1994), p.287.

[9] J.F. Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum* (London, 1938), p.361.

Officer attrition during the Great War was significant. Of the 336,290 men who held commissions in 1914, or were commissioned during the war, 45% were killed, wounded or injured.[10] This meant the officer corps in infantry units changed rapidly over the war, often several times their official battalion establishment of 30 officers.[11] For example, the London Rifle Brigade recorded 225 officers passing through its ranks during the war, the 1/5th Battalion, The Cheshire Regiment, 153 officers, and the 15th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters, 174 officers.[12] However, there has been little work to examine how these levels of loss translated into officer service in a given unit, for instance, to assess how long officers served with their men before they became a casualty, left their unit or the war ended.

This brief study aimed to plot the individual service of officers in one unit throughout the Great War to explore their patterns of service with that unit over the conflict. The selected formation was the 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles, because it recorded a staggering 325 officers who served with the unit during the First World War.[13]

A database was constructed which mapped the start and exit date of each officer's episode of service, where the information was available. The database also recorded the reason for an individual officer leaving the unit or their service ending, for example, being evacuated because of illness.

The information for the database was collected from a range of sources including the biographical research that James Taylor conducted into the 2/RIR's officers as part of his 2005 history of the battalion.[14]

Length of service

Table 1 sets out the length of time officers served in the 2/RIR by the year in which their service ended over the course of the conflict. It further breaks down their service into specific time bands for those who served under six weeks (42 days and under), between six weeks and six months (43 days to 182 days) and over six months (183 days and over).

It was assumed that all war service ended at the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

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[10] *Statistics of Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War* (London, 1922), pp.234-267.

[11] W.R. Lang, *Organization, Administration and Equipment of His Majesty's Land Forces in Peace and War* (Toronto, 1916), p.117. J. Stempel-Lewis', *Six Weeks* (London, 2011), p.7.

[12] A calculation made for each unit on information in F. Maude, *The History of the London Rifle Brigade in the Great War* (London, 1922), pp.429-492, W.A.V. Churton, *The War Record of the 1/5th (Earl of Chester's) Battalion, The Cheshire Regiment,* (London, 1920), pp.113-116 and M. Bacon & D. Langley, *The Blast of War, A History of Nottingham's Bantams, 15th (S) Battalion Sherwood Foresters 1915-1918* (Nottingham, 1986), pp.72-76.

[13] This is the number calculated for this study based on a database of the officers in the unit. James Taylor, who wrote a history of the unit (J. Taylor, *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War* (Dublin, 2005)) suggests that 326 officers passed through the unit (p.134).

[14] See J.W. Taylor, *The 2nd Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War* (Dublin, 2005).

Table 1 – Length of service for officers in the 2/RIR by year their service ended

Year service ended	Average (days)	Records	Percentage breakdown for active service by periods		
			42 days and under	43 days to 182 days	183 days and over
1914	310	38	18%	74%	8%
1915	87	73	20%	75%	5%
1916	126	72	16%	67%	17%
1917	177	66	17%	64%	19%
1918 (to 11.11.18)	211	80	21%	54%	25%

Table 1 shows that for officers who ended their service in 1914, their average length of service was nearly a year. This figure included a small number of officers who had years of pre-war service.

In 1915, the average fell dramatically to just under three months.

From 1916 onwards, the average length of service increased steadily and peaked in 1918. In the final year of the war, one in four officers served six months or more with the battalion.

The number of officers who served six weeks or less remained reasonably consistent throughout the conflict at around one in five.

The data also showed that twenty-two officers had two episodes of service with the unit and seven officers had three.

Reasons for an officers' service ending

The reasons for an officer leaving the unit, or their service ending, was classified into six possible categories. These were broad and covered:

1. Death; being killed in action, either instantly or by wounds.
2. Medical evacuation; leaving the frontline due to illness or incapacity.
3. Capture; becoming a POW.
4. Transfer; leaving the unit due to promotion, administrative reasons or by request.
5. Wounds; leaving the unit through sustaining injury by enemy action.
6. Armistice being called; hostilities ceasing on 11 November 1918.

Table 2, sets out the reason for an officer ending their service, or leaving the unit, by year over the course of the war.

Table 2 – Reason for an officer's service ending by year between 1914 to 1918

Year service ended	Reason for service ending						Records
	Armistice called	Killed	Medical evacuation	Capture (POW)	Transfer	Wounds	
1914	N/A	24%	21%	5%	5%	45%	38
1915	N/A	30%	27%	0%	14%	29%	73
1916	N/A	21%	18%	0%	22%	39%	72
1917	N/A	23%	8%	2%	26%	42%	66
1918	34%	11%	13%	5%	16%	20%	80

Table 2 demonstrates that during the war, the majority of officers' service in the 2/RIR ended due to death, injury, illness or capture. In 1914, 95% of officers' service ended because of these four reasons but by 1918, the figure had fallen to 49%.

