



# Distant Thunder

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**The Ulster Memorial Tower  
Somme, France**

## From the Editor

Happy New Year and welcome to Issue 7 of *Distant Thunder*. I hope everyone had a peaceful and enjoyable Christmas. When I produced the last issue of this journal, I had hoped we were starting to see an ever-growing light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. I also know that many of you had returned to some element of the 'normality' that we all enjoyed before the arrival of Covid. Unfortunately, a few weeks ago we were faced with a new challenge. However, at the time of writing it seems we have 'weathered the storm' and many of the restrictions we were living with have been lifted.

Hopefully we have turned a corner in the battle against Covid. But whatever the future may hold, you can be assured that the Executive Committee and many branches of the WFA will do their utmost to ensure that members will have plenty of things that will help them to pass the time and enhance their knowledge of all aspects of the Great War. These include webinars, virtual tours, journals and of course, the association website, through which a member can access Pension records, Medal Index Cards and a variety of interesting articles. I will also endeavour to provide readers with material of an Irish interest. With that in mind, can I once again, ask readers who might like to contribute an article, share a photograph or write a letter to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you, as this is *your* journal. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this issue and my sincere thanks to all those who have contributed an article or assisted me in any other way.

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# **Operations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment: 18-25 October 1914**

**John Mason Sneddon**

## **The Regiment.**

The Royal Irish Regiment was raised in 1684 when Charles II authorised the amalgamation of a number of the independent companies of infantry, mostly composed of experienced soldiers with a significant proportion of officers and men having fought on the Continent or served in Cromwell's Parliamentary Armies, that the Crown maintained to garrison various military and other important points within Ireland. During the dynastic and religious struggle between James II and William III this relatively new Regiment, perhaps because it was stationed in England at the time, escaped the more damaging aspects the 'Glorious Revolution' inflicted on the army although it still experienced the successive religious and political purges that saw the loss of many experienced officers and men, first the Protestants under James, and then the Catholics under William, as each new Regime attempted to create an ideologically pure and loyal army.

After this period of uncertainty its future was assured in February 1689 when William III ordered that it be re-equipped and brought up to strength, a process completed in May when the final batch of officers, the majority from the Protestant settlement in Ireland, were appointed by the King. The Regiment became the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the Line, or the 18<sup>th</sup> (Royal Irish) Regiment of Foot, recruiting predominately from the Catholic poor of southern Ireland.



The Officers of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Rifles photographed with Brigadier-General Doran (GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade) at Devonport on 10 August 1914.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next two and a half centuries, the battalion was present at the majority of the significant campaigns conducted by the British Army in America, Europe, Africa, India, China, New Zealand, having gained its reputation as a brave and reliable Regiment early in its history

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/280356-1st-battalion-irish-regt-group-pic-1914-people-of-please/>

during the Siege of Namur (1695). Under the Childers reforms of 1881 it became the Royal Irish Regiment, with its depot at Clonmel and *de facto* the County Regiment of Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford and Kilkenny, its main recruiting ground. In 1914, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was stationed at Devonport and from there on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, they went to war as one of the four battalions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade in General Smith-Dorrien's II Corps.

### **The Loss of the Regiment. The Battle of La Bassée.**

#### **The Strategy.**

We now jump ahead to October 1914. The battalion has survived Mons, the Great Retreat and the Battle of the Aisne, but not without significant casualties, and as the fighting on the Aisne died down the Germans and French put all of their energy into a period of intense fighting comprising of a series of reciprocal battles to envelop the northern flank of the opposing army, the so-called 'Race to the Sea' which, between 17 September and 17 October, pushed the line of trenches from Soissons on the River Aisne almost 150 miles north to the outskirts of the city of Lille, leaving a narrow corridor of French countryside, between Lille and the North Sea coast, where armies could still manoeuvre. With the most recent attempt by the Second French Army to outflank the Germans stalled along the line Vimy-Lille-Lens General Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, created a new army by stripping the Second Army of its left flank Divisions, adding a couple of Territorial Divisions and Conneau's Cavalry Corps and called the conglomeration the Tenth French Army commanded by General Maud'huy. Its objective was to get around the flank of the Germans east of Lille to relieve the pressure on the Second Army and restore mobility to the battlefield. It was to be supported by the BEF, currently in the process of moving north from the Aisne to take up its original position on the left of the French line, and able to absorb the significant reinforcements arriving in northern France; the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division, and the Indian Corps arriving in October, to create a powerful British striking force of ten infantry and four cavalry Divisions with which to assist the French operation.

A conference held on 10<sup>th</sup> October agreed a joint strategy in which the combined armies would attack eastwards to turn the flank of the German *Sixth Army* holding up the French between Vimy and Lille. Haig's First Corps and the 7<sup>th</sup> Division would advance up the Ypres-Menin road to secure the important road and rail junction at Menin; II Corps would advance between La Bassée and Éstaires to come around the north of Lille to prevent that important industrial city falling to the enemy and at the same time cut the lines of communication of the German Divisions holding up the advance of the French Tenth Army; the British III Corps would advance up the valley of the river Lys between I and II Corps, protecting their inner flanks.

The Royal Irish Regiment left the Aisne battlefield on 5 October and, after an overnight train journey, arrived in Flanders to begin their journey towards Bethune to be in position for the start of the Franco-British offensive planned for 11 October. From early morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> they marched until late afternoon when they rested until midnight before marching throughout the night to rendezvous with a fleet of French buses that transported them a further 21 miles before a final march towards the La Bassée canal arriving in the late afternoon of 11 October



and, as the lead battalion of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, they pushed across the canal to secure the bridgehead to spend the night in a sprawling industrial landscape of smoking factories, brick kilns and coal mines reminiscent of Mons.

The following day, having been replaced as vanguard by the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex, the Royal Irish continued their advance through a flat, dreary and featureless landscape of heavy wet soil drained by miles of ditches lining every field before feeding into dykes, most too wide for a heavily burdened soldier to jump, and crossed by a single wet slippery plank from which it was easy to slip. Moving in such countryside was difficult and tiresome and, although practically devoid of cover in the form of hedges and woodland, the landscape was heavily populated with scattered cottages and farm building that a determined enemy could quickly convert into strong points. The only notable feature in this dreary landscape was their goal, a low ridge some 50 to 70 feet high and several miles long that split into two shallow spurs. Near the top of the eastern spur was the village of Aubers and on the western the village of Illes and troops that possessed the high ground, and its villages, would dominate the countryside for miles around and control the road and rail links to the German forces in La Bassée.

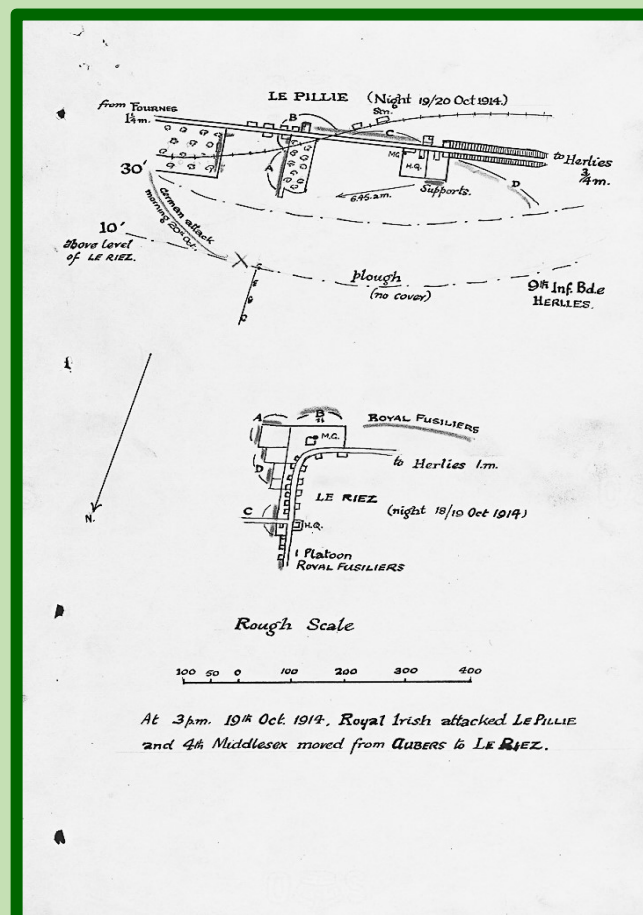
Early in the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup> as the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex moved to secure the bridges over the Lawe Canal near the village of Ville Chapelle the British infantry encountered, for the first time, German rifle and artillery fire, and from this point on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's advanced towards their first objective, the La Bassée – Éstaires road, was resisted by German cavalry and their accompanying Jäger battalions, determined to delay the British advance by fighting a rear-guard action from almost every building and patch of woodland only to melt away as soon as the British infantry stopped to develop an attack. On 15<sup>th</sup> October, the Northumberland Fusiliers and the Royal Scots Fusiliers of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade captured their section of the Éstaires road but the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade was held up some 400 yards short by heavy machine gun and shrapnel fire but, true to form, the enemy withdrew during the night and the advance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division towards Aubers Ridge continued with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade taking over the advance, and the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade going into reserve. The struggle across the flat farmland had cost the Brigade about 35 Officers and 600 other ranks killed, wounded and missing.

**17<sup>th</sup> October.** Still in reserve the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, was ordered to move to Aubers to support to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade attacking Herlies but were not called on and when the rest of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade arrived in the late afternoon it was found that there were insufficient billets for all four battalions, and support units in Aubers so, as the vanguard, the Royal Irish were ordered to go and find billets in the hamlet of Le Plouich, about a ¼ mile from Aubers. This they did, throwing out a picket line to the south and east on rumours of a German presence.

**18<sup>th</sup> October.** The attack of 3<sup>rd</sup> Division across the Aubers Ridge was renewed at 6.30 am resulting in the occupation of the villages of Illes and Herlies that brought them one step closer to dominating the road and rail links supplying Le Bassée. The 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade remained in billets on five minutes warning but as the morning wore on, they received reports of increasing German resistance against the 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> French Cavalry Divisions fighting between the villages of Fromelles and Fournes. At about midday Captain Furnell was ordered to take B Company and

occupy a position between Le Riez and Le Pilly from where he could support the French attack by bringing rifle fire to bear on Fournes but when he reached Le Riez at about 2 pm they found it occupied by what appeared to be a German patrol, which they drove away without much trouble, but when they moved forward towards Le Pilly they found it strongly occupied by the enemy and coming under heavy artillery fire drew back to Le Riez and entrenched on the southern side of the hamlet facing Le Pilly. Captain French with C Company that had been sent up in support also came under artillery fire and entrenched on the eastern side of Le Riez facing Fournes. Just before it was completely dark, at about 7 pm, the Germans launched an infantry attack on B Company which they beat off and at about midnight, given the threat to the two Companies at Le Riez, the remainder of the battalion moved up, A and D Companies filling the gap between B and C. After collecting all the tools they could from the houses and farms within reach, the battalion spent the remainder of the night deepening the ditch that ran between B and C companies into a primitive fire trench.

**19<sup>th</sup> October.** At 4 am digging was stopped and the men issued with rations and after breakfast the battalion took up positions in preparation for an enemy attack, their new fire trench occupied by 'B' and 'D' Companies with a platoon from each placed in support behind a house about 60 yards behind 'B' Company with the machine guns placed on their right behind 'D' Company and the other two companies occupying the various buildings facing Le Pilly.



Positions of the BEF between Le Riez and Le Pilly  
on 18 and 19 October 1914.

The French attack on Fournes had failed on the 18<sup>th</sup> but the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had been assured during the night that it would be renewed the following afternoon.<sup>2</sup> This left the Royal Irish Regiment waiting and at 11 am the battalion reported to 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ in Aubers that the Germans were still in Le Pilly but, as they had not fired at them all morning, they were probably unsure of the Battalion's exact positions and not strong enough to attack them and based upon this assessment it was decided that the Royal Irish would take the village following a bombardment lasting from 12 to 1 pm but, due to a mix up in orders, the artillery bombarded Fournes instead and the infantry attack was called off.

Liaison between the French cavalry preparing to attack Fournes and 3<sup>rd</sup> Division Headquarters was maintained by staff officers riding between the two Headquarters, a process that could take at least half an hour depending upon the intensity of the German shelling and the movements of the French HQ and it appears that after the artillery bombardment of Fournes neither the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, or the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, had up to date information on the status of the French attack but 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade HQ, assuming it must still be happening, insisted that the Royal Irish Regiment clear the Germans out of Le Pilly to give fire support to the French. A new bombardment of Le Pilly was hastily arranged to take place between 2 and 3 pm after which the Royal Irish Regiment would attack.<sup>3</sup> This was co-ordinated by Major E.H.E. Daniels, acting battalion commander, who established his headquarters in a large haystack, (marked Y in Fig. 2), situated in advance of the battalion who had crowded in and around the position occupied by B Company with A and B Companies forming the assault Companies, C in support and D in reserve. For additional support the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade had provided the 15<sup>th</sup> Hussars with their two machine guns working on the left of Le Pilly; rifle and machine gun fire from the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers from their positions in Herlies on the right, and one Section of 18-pounders, Royal Field Artillery, but I cannot find any evidence that these Field guns made it to the battle. The 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex moved into the position vacated by the Royal Irish in Le Riez to act as support while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Scots, acting in reserve, moved out of Aubers to occupy their vacated billets in Le Plouch.

It would appear that most of the hastily organised second bombardment missed the village landing in the fields to its left but this was probably unknown to the infantry preparing to attack. In front of them was almost 1,000 yards of open meadow, much of it recently ploughed or under cultivation and without hedges or any other form of cover and once the bombardment commenced the forward sections of A and B Companies crawled forward into the meadow shortening the distance they would have to cover before reaching the hamlet and at 3 pm, when the bombardment stopped, the men jumped up and, in lines of half Companies, started their assault that immediately drew heavy enemy fire. It had been anticipated that the French

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<sup>2</sup> The French Cavalry took their horses with them when acting as infantry so it would take a whole morning for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division to change positions as it involved both men and horses, allowing the Germans ample time to strengthen their defences in Fournes.

<sup>3</sup> This order is an example of the defective tactics in the coordination between artillery and infantry practiced by the BEF in 1914 and 1915. On the assumption that the bombardment had demoralised or killed the defenders, and to protect our own infantry from friendly fire, the bombardment stopped before the infantry started their attack giving sufficient time for the German machine gunners and riflemen to man their defences.

attack on Fournes would prevent interference from the Germans from the left flank but this did not happen for when B Company approached the right-hand section of Le Pilly they came under very heavy rifle and machine gun fire from the other side of the meadow, the Germans apparently located in the gap between the two small woods just north-east of Le Pilly. Having survived this and reached the village street close to the railway crossing they were then enfiladed by very accurate artillery fire from the direction of Fournes, the very ground that they had been assured was held by the French but they managed to clear their section of the village the German infantry pulling back to a trench between Le Pilly and the Fournes road.

Attacking on the left, A Company drove the enemy back from the two small woods and started to move forward towards Fournes but when they reached the large farmhouse (marked Z in Fig. 2), they became the target of British artillery fire and forced back to take shelter in the woods, the German infantry retiring to a position just beyond the farmhouse, and only about 400 yards south of Le Pilly. At about 4 pm, the battalion received unexpected reinforcements when 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants A.J.R. Anderson (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion) and Brendin (4<sup>th</sup> Battalion) arrived at Le Riez with a draft of 63 reservists who were immediately fed into the battle going forward with the last platoon of D Company; both officers, and about 40 of the men survived the crossing of the deadly ground of the meadow to take up positions behind A Company but the lodgement in Le Pilly had been costly. 2/Lieutenants Ross-Symth and Howard were killed, along with an unknown number of other ranks killed and missing and Captain C. A. French and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Newton-King wounded along with 161 NCOs and men, all of whom were evacuated during the night. At about 4.30 Major Daniell sent one of his cyclist messengers to 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ in Aubers to report that he was in the village and was ordered to prepare to hold it for the night.

By the time the light was fading, about 6 pm, the battalion held the village from the level crossing of the light railway to the other end of the village street with both flanks thrown back in the following order, right to left. D Company faced Herlies, its riflemen stretched out in shallow rifle pits scratched with entrenching tools in the recently ploughed ground; C Company held the railway buildings at the level crossing and about half the length of the village street, their section containing Major Daniell's HQ and the machine gun section concealed in the loft of one of the houses that allowed it to sweep the fields and buildings along the front of the village. (Fig 2). B Company held the remainder of the street, with A Company bent back at right angles to B and partially concealed among the trees of the two small woods. As the Regiment did not hold the farmhouses, or any of the other buildings in the fields close to the village, all of the positions they occupied were exposed to sniper and machine gun fire from these buildings and, just before the light finally faded, they were given a taste of what was to come next morning with a short period of very accurate artillery fire from the direction of Fournes.

With darkness, enemy fire practically ceased and once free of their attention the battalion got to work strengthening their defences, the Royal Engineers, who had accompanied the attack, striped the wire from all the field boundaries within reach and erected a thin line of entanglements about 20 yards in front of the positions held by A company. Ammunition was going to be a problem as the battalion ammunition carts had remained at Le Plouich so men were sent out to search the field in front of the village collecting ammunition from the dead



and wounded. At about 9 pm Lieutenant Laing, took his machine gun limbers up to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade barricade at the entrance to Herlies to meet two of the battalion supply waggons that had made their way from Aubers where he loaded all the supplies he could carry, along with sixteen boxes of ammunition from the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. He had intended to take the limbers back to the barrier for a second load but an observant German artillery spotting officer had noticed the activity at the barricade and, as the German shells started rain down among the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers guarding the barricade, they insisted, in an effort to stop the shelling, that the waggons the return to Aubers.

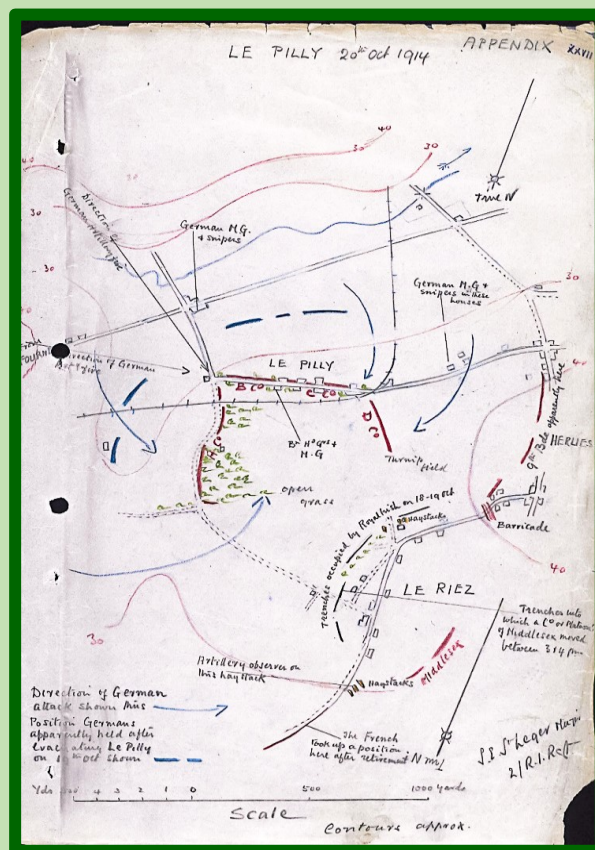
The volume of enemy artillery fire from the direction of Fournes experienced as darkness was falling made it clear to the infantry in Le Pilly that the French cavalry had not yet captured Fournes exposing their flank to the enemy and realising the precariousness of his position Major Daniell sent a message to 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ urgently requesting assistance in the morning.

**20<sup>th</sup> October.** With hindsight, we now know that there was no valid military reason to leave the decimated 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment at Le Pilly during the night of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> October. The justification was that they were there to support the French in their capture of Fournes but that was not going to happen. The French cavalrymen, inappropriately armed with a carbine rather than a rifle, and without adequate artillery support had already failed twice and in the morning would be driven back on Fromelles separating them further from the BEF. Perhaps it was continuing optimism on the part of the British High Command that they could hold, or even defeat, the German advance when in fact they were facing the overwhelming force assembled by von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, to destroy the French and British in northern France and gain the Channel ports. The fact remains that the Royal Irish Regiment could have withdrawn during the night for they were not quite surrounded retaining contact with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade in Herlies from where Lieutenant Laing and his limbers appear to have journeyed, and returned without interference from the enemy and was exchanging messages with the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex at Le Riez and 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ in Aubers as well as evacuating their wounded from the day's attack on the village.

Nevertheless, as historians, we do have a problem recreating the factors that may have given rise to the decision to leave the Royal Irish Regiment where they were. Many 1914 War Diaries, even up to Divisional level, were written up retrospectively by officers not present at the events described and based on scanty information gleaned from survivors and the War Diary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, is typical in this respect. It is not written on Army Form C.2118 and the account of Le Pilly, appearing in the diary for October 1914, is full of retrospective information collected from interviews conducted in 1915 and even 1917, and as it lacks the important appendices of messages and orders it is difficult to confirm much of the detail from other sources such as the brigade or divisional diaries although there is ample evidence that during the night of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup>, Major Daniell was in frequent contact with 8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ in Aubers with one message copied to 3<sup>rd</sup> Division just after midnight making it clear that he spelt out the challenges facing his men if they were to fight in the morning:

*O.C. Royal Irish reports that he is not in possession of the whole village of Le Pilly but another two hundred yards will take him to the N.E. end of it. At present*

he considers that unless the French take Fournes before morning his best position is to stay where he is for his left has a good line through an avenue of trees up to the railway cutting and his right is doubled back to within a few hundred yards of Herlies. He asks that ninth brigade be ordered to fill towards him by taking troops now doubled back on their left flank. Can this be arranged tonight. He further considers that he will require considerable help in the morning along the Illes-Fournes road and the woody country around Fournes itself. He is enfiladed and taken in reverse on his left and along his front. It is essential to render Fournes and the ground between it and Le Pilly untenable to the Germans. I therefore suggest that RA officer should be well forward with a telephone at an early hour and in direct telephone communication be established between CRA and Le Pilly.<sup>4</sup> An early French attack on Fournes would secure the position.



The pattern of the German attack at Le Pilly.

Apparently, 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ requested the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers of 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade to advance, probably no more than 100 to 200 yards to their left, in order to link up the end of D Company with the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex in Le Riez but this was refused the Fusiliers stating they were too weak in numbers to lengthen their line leaving a gap that was to be fatal to the survival of the battalion next day. To protect his left flank Major Daniell had sent Captain Harrison to Le Riez to ask Colonel Hull of the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex if he could advance to fill the gap between the battalion in Le Pilly and the French somewhere to their left but Colonel Hull also said he did not have enough men to occupy

<sup>4</sup> CRA = Commander Royal Artillery.

that distance but promised he would do what he could in the morning to support the Royal Irish with rifle and machine gun fire from his present positions. Major Daniell seems to have been satisfied with this arrangement.

Dawn on the 20<sup>th</sup> brought with it the opening stages of a massive German offensive directed at all of the positions held by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. At Herles the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade were subject to an intense bombardment throughout the day interspersed by infantry attacks. Captain Gordon, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers recorded:

*A hard day-incessant shelling and repeated infantry attacks that we drove off with great loss to the enemy. Herlies a 'hell on earth'. Practically every house destroyed – had 3 down about my head. Church ruined. My Company suffers heavily but does well*

The bombardment added to the isolation of the Royal Irish Regiment for the shelling of Le Riez was so intense that the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex had to pull back to a new position about 400 yards north-west of the village making it impossible to support the Royal Irish and then, at about 10 am, the forward artillery spotting officers on top of a haystack close to the Middlesex line reported that the French were being driven from the area around Fournes opening up the whole of the ground to the left of Le Pilly, not covered by the battalion's machine gun, to German infantry attack.

This had started soon after dawn with the German infantry infiltrating men into the gap between D Company and the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Herlies, a movement that would have been prevented if the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers filled the gap as requested the night before, and it was soon apparent that this was part of a two-pronged attack. A similar outflanking movement, taking advantage of the French withdrawal from around Fournes, was working round the flank of A Company concealed in their wood, a manoeuvre spotted by Lieutenant Tandy, holding the end of A Company's line, who sent a messenger to Major Daniell at 6.45 am to report that he was being outflanked by the enemy moving through the bottom of the wood and required support. The only supports available were 2/Lieutenant Brendin and 36 of the draft he had brought up the previous afternoon and, as they were totally unfamiliar with the situation, Major Daniell sent Captain Harrison, his Acting Adjutant, to direct them to their new position. Harrison suggested that they could prevent A Company from being outflanked by occupying a ditch that ran at right angles to their line but Major Daniell disagreed and said he wanted them further forward right along the edge of the tree line which would have given them a clear line of fire to stop more of the enemy crossing the surrounding fields.

When Harrison arrived at A Company, he crawled forward through the wood to establish the position suggested by Major Daniell but as he reached the edge of the wood, he found the German platoon had worked their way round the end of A company much further than he expected making it impossible to entrench according to Major Daniell's instruction with the enemy digging in on a position less than 100 yards away. As he turned away, he was spotted and came under a hail of rifle and machine gun fire and was wounded in the arm but managed to regain A Company's position and ordered some of his reinforcements to occupy the ditch he

had originally favoured and the remainder to strengthen Lieutenant Tandy's position now under intense enemy infantry fire. By 7.30 am the German fire slackened slightly as the focus of the attack moved to D Company on the right of the village and Captain Harrison, taking advantage of the slight lulls, started back to Major Daniell to report but again his movement was spotted, this time by an enemy sniper who wounded him again, this time on the hip, although he still managed to crawl back to HQ to report before collapsing and removed to a cellar that served as a makeshift hospital. Harrison became a prisoner of war and in his brief post-war account reported that Major Daniell came to see him about midday and told him the battalion was holding its own and he had sent for reinforcements that were expected to arrive at any moment.