Conclusions

The data presented here suggests that the myth of officers serving only a few weeks during the Great War has a limited basis in truth with only one in five officers having served six weeks or less.

Instead, a different narrative emerges that officers spent on average at least three months with the battalion and this average increased as the war progressed, peaking in the final year of the war with one in four officers having served six months or more.

What also emerges is that being an officer in the 2/RIR during the war was a dangerous business with the majority being physically harmed, becoming ill or being captured.

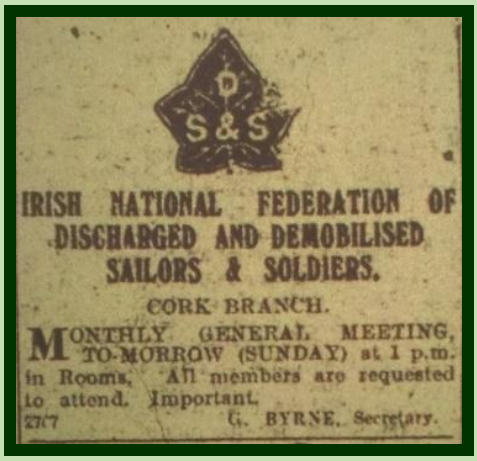
The results of this brief study need to be treated with caution as they refer to one set of officers in a single battalion and there were at least 1,776 British and Dominion infantry battalions raised during the Great War.[15]

This research forms the first part of a wider project which is examining officer length of service in nine other British and Canadian units and the results are due to be submitted to an academic journal soon.

[15] E.A. James, *British Regiments 1914-1918* (Dallington, 1974), Table C. J.F. Meek, *Over the Top! The Canadian Infantry in the First World War* (Privately published, 1971), pp.49-147.

Cork's First Armistice – A Tribute of Respect

Jean Prendergast



Cork's Evening Echo Advertisement
1 November 1919

On Tuesday, 11 November 1919, Cork's first Armistice ceremony took place in the midst of unrest in the city and the political complications of the time. It was very different to the ceremonies that are conducted today and was conducted without the roadmap and focus that we are used to nowadays using, as it did, the symbols of pre-war Irish nationalism that were even then passing into history. The organisers were the Cork city Branch of the Irish National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers (FDDSS). The Branch had been founded in Cork at a meeting in the City Hall in December 1917. It had adopted as its symbol the ivy leaf emblem of Charles Stewart Parnell and carried the old flag of the Cork Irish National Volunteers as well as their own banner which consisted of the letters D&D - S&S on a plain background while in 1919 the Mallow Branch was reported as marching behind a green banner emblazoned with a harp. The President was the Lord Mayor of Cork, William F. O'Connor; the Chairman was Thomas Downing; the General Secretary was Gerald Byrne and the Hon. Secretary was Jack Flynn. O'Connor was a local Nationalist politician whose two brothers had served in the war; Downing, a telegraphist in the GPO in Cork, had served with the Royal Engineers though he had not seen service at the Front; Byrne had pre-war service as a Sergeant with the Royal Munster Fusiliers and Flynn had served as a sergeant with the Royal Irish Regiment during the war. The Federation also had its own fife and drum band which regularly paraded through the streets following meetings of the Branch at their rooms at 18 St. Patrick's Quay in the city. Branches were also formed in Bandon, Charleville, Cobh, Fermoy, Mallow, Skibbereen, Kinsale and Dunmanway but the Cobh and Skibbereen Branches later defected to a rival group, the Comrades of the Great War.

This group had been formed by establishment figures in the UK also in 1917 and in Cork was led by former officers who formed branches in Midleton, Killeagh, Youghal and Glanmire. Previously, in August, the hall of the Comrades of the Great War, in Hanover Street, had come

under attack by a mob armed with revolvers and stones while holding a social event. There was some rivalry between the two groups and both organisations had taken part separately in the 'Peace Day' celebration that was held in Cork a few months earlier in July where two thousand ex-servicemen marched in the parade through the city from the Barracks with the British military. However, neither group at this time could claim more than 1,500 members each out of an ex-service population in Cork of some fifteen thousand most of whom were content to remain in the background. Yet, they would quietly come forward and support efforts to create a permanent memorial to the Fallen and for the previous few months Cork establishment figures had headed up a campaign to collect funds in order to create a:

> *Memorial Hall for the use of demobilised Sailors and Soldiers and for Sailors of the Merchant Marine – a comfortable place of meeting and recreation for those servants of their country. In the public Halls of this Building, accessible to the public, will be placed Tablets containing the names of the many thousands of Cork City and County men who gave their lives for their country in the great European War.*

However, this project would not come to part fruition until 1921 and as Armistice Day approached, there was some confusion on the ground with the Cork city Branch of the FDDSS advertising on 7 November that *'All ex-service men are requested to Parade at 18 Patrick's Quay tomorrow (Saturday), at 2 o'clock, to take part in the great demonstration to celebrate peace, and to demand our rights for which we fought.'* The Comrades of the Great War advertised on the same day that this parade had nothing to do with them and that members and branches would make their own arrangements for the eleventh of the eleventh.