In the early afternoon, Lieutenant Laing was brought down into the cellar suffering from severe concussion, the Germans having identified his machine gun positions in the loft and destroyed the house with their first high explosive shell. Throughout the morning they had been busy preventing the German infantry occupying the buildings in front of the village but with their destruction the remaining riflemen of C and D Companies had insufficient firepower to prevent machine guns and snipers occupying these scattered houses and farm buildings which now brought the village under attack from the front and both flanks leaving a precarious journey over the large field swept by enemy's fire to reach the forward positions held by the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex at Le Riez.

At about 3 pm, concerned about this route becoming closed off leaving the battalion surrounded, Major Daniell ordered Sergeant Thornton to make his way to the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex to report how hard pressed they were and ask for any assistance they could give. Thornton found the Middlesex under heavy artillery fire and expecting an infantry attack at any moment but to his credit Colonel Hull ordered a platoon back into Le Riez to re-occupy the trenches dug by the Royal Irish and provide what support they could with rifle fire but unfortunately this was insufficient to stop the enemy infantry that were working their way around A and D Companies from joining up and completely surrounding the remaining Royal Irish. This move by the German infantry around the positions held by D Company was greatly facilitated by the lack of action on the part of the Royal Fusiliers which, although in a better position than the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex to provide support seemed to have remained cowering in their trenches all day taking cover from enemy artillery.<sup>5</sup>

At about 4.30 in the afternoon the volume of infantry fire in and around Le Pilly increased dramatically and a few minutes later the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex's platoon holding the forward trench at Le Riez were almost swept away by about 20 demoralised men of the Royal Irish Regiment, some without their weapons, shouting that the battalion had been cut up and the Germans were coming. When these men had moved back into the village the Middlesex sent out a small patrol towards Le Pilly to see what was happening but it met such intense rifle fire from the north-east corner of the village that they had to withdraw back to their ditch to be followed by

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<sup>5</sup> It is normally considered to be verging on treason to criticise the original battalions of the BEF but there are grounds for asking if the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers were artillery shy for a few days later, in the defence of Neuve Chapelle, they left their trenches under enemy artillery fire exposing the flank of the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers to intense infantry attacks that almost decimated the battalion.



a large body of German infantry who dug themselves in across the field between Le Riez and Le Pilly cutting off any further attempts by British infantry to reach the village. Later, in the darkness, the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex sent out scouts but they failed to get through to Le Pilly and no more men of the Royal Irish Regiment made their way back to the Middlesex position.



The German Infantry Penetrate Le Pilly. Drawing by Max Weinberg, 1914

The destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, was carried out by the 56<sup>th</sup> Active Infantry Regiment, 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the German VII Army Corps. The 56<sup>th</sup> Active Infantry Regiment was part of the pre-war standing army so a large proportion of officers and men were professionals, not reservists that formed the bulk of the German troops fighting in northern France in late 1914.<sup>6</sup> We have a brief account of the attack on Le Pilly by Lieutenant Martens, Commander 6<sup>th</sup> Company, 56<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, who was captured at Arques on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1915. His report is a mixture of pride in what his battalion achieved and a wish to please his captors by honouring the Irish:

*Account of the Action at Le Pilly by Lieutenant Martens, Commanding 6<sup>th</sup> Company, 56<sup>th</sup> Active Regiment, German Army (now a prisoner of war) stated at Arques on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1915, to an officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Royal Irish Regiment.*

*On the 26<sup>th</sup> October, last, I commanded the 6<sup>th</sup> Company 56<sup>th</sup> Active Infantry. On that day it was ordered that the 6<sup>th</sup> Army (German) would advance against the British Army - we had been retiring for some days.*

*Early on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> we were informed that an Irish infantry battalion was located near Le Pilly, and well in advance of their own line. Owing to its isolated position it was decided that my battalion in conjunction with the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment should surround and cut it off.*

*Our batteries at Fournes ranged on the Irish entrenchments early in the morning; distance of about 2000 yards, and the following Companies of*

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<sup>6</sup> The BEF fought as battalions of about 1,000 men. The Imperial German Army fought as Regiments each of four battalions with supporting arms, such as engineers and artillery added as required. The easiest way to look at it is that a German Regiment is equivalent to a British Infantry Brigade so at Le Pilly the Germans could call on about 4,500 infantry plus 8 machine guns plus artillery against the 800 or so of the Royal Irish Rifles with 1 machine gun and no artillery.



*my Regiment - 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> went forward with object of surrounding the British battalion. My company was ordered to support them from the Le Riez direction. We expected opposition from the French, but to our surprise and satisfaction they had retired during the night.*

*The 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> companies made as simultaneous movement in early morning; one company in a south-westerly direction and two in a north-westerly; the artillery at Fournes had got the range of the trenches and practically poured shrapnel on them-doing fearful execution. The Irish Regiment was in a hopeless predicament, there seemed no escape except they surrendered, and it was exceedingly foolish that they did not. We also got our snipers and machine guns into all the surrounding houses and if any of your men attempted to show themselves, they were at once shot down. Your machine gun was in action in a house for a considerable time before we could locate it, but when we did the first shell demolished the building and put it out of action and must have killed all of your gunners.*

*Our artillery continued to fire on your men and enfiladed their main trench throughout the day until we had all you surrounded; and then we opened a heavy fire on your rear and flanks. The British regiment was in a bad way, indeed, as you had no protection whatsoever against our rifle fire.*

*About 3.30 or 4 pm our three companies attacked your positions from front and rear and our advance was covered by the snipers and machine guns from the houses. We eventually closed with your regiment, but the losses had been appalling - about 500 killed. We took 302 prisoners but the majority were wounded, some very seriously, barely 100 could walk. I saw a good-looking senior officer, with aquiline nose, fairish moustache, sitting in a trench - dead.*

*My regiment has Major Daniell's pocket-book and diary in their possession.*

**Aftermath.** No longer strong enough to serve in the firing line the survivors of the Royal Irish Regiment were ordered to turn-in all their war-like stores and were withdrawn from combat on 24 October to proceed to St Omer to act as Army Troops performing duties at Sir John French's Headquarters. Their strength was 131 men but the state of their clothes and equipment was so bad it was impossible for them to take up their new duties and from the 26<sup>th</sup> October to 14<sup>th</sup> November they were refitted and the NCOs and men trained in their new ceremonial guard duties. Their first formal duty was a Guard of Honour for the body of Field Marshall Lord Roberts on 15 November and on the 30<sup>th</sup> acted as Guard of Honour to the King. Similar duties and training occupied their time until the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1915 when the reconstituted 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, went back to the war joining the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Division, at Le Bizet, about a mile north of Armentières.

**Casualties.** The total number of casualties, and the names of all the individuals killed at Le Pilly on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> October, will probably never be known with certainty. For example, the draft that arrived in the afternoon of the 19<sup>th</sup> would not have been entered on the muster role

in the middle of a battle and being strangers to most of the men around them their deaths would go unreported by the survivors. At roll call on the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, before the initial attack on Le Pilly, the battalion strength was 20 officers (including the doctor and chaplain) and 821 other ranks. At 9 am on 21 October there was one officer, Lieutenant E. M. Phillips, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Transport Officer and 135 other ranks. Of these we do not know how many may have survived Le Pilly although one was Sergeant Thornton, who could not rejoin the



Memorial to the dead of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Regiment at Le Pilly, France. Erected by the citizens in 2014.

battalion after delivering his message to the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex, and the 20 or so who made it back to the Middlesex trenches most of whom appear, for one reason or another, to have been outside Le Pilly at the time of the final German assault for Major St Leger states that only four men escaped from Le Pilly.

Almost all of the dead have no known grave with 191 names recorded as being killed in action between the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> October on the Le Touret Memorial to the Missing but that is not the whole story. There are many in Ireland, and across the world, very knowledgeable the Battalion's casualties but for those who are not, or perhaps just interested in a single soldier I recommend looking through the discussion on the Great War Forum (Start your search with Le Pilly or Royal Irish Rifles).

Of interest to us in our story are two lieutenants of the Royal Irish Regiment who were buried on or about the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1914 in the Fournes German Cemetery, to be subsequently re-interred as unknown lieutenants of the Royal Irish Regiment in Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery. These is strong evidence that these bodies are the remains of Lieutenants Laing and Tandy killed at Le Pilly. (<https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/273804-lts-david-laing-archdale-tandy-20-october-1914/#comment-278454>).<sup>7</sup>

### Some Reflections.

**The nature of the defences at Le Pilly.** We have no details of the defences but we can make some educated guesses. The village was captured in an infantry attack and although a small party of Royal Engineers went in with the infantry to help construct defences once the village was captured, they would not have any tools, particularly shovels and pickaxes for digging deep

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<sup>7</sup> There is also a Facebook group devoted to the history of the Regiment. (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/963675410382519/> )

trenches. D Company, on the right facing Herlies, were lying in a field of sugar beet and the best they could do would be shallow scrapes or foxholes that would not provide any protection from shrapnel and if the soldier lifted his head off the ground to aim his rifle that was probably a death sentence if spotted by a German marksman.

One of the four survivors from Le Pilly told Major St Leger that all the dead he saw had been shot through the head, an indication of both of the skill of German snipers and the inadequacy of the protection available. On the left of the battalion, A Company in the woods would have had similar shallow cover made all the more difficult to dig through the roots of the trees and undergrowth while the troops along the road would have had the cover of the houses and foxholes dug in the gardens. None of the individual positions would have been joined up to form a trench and with the men separated fire control and identification of targets was difficult with platoon officers and NCOs having to move up and down their line of foxholes to issue instructions, an activity that could result in very high casualties.

When it came to the end trying to negotiate surrender in the midst of an infantry fire-fight took a great deal of courage, as well as luck and it is unlikely that the survivors of the battalion managed it all in one go for their defence line was quite spread out and it would have been isolated groups of men surrendering, totally unaware what was happening elsewhere. There is no evidence to suggest that the regiment ran out of ammunition suggesting that the survivors surrendered because their casualties were so high that they were no longer capable of organising a coherent defence against the overwhelming numbers of their enemy swarming through the village.

**The French.** It is quite fashionable to blame the French for the disaster at Le Pilly but there were as much the victims of an overwhelming German offensive as anyone else. The French troops attempting to capture Fournes were dismounted cavalry, not infantry, and poorly trained and armed to act as infantry. Although the French Tenth Army and the British II Corps were supposed to be working together there was no meaningful co-ordination, no overall commander coordinating the efforts of a combined allied forces but rather two national armies acting independently under their own commanders but attempting to keep one another informed of what they were doing by liaison officers riding back and forward between units, who frequently became casualties or failed to find the particular officer in the opposite army to whom they were supposed to report.

One of the reasons the Royal Irish were not withdrawn from Le Pilly is that 3<sup>rd</sup> Division HQ did not know that the French felt that they no longer had the resources to capture Fournes and had in fact issued instructions for the offensive to continue next morning.<sup>8</sup> There was no telephone communication between the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and the Royal Irish with messages carried by bicycle messenger travelling along lanes and roads with which he was totally unfamiliar and, in such a confused battlefield, likely to run into the odd German.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to remember in any discussion that the Germans had been, for several days, retreating in front of II Corps, albeit slowly to allow time for the final assembly of the Sixth Army.

# **Erskine Childers and the Cuxhaven Raid**

## **Christmas Day 1914**

**Dr Trevor Adams**

Perhaps one of the more obscure chapters in the life of Robert Erskine Childers was his involvement in the early war North Sea operations, in the present case his taking part in the raid on Cuxhaven on Christmas Day 1914. If ever the expression the 'fog of war' could be applied to an operation, this was it, as we shall see.

Although Childers is often thought of today as being an arch Irish Republican, which indeed was one side of his character, he was also a child of Imperial Britain. He had been to a prestigious public school, Haileybury, and to Cambridge University. He served in the British army in the Boer War with the Honourable Artillery Company (HAC), a reserve unit which is so posh that one can only join by invitation. So, it was little surprise that he returned to the colours, albeit naval ones, in August 1914, in spite of having been engaged in gun running into Ireland for the Irish Volunteers, just a few weeks earlier.

The Cuxhaven raid was a forgotten minor chapter of WWI that was only resurrected in the aftermath of WWII when historians and strategists were examining the seaborne air attacks of WWII such as Midway, Coral Sea, Pearl Harbour and Taranto<sup>2</sup>. It was only in the post-WWII analysis that the significance of the Cuxhaven Raid was recognised, as being the first seaborne air attack in military history, and also undoubtedly the least successful. Although it is called the 'Cuxhaven' raid, in fact its roots lie in the paranoia existing in the United Kingdom (then including Ireland of course) on the threat of aerial attack by so-called Zeppelins. The aim was to attack the airbase that was known to exist to the south of Cuxhaven but without precise information as to its location. In other words, the level of planning of the raid was inept.

In fact, the airship base was at Nordholz, some eight miles (14km) south of Cuxhaven and inland, not on the coast. Today, it is still an operational airfield for the German air force coastal operations, and the site of a wonderful museum on both the era of the airship and more recent aviation history. Indeed, the visitor will find that the term used there is 'airship', as Zeppelins were built at the works in the South of Germany on Lake Constance, on the Swiss border. The northern German airship was the Schütte-Lanz which used a plywood framework, not the high-tech alloy of the Zeppelin, but had many technological advantages over the Zeppelin. It is a bit like referring to all vacuum cleaners as Hoovers.