About three o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, 8 November, the members of the FDDSS, led by their band, marched through the city from their rooms at 18 St. Patrick's Quay to the City Hall where they held a mass meeting to discuss their grievances. Contingents from Mallow and Bandon, including the Secretary of the Bandon Branch, the future Commandant Tom Barry, also attended. The members were deeply unhappy with their treatment by the Government considering the promises that had been made to them regarding employment, pensions and housing in the early years of the war. The City Hall was packed, and resolutions were passed protesting against the Government's inaction in fulfilling the promises made to ex-servicemen.

That night, soldiers from the King's Shropshire Light Infantry and local civilians, fought running battles in the streets in and around Patrick Street, Bridge St., King Street and on the roads leading up to the Barracks. The KSLI had recently been transferred from Fermoy where they had wrecked the town following the death of one of their number in an ambush conducted by IRA Volunteers. The rioting continued over the next three nights and the Comrades of the Great War were among those who wrote letters of protest to the General Officer Commanding in Cork and the KSLI were withdrawn from the city on 11 November. That morning, the Lord Mayor wrote to the Evening Echo:

Sir, Kindly permit me to avail of your columns for the purpose of reminding my fellow-citizens of the first anniversary of the cessation of the hostilities, which occurs today, and to take the opportunity of appealing to them to pay a tribute of respect to the memory of the gallant Irishmen who have lost their lives in the war. 'After life's fitful fever' may they sleep well. The occasion reminds us of the motives that impelled our gallant fellow-countrymen to engage in the war, and I feel sure that the prayers of all will go forth for the eternal rest of those who have fallen. I only hope that our common country may reap the benefit of this great sacrifice. The Band of the Discharged and Demobilised Soldiers and Sailor's Federation will assemble at Fr. Mathew Statue, and at 11.2 am will march to the Grand Parade playing the 'Dead March,' where the 'Last Post' will be sounded. As a further tribute of respect to the memory of our brave fellow-countrymen, the municipal flag will be hoisted over the City Hall at half-mast at 11 am. It will so remain till sunset, and I trust that this example will be generally followed in the city. – Yours, etc., W. F. O'CONNOR, Lord Mayor, City Hall, Cork.

This ceremony would be entirely separate from that conducted by the British military on the day and there would be no interference from the IRA Volunteers in the city who could, by then, count many ex-servicemen in their ranks. Subsequently, an enormous crowd assembled in Patrick Street and, headed by the Lord Mayor, marched slowly to the National Monument on the Grand Parade where the two minutes silence was observed, and a bugler played the Last Post. This was the first and only time that the National Monument was the focus of an Armistice Ceremony in Cork. It was the place where the annual Manchester Martyr's commemoration was held (also in November) which had been attended by many of the Ex-Servicemen present since childhood. It seems to have therefore served as both a roadmap for the Armistice and a commemoration of those who were also seen as having 'died for Ireland.'
A photograph of the occasion, published in the *Cork Examiner*, shows the crowd in Patrick Street and the newspaper commented that *'None could grudge to these brave men, many of whom were in the worst places of the war – Mons, Givenchy, Festubert, Gallipoli – their solemn mourning for their heroic dead, men whose deeds of valour were unparalleled, and poorly thanked.'* Afterwards, the FDDSS band led the procession down the South Mall through to Pembroke Street, Winthrop Street and on to St. Patrick's Street after which the members of the FDDSS returned to their rooms on St. Patrick's Quay.

Elsewhere, the Armistice was observed by British troops garrisoned in Victoria Barracks and in Cork Harbour where naval guns fired from ships in the harbour and from the harbour forts and the hooter at Haulbowline Dockyard sounded. The two minutes silence was generally observed in the business houses of the city and the Municipal flag was hung at half-mast along with the Union Jacks displayed by some of the business premises in the city. Members of the Comrades of the Great War observed the two minutes silence at work or at home. In Youghal the Comrades held a torchlight procession through the streets of the town led by their band and followed by a large crowd and afterwards held a dance at the Town Hall. In

Bandon, legend has it that Tom Barry hoisted the Union Jack from the window of the FDDSS rooms in the town on Armistice Day. An Armistice ceremony in Mallow was cancelled when the instruments of the local fife and drum band were stolen by IRA Volunteers. Likewise, in Carrigtwohill, where the local band instruments had also been stolen, the twenty-five local Ex-Servicemen nevertheless managed to retrieve the big drum and marched behind it up the main street. There were no other reports on any Armistice ceremonies in the newspapers from the county. That night in the city, Miss Zilma Wheeler, a 'Professor of Dancing', held an Armistice Anniversary Dance at the Imperial Hotel in the city where dancing took place from 8.30 pm to 2.30 am.