### **Churchill's ideas for North Sea warfare in 1914-1915**

Winston Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty before and in the early part of WWI. One of his obsessions was German airships – 'Zeppelins'. They could do long distance reconnaissance and carry a bomb load, both of which were tasks that were beyond the ability of aircraft in 1914. Indeed, there was widespread paranoia about Zeppelins, and their supposed abilities, in general. In fact, the Germans only had about eight military airships at the outbreak of the war.

As part of the offensives against Zeppelins, the RNAS had carried out an ineffective bombing raid from Belfort in Eastern France on the Zeppelin works at Friedrichshafen on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1914, which involved infringing Swiss airspace. (RNAS was the Royal Naval Air Service, or, in navy slang, Really Not A Sailor). In fact, the Zeppelin works still exists in Friedrichshafen today, making much smaller airships. There is also a wonderful Zeppelin museum there, on the shores of Lake Constance.

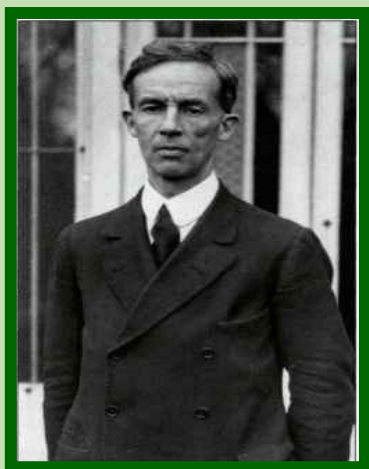
In the period in the lead up to, and just after, the outbreak of hostilities, Churchill had suggested various hare-brained attacks in the North Sea. He had ordered studies of possible landings by the Royal Navy on the Dutch, German, Danish and Scandinavian coastlines<sup>2</sup>. You will note that this involves the invasion of neutral countries. Of the German possibilities, the islands of Helgoland and Borkum were the two being heavily pushed by Churchill in late 1914 and early 1915. However, the greater problem would have been trying to hold enemy territory against what would surely have been massive counter attacks.

In the end, planning the Dardanelles naval attacks and the Gallipoli campaign took over the attention of Churchill and the War Cabinet<sup>2</sup>.

So, the raid on the airship base at Cuxhaven was thought up as being a way to forestall Zeppelin attacks on the UK, or indeed Entente forces on the Western Front, without committing ground forces. It was spurred on by the German navy attacking Hartlepool, Whitby and Scarborough on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1914. There was felt to be a need to 'do something'.

### **Erskine Childers' recruitment**

On the outbreak of WWI, Churchill needed people who knew the Dutch and German coastline intimately. He asked Sir Henry Oliver, the Director of Naval Intelligence to find someone appropriate. Oliver failed in his attempt to recruit Gordon Shephard, as he had already left for service in the RFC in France, as of course part of the BEF. Oliver's staff then tried to trace Erskine Childers – but why him? The answer lies in Childers' sailing exploits.



**Robert Erskine Childers.**

Erskine and his brother Henry started sailing seriously when they bought a cutter, *The Shulah*, in 1893. Various localised sailing adventures with that and its successor *Mad Agnes* followed. In October 1897, he set off in another yacht, *The Vixen*, intending to pick up his brother and a friend at Boulogne and head West. However, the weather was not promising, so they headed East to the Friesian Islands on a journey which would be the inspiration for his only novel, *The Riddle of the Sands*. In 1905, he took delivery of *The Askard*, a wedding present from his father-in-law, Hamilton Osgood. Erskine and Molly Childers sailed *The Askard* to the Baltic in 1906 and 1913 (and elsewhere in between but the sailing records are patchy at best).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the little channels of the Friesian islands and the Baltic archipelagos provide a wonderful sailing experience for the yachtsman. By August



1914, Childers had a detailed knowledge of the Dutch and German coastlines. That was his value to the Royal Navy.

So, Oliver's staff sent out telegrams to trace Childers, one even being sent to the headquarters of the Irish Volunteers in Dublin! In early August, Erskine Childers reported to the Admiralty<sup>4</sup> to be interviewed by his old friend Captain Herbert Richmond, Assistant Director of Naval Operations. He emerged a few hours later as a Lieutenant in the RNVR (Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve), never having previously having had anything to do with the Royal Navy. The upper class 'old school tie' system was alive and well. (If you are not up to speed on naval ranks, a RN Lieutenant is equivalent to a captain in the army).



**The flat expanse of the Wattenmeer at Cuxhaven, with the bundles of twigs to mark the walking route out to the island of Neuwerk.**

### **Geography of the German coast**

Cuxhaven is a harbour town at the mouth the River Elbe, which leads up to the port of Hamburg, and guards the access to Hamburg. The island of Helgoland lies some way off the coast. Both were naval bases in 1914, although Wilhelmshaven was the major base on this stretch of coast. The coast is flat with extensive mudflats, called Watt in German, hence the name of the area of sea as the Wattenmeer – 'the sea of mudflats'. Just off Cuxhaven is the island of Neuwerk, some 12 km out, which can easily be reached on foot at low tide. Indeed, it is possible to walk out for 20km. So, if you can walk out that far, the sea is so shallow that it is impossible to bring large naval vessels close in, save for the defined shipping channels which back in the day would also have been well defended. That coupled with the flat, featureless coastline and the flat

trajectory of high velocity shells from naval heavy guns would have rendered an effective coastal bombardment very difficult.

### **Erskine Childers' naval service**

Following his being recruited by Captain Oliver in early August, Childers was immediately given a small office in the Admiralty and asked to draft a plan for the invasion of the German island of Borkum, which he duly did, on his own, in three days<sup>4</sup>. The plan was quietly stifled by the War Office and senior figures in the navy who regarded the idea as idiotic and amateur. Considering that the Admiralty had given the task to an amateur who knew nothing about offensive seaborne operations, this is hardly surprising. It was another one of Churchill's schemes which was quietly mothballed, never to see the light of day.

On 18<sup>th</sup> August 1914, Erskine Childers reported to the naval air base at Felixstowe, on the East coast. Two days later, he was attached to *HMS Engadine*, at the rather advanced age of 44. He was referred to as 'uncle' by his fellow crew members. His primary function was to teach navigation to pilots and observers, using both charts and the stars. He also volunteered to be the ship's intelligence officer.

This ship was literally an aircraft carrier, i.e. it carried aircraft, but at this stage in naval aviation the planes were seaplanes which had to be lowered on to the sea for take-off and then recovered from the sea, when they hopefully returned from their mission. It had been converted from a cross-channel ferry, in a process taking all of a week.

Childers is recorded as having been rescued along with his pilot when they had to land their seaplane off Hartlepool in late September. So, he was obviously involved in flying at an early stage of his naval career.

### **The Cuxhaven Raid**

The officer in charge of the raid was Squadron Commander Cecil Malone. Of Childers input, he said:

*The valuable assistance rendered by Lieutenant Erskine Childers RNVR, whose knowledge and experience connected with the navigation of the German coast proved invaluable in instructing the pilots.*

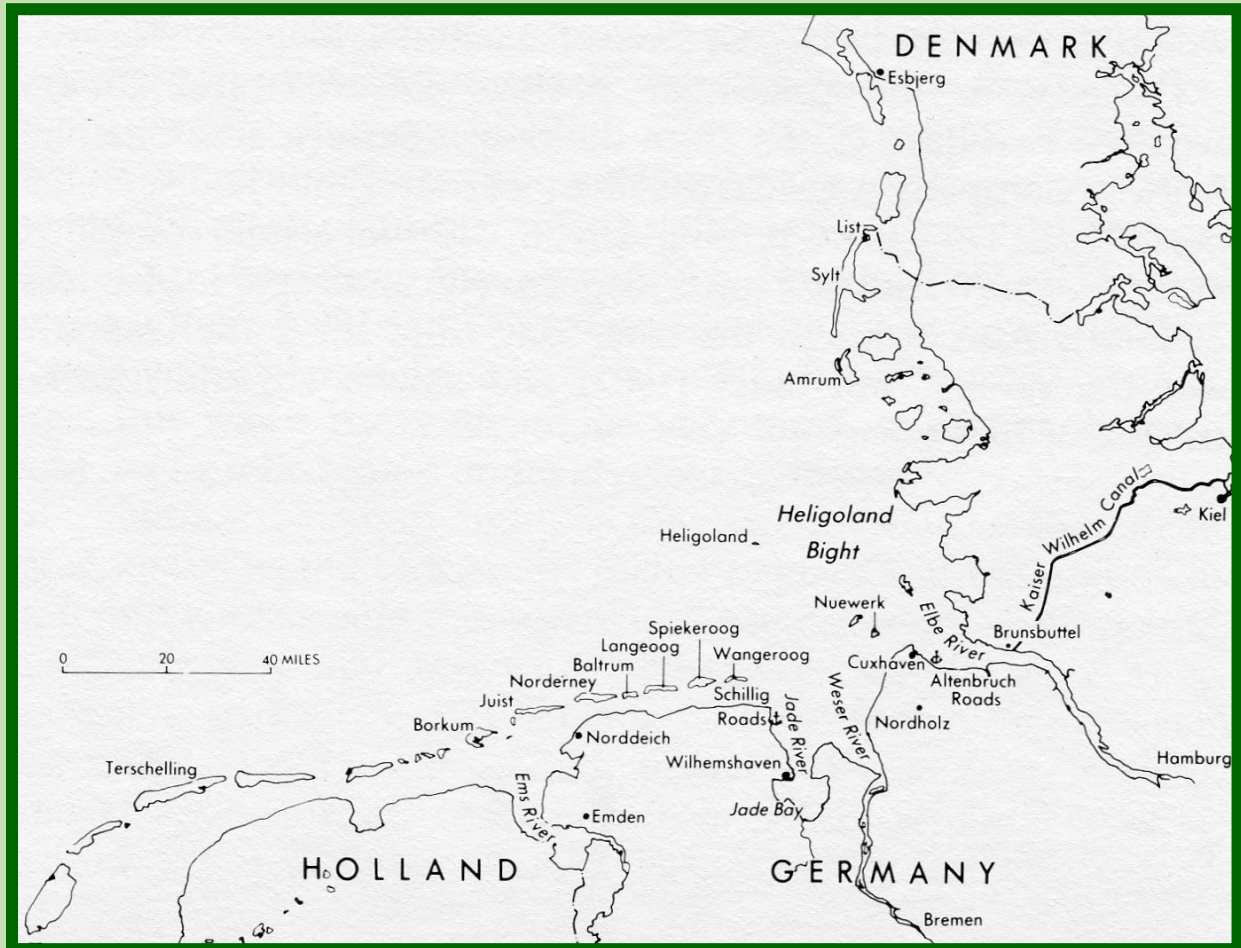
And he referred to:

*The energy expended by him in preparing charts and collecting topographical data.*

Whilst one of Childers' biographers has suggested that he acted as chief observer in the air and in effect, lead a close formation of aircraft, this is not what happened in 1914. Instead, the aircraft made their own way. There were up to 150 ships involved in various roles, all to facilitate the delivery of just 81.5 lbs (39kgs) of explosives (though in fact only a fraction of that was dropped in anger by the aircraft). The plan was to launch the planes from a point north-east of the island of Helgoland and fly south west, to make a landfall in the Cuxhaven area. They were then to 'seek out' the airship base. On their way back, they were to carry out reconnaissance missions, which were to find out whether:

- the Elbe lightships were still in place

- there was a channel through the minefield at the mouth of River Jade and, if so, whether there were buoys visible
- the exact anchorages of ships in Schillig Roads (near Wilhelmshaven) could be identified
- the number and types of ships in Wilhelmshaven harbour could be identified
- the location of the boom guarding Schillig Roads could be seen, and
- there were suitable targets in Schillig Roads for the British warships to fire at.



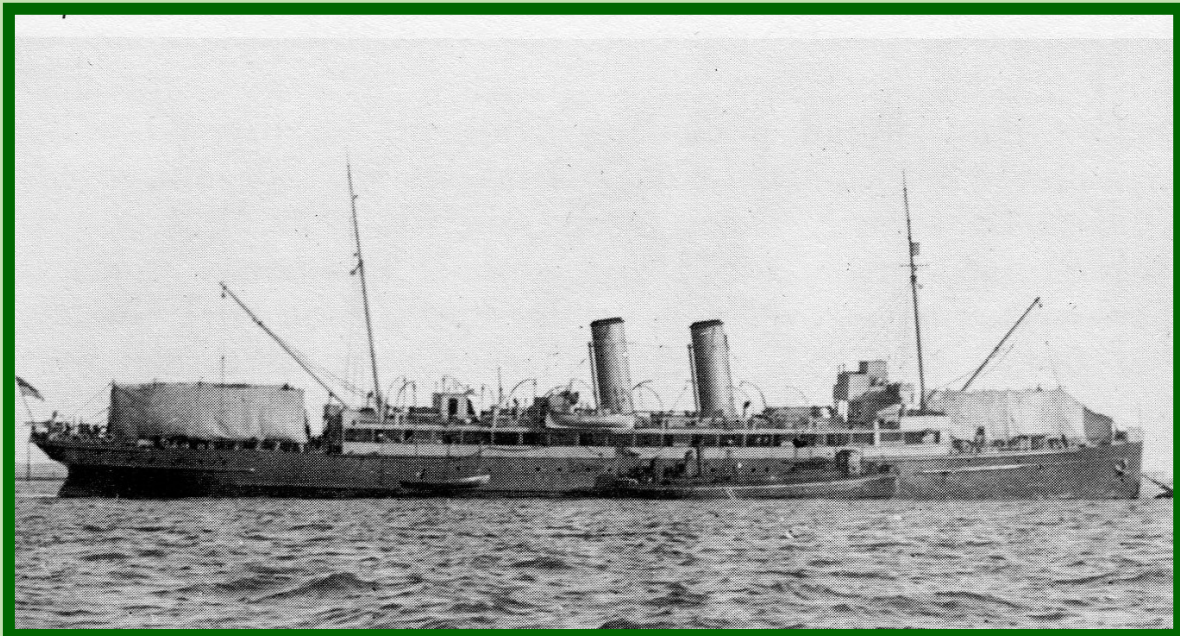
**The north German coast and German (East) Friesian islands, showing geographical points of importance to the Cuxhaven Raid including main High Seas Fleet Anchorages at Schillig Roads and Altenbruch Roads.  
Map by Bruce Krefting**

After the attack on the airship base and the reconnaissance, the planes were to fly westward, and follow the Friesian Islands as far as Norderney. They were then to turn north between Norderney and Juist to a point 20 miles north of Norderney where the carriers were to be waiting. Aircraft of this period did not carry radios. As well as surface ships, submarines were deployed to the area to act as rescue vessels for planes which had to land without finding their mother ship.

This was all happening on virtually the shortest day of the year on a foggy North Sea coast in the middle of the winter. On 25<sup>th</sup> December 1914, there was indeed fog along the coast. This led to uncertain navigation by the aircrews, and ultimately uncertainty about where they had been and what had happened. Consequently, the bombing missions, such as they were, had



no success. From the German records, two veterans who had been stationed at the airship base at Nordholz at the time recall a British plane appearing out of the mist and it dropping two bombs which missed the hydrogen gasometer by 100m or more<sup>1</sup>. The anti-aircraft batteries fired at it vigorously. (This, incidentally, was the only occasion that bombs were dropped on or near Nordholz during the whole war). However, none of the British crews believed that they either had found the airship base or bombed it, however inaccurately.



**HMS Riviera, one of the three seaplane carriers of the Cuxhaven Raid, as she appeared in the early war rig with canvas aircraft shelters fore and aft. Engadine was nearly identical in appearance, and Empress very similar. Remodelling in 1915 replaced the canvas screens with a large aft hangar.**  
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

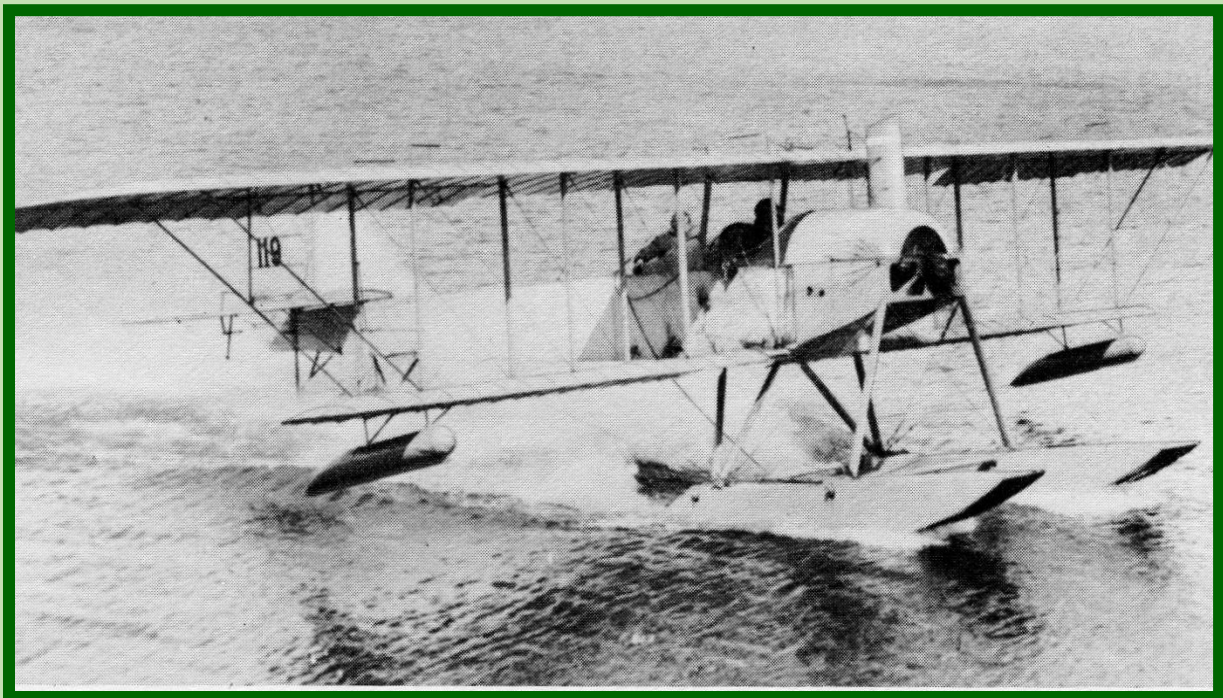


**What the aircrews didn't see – the Drehhalle (rotating hanger) at Nordholz, which could turn through 360°, to mitigate the effects of crosswinds when moving the airships in or out. This was to avoid hitting the fragile airship on the hanger doors. A complete rotation took an hour.**



So, who was the phantom pilot? Well, Gaskell Blackburn reported that he had dropped two bombs on ships in Wilhelmshaven harbour, and had been heavily fired at by anti-aircraft batteries. However, the Wilhelmshaven archives do not record any bombs falling on the harbour or the town on 25<sup>th</sup> December. Furthermore, there were no anti-aircraft batteries in the harbour or the town<sup>1</sup>. So, Blackburn's plane seems to be the most likely candidate for the 'phantom' attacker. If so, he was the only pilot to find the Nordholz airship base, even if he never realised it!

Flight Lieutenant Charles Edmonds was the only flier to undoubtedly bomb German warships. He dropped two bombs on the light cruisers *Stralsund* and *Graudenz* in the River Weser. The German records state that one was wildly inaccurate and the other was 200 meters away off the *Graudenz* beam, putting up a 10-meter column of water. Edmonds later carried out the world's first torpedo attack from a plane, in 1915, and ultimately became an air vice marshal in the RAF<sup>3</sup>.



**Short Folder No. 119, one of the three aircraft of its type embarked on HMS Engadine for the Cuxhaven Raid and flown by Robert P. Ross.  
Courtesy of the Fleet Air Arm Museum.**

Another 'first' for the Cuxhaven raid was an attack on a warship from the air. Edmonds certainly did so, but in addition the German airship L5 which was 20 sea miles north of Nordeney attacked the Royal Navy. It spotted a British submarine rescuing the crews of three planes. The submarine then dived. A number of RN surface ships were spotted going to recover the aircraft floating on the sea. To hinder this, L5 dropped two bombs without hitting the submarine or the surface ships.



Childers was the observer for Flight Commander Cecil Kilner in Short seaplane number 136. (Not all the planes carried observers, not least to save weight). In their joint report, they state that they reached the coast at 8.17am at an altitude of 1000 feet (330 meters). They encountered fog and had to drop to 200-300 feet (70-100 meters) in order to see the ground, as that is how they navigated.

‘The fields were under hoar frost and the atmosphere was dull and dark’.

‘Shortly after crossing the coastline, the engine began to misfire, possibly due to the extreme moisture of the atmosphere or to over lubrication.’

This problem continued for rest of their flight, dropping the revs from 1300 to 800 at times. They believed that the airship base was ‘a few miles’ to the east of the village of Cappsiel. They located a village that they believed to be Cappsiel, and then searched east and south of it, without success<sup>3</sup>. The task was abandoned as the engine continued to misfire, and they reached the coast near the River Jade. They headed west-north-west to Schillig Roads. They were heavily fired at but Childers managed to identify various warships, albeit the seven battleships he reported as dreadnought classes *Deutschland* and *Braunschweig* were in fact pre-dreadnoughts, as the dreadnoughts in question were at Brunsbüttel at the time. Their report states that they did not drop any bombs on these vessels ‘as a hit did not seem practicable’. They flew to the island of Wangeroog to attack a submarine base but could not find it. At 9.40am, they headed north from Nordeney and were recovered by one of the aircraft carriers.

The Kilner/Childers plane was the only one to be able to do any of the reconnaissance tasks, and, even then, they were heavily shackled by poor visibility. They were able to establish that:

- there was no swept channel leading to the River Jade
- there was no boom defending the harbour at Schillig Roads, and
- no worthwhile targets were there.

None of the planes scouted the main naval base at Wilhelmshaven.

There were attacks on the Royal Navy ships by the airship L5 and by surface ships and submarines. However, the only shots actually fired by one surface ship at another was the German battleship *SMS Wettin* firing on a German trawler. In the end, the British losses were four men lost at sea, due to heavy weather on the following day. One of the sailors was from *HMS Caroline*, now a museum in Belfast. The weather was so bad that the ships were ordered to return to port. The navy lost four seaplanes and had some ships temporarily disabled because of the damage inflicted by the bad weather – two battleships, three destroyers and a submarine. The British flotilla was protected, as the German coast had been, by typical North Sea foggy weather.

There were various exaggerated claims for the effects of the Cuxhaven raid, including the myth that the battlecruiser *Von der Tann* had been damaged in a collision<sup>3</sup>, as it was not present in the battle of the Dogger Bank, four weeks later. In fact, the *Von der Tann* was in drydock for

planned maintenance at that time, and could not be extricated when the operation was hastily rescheduled to take advantage of a break in the weather.

One major lesson on the efficacy of airships or aircraft attacking ships which emerged from the Cuxhaven raid was, to quote Commander Reginald Tyrwhitt<sup>3</sup> that 'given ordinary sea room, our ships have nothing to fear from seaplanes or Zeppelins'. That held good for the rest of WWI, but the tables were turned in WWII, when warships became very vulnerable to air attack.

A forgotten lesson of the raid was that submarines can be used to rescue downed aircrews in a concerted attack on the enemy. The US Navy did do this to good effect in the Pacific campaign in WWII, one notable rescued pilot being President George H.W. Bush, as he became later in life.

### **What did Erskine Childers do next?**

In summary, his naval career was as follows<sup>6,7</sup>:

August 1914 - March 1915: *HMS Engadine*

March 1915 – December 1915: *HMS Ben my Chree* (another seaplane carrier, originally a Manx ferry). Service in Gallipoli and Egypt.

December 1915 – March 1916: Coastal Motor Boats in the North Sea

March 1916 - July 1917: Intelligence officer, the advanced seaplane base, Dunkirk

July 1917 – April 1918: Secretariat of the Irish Convention, Dublin

May 1918 – September 1918: Naval section of air intelligence at the Air Ministry

September 1918 – November 1918: Intelligence officer with no. 27 Group HQ, RAF Bircham Newton, working on the planned air raid on Berlin

November 1918 – December 1918: In Belgium, preparing report on bomb damage

March 1919: Discharged from service

Childers was promoted to Lieutenant Commander RNVR in December 1916 and was redesignated as a major when the RAF was formed in March 1918. He received a Mentioned in Despatches for the Cuxhaven raid in 1915, and a DSC in 1917 for his work in Egypt.

So, the arch Establishment figure of 1914-1918 became the hardline Irish Republican in 1919 who would not accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. Many others have written about him and his Irish activities, doubtless more authoritatively than the present author ever could. However, I remain fascinated by his role as surely the oldest new lieutenant ever to grace an RNAS plane.

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4. Leonard Piper, *The Life and Death of Erskine Childers*, Hambledon and London, London and New York, 2003.
5. Hugh and Robin Popham, *A Thirst for the Sea*, Stanford Maritime, London, 1979.
6. *The Private Papers of Lieutenant Commander RE Childers, DSC, RNVR*, Imperial War Museum.
7. *Service records of Robert Erskine Childers*, ADM-273-5-8, ADM-273-19-232, ADM-337-117-202, ADM-337-124-493, AIR-76-85-171, National Archives, Kew, London.

The photographs of the *HMS Riviera*, Short plane and the map are from the Layman book, which I would recommend to anyone seeking the detail of the Cuxhaven Raid.