The next day, James Connolly's son Roderic spoke at an event organised in the City Hall to celebrate the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Two days later, another attempt, the second of three, was made to blow up the Boer War Memorial on Connaught Avenue in the city. This monument would later become the focus of Armistice Day until 1925 and the erection of the memorial on the South Mall leaving us to wonder why the National Monument was no longer the focus after 1919.

The following year, Armistice Day was not marked in public by any of the ex-servicemen's organisations in Cork there being a ban on any large outdoor gathering in force. Instead it was marked by Crown forces within their garrisons while the people of Cork attended memorial masses and services in the various churches.

The FDDSS would survive the coming year and re-emerge as the Irish Legion of Ex-Servicemen absorbing the smaller Comrades of the Great War group and it was this group that erected the Munster Memorial in Ypres in 1924. 1923 saw a split in the organisation which led to the formation of the Cork Independent Ex-Servicemen's Club which erected the South Mall Memorial in 1925. The same year, the Irish Legion of Ex-Servicemen became the British Legion. As for the majority of Cork's ex-servicemen, they concurred with Henry Harrison when he said in 1925:

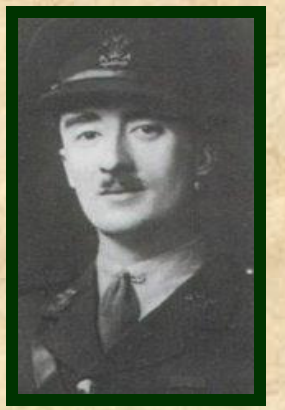
> *'We claim our place in the life of the Nation, now happily free and independent. We claim recognition of the patriotism of Ireland's soldiers of the Great War. We claim honour and respect for our dead. As Ex-Servicemen, we quarrel with no party, and we are true and loyal citizens of Ireland under its new title of the Irish Free State. And we will allow no organisations or leaders or schemers or intriguers to twist us into tools to further either pro-British or anti-British designs. It is our pride and our duty to be simply good Irishmen.*

Taken from my forthcoming book *'Cork's WWI Ex-Servicemen 1917 – 1925 and Their Memorials.'*

Editor's note: All Jean's books on different aspects of Cork and the Great War are available on Amazon.

Roll of Honour

Lieutenant John Vincent Holland
7th Battalion, Leinster Regiment
A VC Hero of the Somme



John Vincent Holland was born in Athy, Co. Kildare, on 19 July 1889. He was the eldest child of veterinary surgeon John Holland and his wife Catherine née Peppard. From 1906 to 1909 he attended Clongowes Wood College and Liverpool University where he studied to be a vet, but he didn't complete his studies. He subsequently travelled extensively in South America and secured employment with the Central Argentine Railway at Rosario in Santa Fe Province. However, when the Great War broke out, he returned to Britain immediately.

On 2 September 1914, Holland enlisted in 2nd Life Guards. He trained at Combermere Barracks, Windsor, until commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in 3rd Battalion, Leinster Regiment, on 13 February 1915. He deployed to France on 9 June 1915 and was attached to 2nd Battalion, Royal Dublin Fusiliers. On 26 June 1915, he was wounded at Ypres and was evacuated to Britain. He was promoted to Lieutenant on 31 July and returned to France and was posted to the 7th Battalion, Leinster Regiment.

Lieutenant Holland took part in the Battle of the Somme. It was during that engagement, on 3 September 1916, at Guillemont, that he performed the deed that won him the Victoria Cross. His Victoria Cross citation which was published in the Supplement to the *London Gazette* on 26 October 1916 and read as follows:

Lieutenant John Vincent Holland, Leinster Regiment

For most conspicuous bravery during a heavy engagement, Lt. Holland, not content with bombing hostile dug-outs, fearlessly led his troops through our own artillery barrage and cleared a great part of the village in front. He started out with 26 troops and finished with only five after capturing some 50 prisoners. By this gallant action he undoubtedly broke the spirit of the enemy and thus saved us many casualties when the battalion made a further advance. He was far from well at the time and later had to go to hospital

John Vincent Holland was subsequently promoted to captain and served with a number of units before he retired in 1922. He also served in the Royal Artillery and Indian Army during the Second World War. He married Frances Grogan in St Colman's Cathedral in Cobh, Co. Cork, on 15 January 1917 and the couple had two sons. John Vincent Holland died at St John's Park Hospital, Hobart, Tasmania on 27 February 1975 and is buried in Cornelian Bay Cemetery with his wife.

New Members Wanted!

If you are interested in joining, or forming a new branch, please contact any of the following:

In the Republic of Ireland:
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