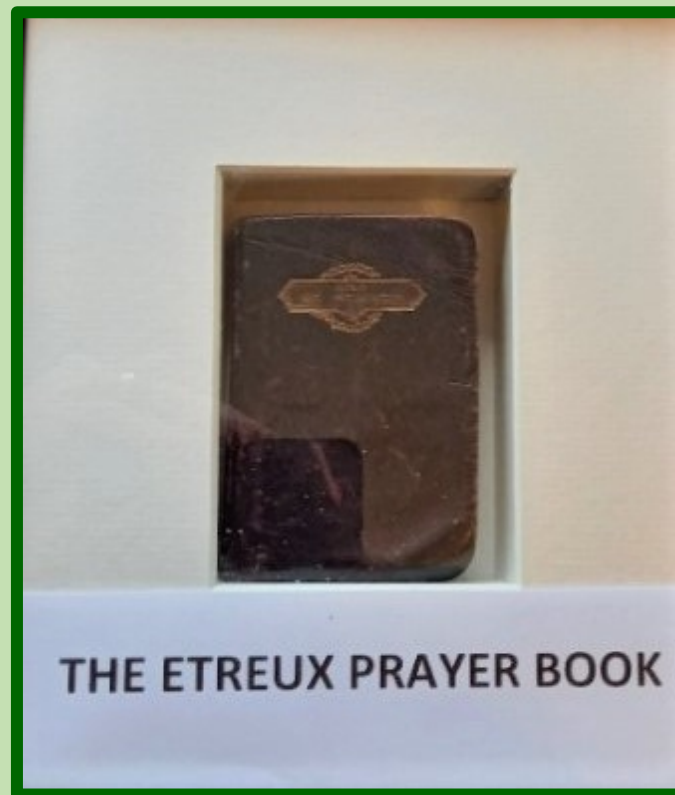
*The Riddle of Erskine Childers* by Andrew Boyle deals with his Irish adventures.

### Editor's note:

On his return to Ireland after the war, Erskine Childers became a member of Sinn Féin and took part in that party's efforts to establish an independent Irish Republic. He became a member of the Irish delegation that tried unsuccessfully to gain recognition for the republic at the Paris Peace Conference and was also appointed Director of Publicity to the Irish separatist parliament, Dáil Éireann. It was in this capacity, that in 1920, he published a booklet entitled *Military Rule in Ireland* which contained a series of eight articles he published in the *Daily News* attacking British policy in Ireland. In May 1921 he was elected (unopposed) as Sinn Féin TD for the constituency of Kildare-Wicklow. He also became editor of the *Irish Bulletin*, the official gazette of the Irish government. Later that year, he was appointed secretary to the Irish delegation that negotiated and signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, but he subsequently voted against the Treaty in the Dáil. He took the republican side in the Irish Civil War. On 24 November 1922 was executed by the Irish National Army in Beggar's Bush Barracks in Dublin after being found guilty of being in possession of a revolver that had been given to him by Michael Collins. Before being shot, he shook hands with the members of the firing squad. Erskine Childers is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers and the 'Étreux Prayer Book'**

Liam Nolan

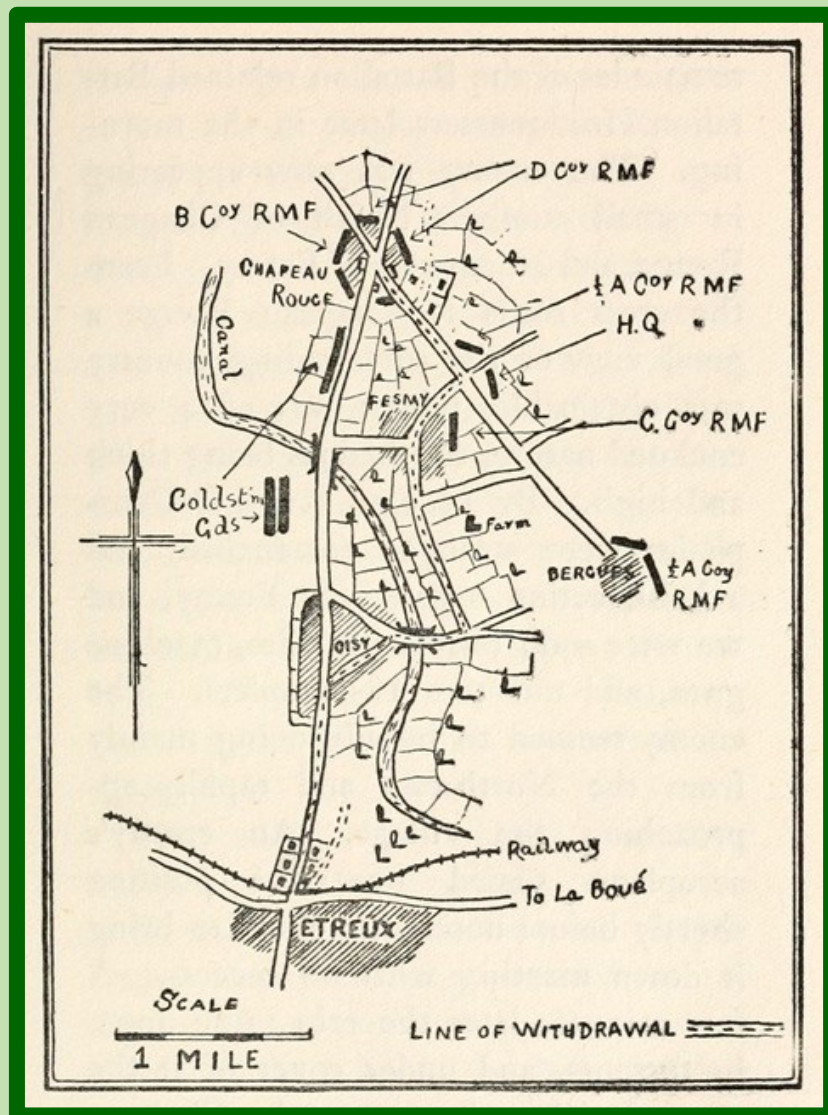


On 16 September, 2019, Mr. Michael Nugent, a Trustee of the Inniskillings Museum, presented a prayer book which had come into the museum's possession courtesy of a lady resident in Scotland, to the officers of the Royal Munster Fusiliers Association.

The museum established that the prayer book had been in the possession of Private John Meehan of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, who had found it on the battlefield at Etreux on 27 August, 1914, and had used the blank pages in the book to record some of his experiences since landing in France on 13 August and later as a prisoner-of-war. The following gives a brief account of the battle at Etreux and Private Meehan's comments contained in the prayer-book.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the regiment arrived in France on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 1914 under the command of Major Paul Charrier as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> (Guards) Brigade. Commanded by Brigadier-General Ivor Maxse, this unit also contained the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Coldstream Guards; 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Scots Guards and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Black Watch. After five days in billets in France, the Munsters marched north to the Belgian frontier. and remained in reserve on 23 August during the Battle of Mons which resulted in a defeat for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

Following the battle, the BEF embarked on a retreat in an effort find time to establish new defensive positions. General Maxse was tasked with covering the retreat of I Corps as it moved southwards. On his right, to the east, was the 5<sup>th</sup> French Army. To the west, was II Corps and the remainder British Expeditionary Force. The Battle of Le Cateau had been fought on 26 August and the badly-shattered II Corps, under General Horace Smith-Dorrien, was also in retreat. The German invasion of France was in full flood and sweeping all before it.



Map of the positions occupied by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers on 27 August 1914.

From: *The Story of the Munsters at Étrux, Festubert and Rue du Bois* by Mrs Victor Rickard.

Charrier concentrated on the defence of the roads by which the enemy must advance. Two companies were sent to an important road junction north of Fesmy (which was north of Étreux) and the greater part of another company to a cross roads to the southeast. Thus, the rearguard was facing north-east, the direction from which the enemy was advancing.

On the morning of the 27 August, the French forces to the east began to withdraw in accordance with their orders. In the meantime, an entire German Army Corps (10<sup>th</sup> Reserve Army Corps) was approaching the positions held by the Munsters by two parallel routes. This Corps was



comprised of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Guards Reserve Division which began attacking the Munsters' positions while the 19<sup>th</sup> Reserve Infantry Division was advancing on Etreux with a view to capturing the town of Guise, an important junction town, twelve miles to the rear of the Munsters' position. About 11.00am, the Germans mounted attacks in great strength on both flanks of the Munsters' defences and Charrier withdrew his units to Fesmy.

Throughout the day, the Munsters repulsed several assaults and, when their positions were overrun, they were retaken in counter-attacks. Due to communication difficulties, a general order to withdraw, which had reached other units of the brigade, failed to reach the Munsters who were now under increasing pressure from a vastly superior number of German troops. With their flanks in the air and the Sambre canal at their backs, their position was now untenable and Charrier ordered a retreat to Oisy. As he had lost contact with part of B Company he sent officer to ascertain its situation. This delayed his men reaching the rendezvous point near Oisy - something that would prove serious.

As the day wore on, the Munsters marched steadily to the south checking the enemy's pursuit with accurate fire. When Charrier and his men reached the outskirts of Étreaux, they were met with sustained enemy fire. Units of the 19<sup>th</sup> Reserve Army Corps had occupied the ground ahead, including the railway cutting on the outskirts of Etreaux.

A series of attacks by the Munsters now followed in an attempt to break through the enemy position. Major Charrier was killed leading the third attack. Attacks on either side of the Etreaux road failed. An attempt to break through the enemy lines further to the east of the road brought the assault to within seventy yards of the enemy position but a final assault with the bayonet was repulsed. One further attack also failed.

The remaining Munsters now concentrated in an orchard beside the road north of the railway cutting surrounded by a large number of German troops. Although ammunition was now nearly exhausted, the survivors manning the four sides of the orchard, kept their enemy at bay. As the fight continued, the machine guns ran out of ammunition and were smashed to pieces.

It was now growing dark and the situation was recognised as hopeless. At 9.15pm, a mere 240 men, including many wounded, staggered to their feet with four unwounded officers, around half of the strength of the battalion that had set out earlier that morning.

The Munsters had been engaged for twelve hours against six German infantry battalions. No less than 1,500 German wounded were assembled in the village of Etreaux next day. By their heroic stand, the Munsters had procured valuable time and space for I Corps. When the last shot was fired, a space of twelve miles separated it from the German 10<sup>th</sup> Reserve Army Corps. Though the Munsters had succeeded in their mission, according to historian, Tom Johnstone, that day at Étreaux, something more prized was won – the respect of a brave enemy. A German officer said of the Munsters, 'Men have never fought so bravely.' It was during this epic engagement that Private John Meehan came into possession of the prayer book.

## **Private John Meehan's Experiences as Recorded in the 'Etreux Prayer Book'**

Private Meehan used the blank pages of the prayer book to write some notes on his experiences from landing in France with the 2nd Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, as part of the British Expeditionary Force to his time in a German P.O.W. camp. Those notes are as follows:

### **Inside the front cover:**

'John Meehan, No. 7006, 2nd R.M.Fus., Etreux, France, found on the field of battle on 27th August, 1914. Presented to John Hall, 93rd Highlanders, 13th July, 1915.'

### **Inside the back cover page 1:**

No.7006, Private John Meehan 2nd R.M.Fus. Found this Prair [sic] Prayer book at Etreux, France, on 27 August, 1914. Mobilised on the 5 Aug., 1914. Landed in France on 14 Aug. Went into billets on the 18 at Bowie [sic] (probably Boué) Got paid out on 20 Aug. Left Bowie [sic] on 21 Aug. Entrenched on

### **Inside the back cover page 2:**

22, marched over 30 miles following day. Billeted next night at Grand Ring (?). Marched about 30 miles each day for a week. Got into action with John Germans on morning of the 27 of August, 1914 at five o'clock was fighting up to ten o'clock that night. In that battle there was at least one army corps 9

### **Inside the back cover page 3:**

of the Germans. That means 30 thousand of them to one thousand of us. We at least killed 10 of them to one of our own. There was about 4 hundred of ours killed, 50 badly wounded and all our officers except 3 or 4. We were taken prisoners – the remainder of us that escaped being killed – into an old factory and was nearly starved to death. From John Meehan, prisoner of war.

### **Inside the back cover page 4:**

Remained in the mill for 10 days at Etreux [sic] [Etreux] 1914. Arrived at Sonnelager [sic] [probably Sennelager P.O.W. camp] 12 Sept. 1914. Built a bungalow in the jungle 1914. Got nothing to eat in Sonnelager {Sennelager} 1914. Went to Limburg in Germany 22 Dec. 1914. Got employed in

### **Inside the back cover page 5:**

the hospital at Limburg 1914. Made a safety razor 1914. Drew 6 boxes of coal in Limburg 1914. Drew extra rations at Limburg 1914. Got a new pair of clogs 1914. I am still waiting for my parcels 1914.

**Editor's note: Liam Nolan is a member of the Western Front Association and Chairman of the Royal Munster Fusiliers Association.**

# The Notice Board

**Please note: Due to the ongoing Covid 19 situation a number of branch activities may be restricted or cancelled**

## Irish Branch Details

### Antrim and Down Branch

**Chairman:** Ian Montgomery

**Contact**

**Secretary:** Dr Tom Thorpe [antrimdownwfa@gmail.com](mailto:antrimdownwfa@gmail.com)

**Website:** <https://www.antrimanddownwfa.org/>

**Twitter:** [@WFA\\_AntrimDown](https://twitter.com/WFA_AntrimDown)

Normally 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. **In the coming months the branch will be hosting a number of online talks the details on which will be on its website and the WFA website**

### Cork Branch

**Chairman:** Gerry White

**Contact**

**Secretary:** Gerry O'Meara [gerryo@gerryomeara.com](mailto:gerryo@gerryomeara.com)

**Website:** <https://www.westernfrontassociationcork.com>

**Facebook:** Cork Branch Western Front Association

**Twitter:** @Cork WFA Official

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. **The branch will also be holding a number of online presentations, the details of which will be on its Facebook page and the WFA website.**

### Dublin Branch

**Chairman:** Ian Chambers

**Contact**

**Chairman:** Ian Chambers: [dublinwfa@gmail.com](mailto:dublinwfa@gmail.com)

**Website:** <https://wfa.dublin.webs.com/>

Meetings held at 2pm on the third Saturday of each month (except for March and August) at Pearse Street Library in Dublin. A modest donation of €3.00 is requested to help fund branch activities. **In the coming months the branch will be hosting a number of online talks the details on which will be on its website and the WFA website.**

## **Visit the Western Front Association Website**

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

Members can access additional material such as pension records and medal index cards, in the 'Members Login' area of the site.

## **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 YouTube channel? This contains recordings of a range of interesting and informative talks given by a number of historian and academics. All of the recent webinars that have taken place can also be viewed on the Youtube channel.

You can access the WFA video library at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/WesternFrontAssoc>

## **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](mailto: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!

## **Podcasts Available!**

A large 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://tunein.com/podcasts/History-Podcasts/Mentioned-in-Dispatches-p1184631/>



# William 'Billy' Good – An Appreciation

Gerry White



In June 2021, the members of the Cork Branch of the Western Front Association were saddened to learn of the death of Billy Good, a founding member and Honorary President of the branch. His passing was also mourned by his family and a wide circle of friends, many of whom he met as a result of a life-long interest in the Great War.

William 'Billy' Good was born in August 1944 in Bandon, Co. Cork, a place where he would live for most of his life. He was the middle of three sons born to farmer and Great War veteran, William Henry Good MC and his wife Isabella (née Kingston).

Billy's father had joined the South Irish Horse in Bandon in March 1911 and by the summer of 1914 he was holding the rank of corporal. He was mobilised on the outbreak of the Great War and deployed to France with his unit on 19 August 1914. In December of that year, he was promoted to sergeant and in April 1917 was commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant into the 5<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion of the Connaught Rangers. The last major engagement that Lieutenant Good took part in was the Battle of Cambrai (20 November – 6 December 1917). During an operation to secure a canal crossing near Marcoing, he captured a German machine gun position – a deed for which he was awarded the Military Cross. He was also wounded during the battle. For a brief period after the war, he was attached to the Military Police in the Rhineland but he soon returned home to live and work on his uncle's farm in Bandon. William Henry Good died in August 1994 and at the time he was believed by many to be the last surviving Cork veteran of the Great War.

After his father's death, Billy and a number of other like-minded individuals in the area formed the Bandon War Memorial Committee to identify and commemorate those men from the town who fought and died in the war. The first project undertaken by the committee and completed in February 1996 was the erection of a memorial stone at the site of the old railway station in Bandon. The first Remembrance Sunday ceremony was held that November at the memorial and one has been held one every year since. The committee's second project was the publication in February 1997 of the book *Bandon Soldiers Died in the Great War*. This book

contained a list of those from the Bandon area who died in the war as well containing various other information and articles about the Bandon area's involvement in the conflict.

Billy also joined and was an active member of a number of associations that commemorated the Irish regiments of the British Army that were disbanded in 1922. These were, the Royal Munster Fusiliers Association, The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association, the Connaught Rangers Association and the 18th Regiment of Foot Royal Irish Regiment (and South Irish Horse) Association. A lifelong student of the Great War, he also visited and led tours of the old battlefields of the Western Front on numerous occasions and was always happy to share his vast knowledge of that conflict with his fellow travellers.

I first met Billy when, like me, he became a member of the Great Sacrifice Project in 2008. This was an initiative sponsored by the City of Cork Vocational Educational Committee that aimed to identify and publish the names of those with connections to the city and county of Cork who died in the Great War. Billy made a number of new friends during the course of our research. The knowledge and experience he brought with him to the project proved to be invaluable. Together with the other members of the project, I frequently availed of his knowledge and advice, both of which, he willingly shared. In 2010, the project culminated with the publication of the book *'A Great Sacrifice – Cork Servicemen who died in the Great War'*.

After the book was published some members of the project wanted to continue their study of the war and to commemorate those who lost their lives in the conflict. After some discussion it was decided that an ideal way to do that would be to form a branch of the Western Front Association in Cork. Billy was among those who took part in those discussions and who was instrumental in forming the branch. Once the branch was up and running, the members wanted to honour Billy's contribution to the study of the Great War in Cork and to Remembrance by making him Honorary President. We were all delighted when he agreed to take that position and over the years, he has represented the branch and the association with great dignity at a number of commemorations and other events. Over the years also wrote a number of articles on various aspects of the Great War that have appeared in different journals.

In addition to the Great War, Billy also had a great interest in athletics. He was a founding member of Bandon Athletic Club in the early 1960s and held various positions on its committee during his life. He was instrumental in making the club one of the biggest in Munster and was the president of the club at the time of his death. He also wrote the definitive history of the first fifty years of the club.

Billy spent his entire career in the insurance industry and worked with General Accident/Aviva in the South Mall & Wilton in Cork city until his retirement at the age of fifty-five. There, as elsewhere, he became known for his work ethic, his good manner and willingness to help people. All qualities that enabled him to make plenty of life-long friends.

With Billy Good's passing, his family lost a loving husband, father, grandfather, brother and uncle; Ireland lost a great historian; those who knew him lost a good friend and the Western

Front Association lost an ambassador who represented the association with dignity. He was one of life's true gentleman and he will be missed by all who had the honour of knowing him.

Billy Good is survived by his wife, Matilda and his three sons, Mervyn, Clive and David

### Memories of Billy Good



**Billy sharing his extensive knowledge of the Great War during the first monthly meeting held by the Cork Branch held on 26 May 2011**



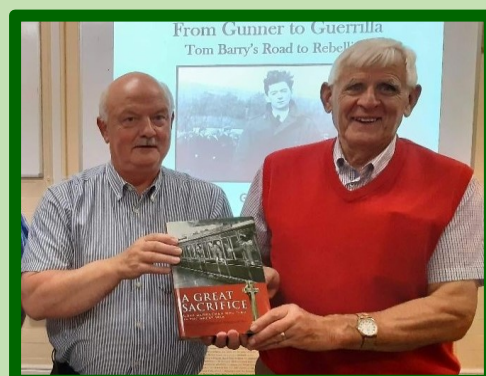
**Ross Glennon, Francis O'Connor and Billy at the first monthly meeting of the Cork Branch.**



**Billy laying a wreath at the Cork War Memorial during the 2015 Cork Branch Service of Remembrance.**



**Billy in 2016 with Simon Coveney TD (centre) and Gerry White, Chair of the Cork Branch.**



**Billy making a presentation to WFA Chair, Colin Wagstaff, during his visit to the Cork Branch in 2019.**



# The Ulster Memorial Tower

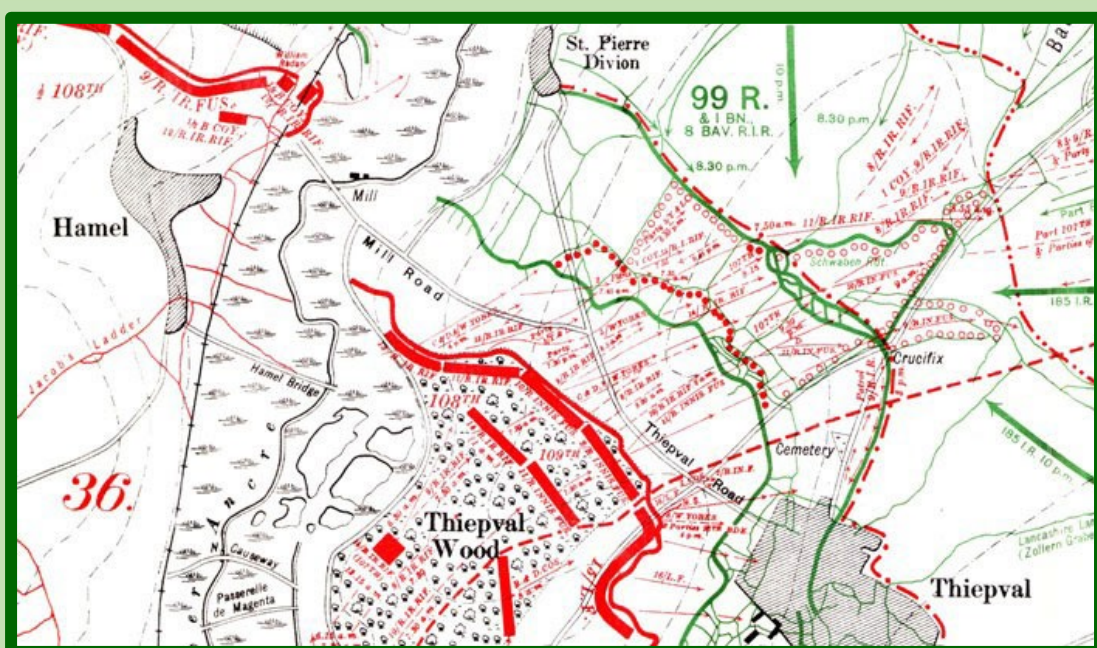
Gerry White

Many members of the Western Front Association who have travelled to the Thiepval sector of the Somme battlefield will have visited the Ulster Memorial Tower. Erected in 1921, the tower is the oldest official First World War memorial on the Western Front. It commemorates the members of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division who lost their lives in the Battle of the Somme and all those from the province of Ulster who fought and died in the war.

The Ulster Memorial Tower has its origins on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It was a day of carnage, a day of courage and a day of sacrifice, and it was a day that would be forever inscribed on the hearts and minds of the people of Ulster.

That morning, the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division commanded by Major-General Oliver Nugent and consisting of the 107<sup>th</sup>, 108<sup>th</sup> and 109<sup>th</sup> brigades was deployed in the British frontline trenches at Thiepval Wood, the 109<sup>th</sup> Brigade on the right, the 108<sup>th</sup> on the left and the 107<sup>th</sup> to the rear. At 0715 hours, while the British bombardment of the German lines was underway, members of the 108<sup>th</sup> and 109<sup>th</sup> Brigades climbed out of their trenches and lay down in the sunken Thiepval-Hamel Road in No-Man's Land. When the bombardment lifted at 0730 hours, the men stood up and advanced towards the German lines.

The main task of the Ulstermen that day was to break through the German frontline between the River Ancre on their left and the village of Thiepval on their right, cross the Thiepval Ridge and capture the German lines near Grandcourt. One of the main obstacles facing the 109<sup>th</sup> Brigade was a heavily fortified network of German trenches on the highest point of the ridge known as the *Schwaben-Feste* or Schwaben Redoubt. Located to the north-east of where the Ulster Memorial Tower now stands, the Schwaben Redoubt had a frontage of over 300 metres and it dominated the surrounding countryside.



A portion of a map taken from the Official History of the Great War showing the advance of the 36th (Ulster) Division on 1 July 1916. The Schwaben Redoubt is located on the second German line to the left of the 'Crucifix'.



Despite meeting fierce resistance, by 0900 hours the 109<sup>th</sup> Brigade had captured the redoubt and was advancing on another position known as Stuff Trench. The 108<sup>th</sup> Brigade had also captured a number of German positions. Unfortunately, the units to the division's left and right failed to make any progress and the Ulstermen soon found themselves being attacked on three sides and under heavy German bombardment. Though they held their positions for most of the day, they were soon running low on ammunition and eventually, at 2200 hours, a large German counter-attack forced them back to their own lines.

As it turned out, the 36<sup>th</sup> was one of the few British divisions that significant progress on that fateful day. But sadly, that came at a horrendous cost. The division suffered some 5,000 casualties of which 2,069 were deaths.

Following the Battle of the Somme, 36th Division would regroup and go on to take part in other major engagements during the war, most notably the battles of Messines, Langemark Cambrai and the German Spring Offensive. It suffered heavy casualties in all these engagements and by the time the war ended, 32,186 members of the division had been killed, wounded or were missing.

Such heavy losses had a huge impact on the people of Ulster and after the war, finding a suitable way to commemorate those servicemen who made the ultimate sacrifice was foremost in the minds of many people in the province. On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1919, a meeting was held at the Old Town Hall in Belfast to discuss the erection of a suitable memorial on the Western Front. A suggestion made by Captain James Craig, the Unionist MP for the constituency of Mid-Down and the future prime minister of Northern Ireland, to erect a monument at the spot where so many members of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division sacrificed their lives on 1 July 1916 was adopted.

Within a few months of the meeting in Belfast, around £5,000 was raised to construct the memorial. The architects appointed to design it were Albert Leigh Abbott and J.A. Bowden of Craven Street in London and it was agreed that it would be a replica of Helen's Tower. Built by Lord Dufferin in 1867 and named after his mother, Baroness Helen Dufferin, Helen's Tower was erected on his estate at Clondeboye, near Bangor, Co. Down. The design was deemed appropriate as it was on that estate that many members of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division trained before moving to England in July 1915 prior to deploying to the Western Front.

The land for the Ulster Memorial Tower was purchased from three French farmers. It was constructed by Fenning and Company Ltd. of Hammersmith, London, and local tradesmen from the Société de Construction et Travaux Publics d'Arras in France and was completed in the autumn of 1921. It was approximately twenty-one meters high and consisted of a memorial room and an apartment for a caretaker.

The day chosen to dedicate the Ulster Memorial Tower was Saturday, 19 November 1921. Prior to that an appeal was issued in Northern Ireland to raise funds to enable veterans attend the ceremony. Originally it was planned that James Craig, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, would welcome those who were attending the ceremony and that Lord Edward Carson, the former leader of the Ulster Unionists, would unveil the tablet in the memorial chamber, but both were ill and unable to attend.

As it turned out, over 100 travelled to Thiepval for the dedication. Among those present were: Rosalind Hamilton, the Duchess of Abercorn; Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff; Major General Oliver Nugent; General Maxime Weygand of France; the Most Reverend Dr Charles D'Arcy, Church of Ireland Primate of All Ireland; the Right Reverend Dr William James Lowe, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; Reverend William Henry Smyth, the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland; veterans of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division and a number of war widows and orphans.

At the start of the ceremony, Field Marshal Wilson formally opened the tower with a silver key presented to him in a silver casket that was inscribed:

*Presented to Field-Marshal Sir Henry M. Wilson, Bart., G.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff, first Colonel Commandant of the Royal Ulster Rifles, on the occasion of the opening by him of the Ulster Battlefield Memorial Tower at Thiepval, 19th November, 1921, on behalf of the subscribers.*

General Weygand joined Field Marshal Wilson in the Memorial Hall where a stone tablet was unveiled that had the following inscription:

*This tower is dedicated to the glory of God in grateful memory of the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division and of the sons of Ulster in other forces who laid down their lives in the Great War, and of all their comrades-in-arms who, by divine grace, were spared to testify to their glorious deeds*

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*It is erected on the site of the famous advance of the Ulster Division on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916*

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*"...Throughout the long years of struggle...the men of Ulster have proved how nobly they fight and die..."*

*16<sup>th</sup> November 1916*

*King George V*

*Their Name Liveth For Evermore*

After the unveiling, the three clergymen conducted a service of dedication after which, Lieutenant Colonel Sir William James Allen, the Unionist MP for the constituency of North Armagh and a commanding officer of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Pioneer) Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles formally handed over the custody of the tower to Sir Robert Liddell who was representing the committee of the Ulster Volunteer Force Patriotic Fund. Speaking during the ceremony, Liddell said:

*'Our duty as Ulstermen is to see that the glorious traditions which were established by those who have gone before are handed down by us to future generations untarnished so that those who come after us will say - This is our heritage'.*

Frederick Temple Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, the 3rd Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, DSO, PC (Ire) also spoke and said;

*'To those who were alive they said thank-you....and to those who were dead they said - we may never see you again but we will ever remember you. We will tell our children how you died, and they will repeat it to their children, and thus your memory will remain green through countless generations...'*

Benediction followed, after which the National Anthem was sung. On the roof, the Duchess of Abercorn then unfurled a Union Jack and French Tricolour which were then raised. Wreaths were also laid in at the base of the tower. Then, in the final act of the ceremony, veterans and representatives of organisations associated with the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, including the Ulster Volunteer Force, Ulster Unionist Council, Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, Ulster Woman's Gift Fund and the British Legion North Irish Headquarters, planted a number of trees that had been brought from Ireland on both sides of the path that led from the road to the tower. Those present also toured the nearby battlefield that was still scarred and littered with the debris of war.



**Outside the Ulster Memorial Tower during the Dedication Service on 19 November 1921.  
Included in the crowd are members of the French Army who formed a Guard of Honour for the  
military dignitaries when they arrived at the tower.**

**Courtesy of Carol Walker**

Following the dedication, a caretaker took up residence in the tower and it soon became a place of pilgrimage for people from Ireland and Britain who visited the Somme sector of the Western Front.

During the Second World War, the tower was occupied by members of the German Army who used it as an observation post. Though it survived the conflict unscathed, by the end of the 1960s, it had fallen into a state of disrepair. This situation remained unchanged until Saturday, 1 July 1989, when the Ulster Memorial Tower was rededicated by Princess Alice, the Duchess of Gloucester and responsibility of maintaining it was given to the recently formed Somme Association. The association also took responsibility for maintaining the trench system in the nearby Thiepval Wood,

the location from where the men of 36<sup>th</sup> Division launched their attack on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

On 1 July 1991, the Royal Irish Rangers erected a memorial to the nine members of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division who were awarded the Victoria Cross during the war. The following inscription was on that memorial:

*In Memory of the Valour Shown by All Ranks of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division  
Who Served King and Country During the Great War 1914 – 1918*

<i>Captain E. N. F. Bell VC</i>	-	<i>9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Innis Fusiliers</i>
<i>2nd Lieutenant J. S. Emerson VC</i>	-	<i>9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Innis Fusiliers</i>
<i>Lance Corporal E. Seaman VC</i>	-	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Royal Innis</i>
<i>FusiliersFusilier N. Harvey VC</i>	-	<i>1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Royal Innis Fusiliers</i>
<i>Second Lieutenant E. De Wind VC</i>	-	<i>15<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Irish Rifles</i>
<i>Rifleman William Frederick McFadzean VC</i>	-	<i>14<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Irish Rifles</i>
<i>Rifleman R. Quigg VC</i>	-	<i>12<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Irish Rifles</i>
<i>Lieutenant G. St. G. Cather</i>	-	<i>9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Irish Fusiliers</i>
<i>Second Lieutenant C. L. Knox VC</i>	-	<i>Royal Engineers (Att 36<sup>th</sup> Division)</i>

*Nec Aspera Terrent*

*Quis Separabit*

*Faugh a Ballagh*

*This Memorial Placed on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1991 by The Royal Irish Rangers*

Then, in September 1993, a memorial to members of the Orange Order in the shape of a black stone obelisk was erected near the tower. The inscription on that memorial reads:

*This memorial is dedicated to the  
men and women of the Orange  
Institution worldwide who, at the  
call of King and country, left  
all that was dear to them,  
endured hardship, faced danger,  
and finally passed out of the sight  
of man by the path of duty and self  
sacrifice, giving up their own lives  
that others might live in freedom.  
Let those who come after see to it  
that their names be not forgotten.*

The following year (1994), a small café and museum that commemorates all the Irish regiments that fought at the Somme was opened in the building adjacent to the tower.

Since its rededication in 1989, one of the greatest strengths of the Ulster Memorial Tower has been its custodians. On the first visit I made to the tower with others members of the Cork Branch of the Western Front Association, we had the pleasure of being welcomed by George Edward ‘Teddy’



Colligan and his wife Phoebe, the parents of Mrs Carol Walker MBE, the Director of the Somme Association and Somme Museum and two lovely individuals whose personality, charm and generosity of spirit have won them many friends among those who have visited the tower. That same day, Teddy took the visitors from Cork to Thiepval Wood where he shared his vast knowledge of the trench system and the battlefield of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division.

Teddy and Phoebe first travelled to Thiepval in April 2001 when their plan was to help at the tower for two weeks. However, as many people with military experience will confirm, 'No plan survives first contact' and they ended up staying longer than expected. Though they 'retired' on three occasions, they ultimately served around thirteen years (on and off) as custodians of the tower. In November 2011, the Picardie and French Tourist Board unexpectedly arrived at the tower and presented each of them with a specially struck medal in recognition of their work promoting tourism in the area. They were also presented with a special medal by the French government (one of five struck) in recognition of their work in preserving the memory of the Irish soldiers who fought and died to secure the freedom of France and its allies in the Great War. Then, in December 2017, Teddy was awarded an MBE in recognition his and Phoebe's dedication, commitment and service at the tower. To this date, those who have followed in their footsteps as custodians of the tower, continue to extend a warm welcome to all those who visit.



**Phoebe and Teddy Colligan.**  
Courtesy of Carol Walker.



**The Memorial Hall of the Ulster Memorial Tower.**  
Author's photograph.

On 19 November 2021, a ceremony was held at the Ulster Memorial Tower to mark the centenary of its dedication in 1921. Organised by Carol Walker and other members of the Somme Association, the ceremony was attended by a number of political, religious and military representatives from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and France. Among those who attended were Mr Paul Givan MLA, the First Minister of Northern Ireland; Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party; Mr Thomas Byrne TD, Ireland's Minister of European Affairs; Lieutenant Colonel Ken Martin, the President of the Royal British Legion in Ireland; the Most Rev John

McDowell, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland; Rev Dr Sahr Yambasu, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland and Dr David Bruce, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Carol Walker MBE and Alan McFarland, the Chairman of the Somme Association. Music was provided by the Band and the Bugles, Pipes and Drums of the Royal Irish Regiment and the Band of 2 Brigade of the Irish Defence Forces.



**Mrs. Carol Walker MBE, the Director of the Somme Association (front left), escorting guests to the Ulster Memorial Tower for its Centenary Service on 19 November 2021.  
Courtesy of Carol Walker.**

Speaking after the service, Paul Givan said:

*'It's an honour for me to be here today on this historic occasion to mark 100 years of the Ulster Tower which memorialises the sacrifice that was made by the men of the 36th Ulster Division and remembers those who served from right across Ireland in the First World War.'*

Jeffrey Donaldson also spoke about the significance of the tower:

*'As the first official memorial to be erected on the Western Front, the Ulster Tower is recognition of how significant the First World War was in the newly established Northern Ireland and the huge sacrifice from all those who left our shores to fight.'*

*Many who served in the 36th Ulster Division drilled and trained in the shadow of Helen's Tower and its surrounding woods. It is fitting that Northern Ireland's national memorial is a replica of that landmark which would have been the last memory of home many soldiers had before they left.'*

Thomas Byrne, who laid a wreath during the service in memory of all those from Ireland who died in the First World War described the service as:



*‘A shared commemoration of all those from the island of Ireland who lost their lives in the First World War. It is about remembering the enormous and destructive impact of the war on that generation, and how it has shaped our history’.*

He also said that, *‘We have come a long way indeed in ensuring that this chapter of our history is fully recognised and better understood as part of our shared heritage.’*

After the service, Minister Byrne travelled to the nearby town Guillemont where he laid a wreath at the Celtic Cross monument that commemorates the British victories at Guillemont and Ginchy on 3 and 9 September 1916 and all the Irishmen who gave their lives in the war.

That afternoon, the centenary was brought to a stirring conclusion with a concert of military music provided by the band of the Royal Irish Regiment and the band of 2 Brigade of the Irish Defence Forces that was held at the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Brebières in the town of Albert.

Today, 100 years after it was dedicated, the Ulster Memorial Tower continues to watch over the sacred soil of the Somme battlefield, a fitting tribute to the Sons of Ulster who fought and fell in the First World War. If any member of the Western Front Association hasn't visited this fine, historic memorial, I would encourage you to do so on your next visit to the front. You won't be disappointed.



**Members of the Muskerry Historical Society in Co. Cork, who visited the Ulster Memorial Tower with the author on a wet and windy day in September 2019.**

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. Carol Walker MBE, the Director of the Somme Association and Somme Museum, who provided him with information and photographs for this article.

# *Roll of Honour*

## **Corporal John Cunningham VC 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment**



John Cunningham was born in Thurles, County Tipperary, on 22 October 1890, one of five children born to Joseph and Johanna Cunningham. Educated at the Christian Brothers School in Thurles he went on to work as a farm labourer but on the outbreak of the Great War he enlisted in the British Army and became a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Prince of Wales's Regiment. He deployed to the Western Front on 19 December 1914. On 12 April 1917, his battalion took part in a flanking attack at Bois-en-Hache near Barlin in support of the attack by the Canadian forces on Vimy Ridge, a key component of the Battle of Arras.

Corporal Cunningham was in charge of a Lewis Gun team, on the most exposed flank of the attack when it came under heavy enfilade fire. Though severely wounded, he displayed great courage and initiative during the attack and for this that he was awarded the Victoria Cross. He was subsequently taken to a field hospital at Barlin but on 16 April 1917, he died of his wounds and was buried in Barlin Communal Cemetery. He was twenty-six years old. His citation was published in the London Gazette on 8 June 1917 read as follows:

### **Corporal John Cunningham, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment**

*For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty when in command of a Lewis Gun section on the most exposed flank of the attack. His section came under heavy enfilade fire and suffered severely. Although wounded he succeeded almost alone in reaching his objective with his gun, which he got into action in spite of much opposition. When counter-attacked by a party of twenty of the enemy he exhausted his ammunition against them, then, standing in full view, he commenced throwing bombs. He was wounded again, and fell, but picked himself up and continued to fight single-handed with the enemy until his bombs were exhausted. He then made his way back to our lines with a fractured arm and other wounds. There is little doubt that the superb courage of this N.C.O. cleared up a most critical situation on the left flank of the attack. Corporal Cunningham died in hospital from the effects of his wounds.*





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