

“Hunger comes again and with hunger thirst, the terrible thirst which gnaws at your stomach and drills into your brain.....”



Phil Reilly, U.S. Army

Phil Reilly — Second World War Veteran

PHIL REILLY was born in 1908 in Aughawillan, Carrigallen. One of a family of four boys and one girl, he left National School at twelve years of age to work on his father's farm. He was frequently sent to help neighbours but he rarely received payment for his work, nor did he expect any. On one occasion, a tailor asked Phil and his brother to dig some ridges and set some potatoes. He gave them one pound ten shillings each and they thought that they were made up. Phil loved all kinds of work, but it was difficult to make one's living in the Ireland of the twenties. Emigration was always an attractive or unhappy alternative for Phil's generation. In the early twenties, 43% of all Irish-born men and women were living abroad; 1,037,234 in U.S.A., 526,767 in U.K., 93,301 in Canada, 198,334 in Australia and New Zealand, 12,289 in S. Africa and 8,414 in India.

Emigrates to U.S.A.

In September 1930, after his father's death, Phil followed his brother John to the U.S.A. In that same month, the U.S. State Department had instructed American Consuls to refuse visas to prospective emigrants unless they were able to support themselves on arrival. In practice, that meant having \$50 in cash — a requirement that few could fulfil. It was the Depression decade. In Pres. Hoover's America of 1930, 4 million were out of work. This was to rise to 7 million in 1931, 12 million in 1932 and 15 million in 1934. Breadlines were commonplace, and as people literally starved, they resorted in some areas to city garbage. A survey in New York City, where Phil settled, revealed that 20% of the children there were suffering from malnutrition.

Phil had a distant relation who managed to keep him until he eventually got work. His first offer of a job carried with it the condition that he would have to join the Freemasons. Phil



declined the offer. He got a job in Butlin's Warehouse in New York. After a few years, he had saved enough money to direct his brother to buy a small farm which had come up for sale in Carrigallen. Sometime later, the firm with its 200 employees went into receivership. Phil and another employee were retained. A better paid job soon came his way and the American dream came close to realisation.

Phil had always intended to return home eventually, but Pres. Roosevelt's declaration of war on Dec. 8th, 1941 soon put his plans on hold, if not in jeopardy.

When the war in Europe had broken out on Sept. 1st, 1939, the U.S. regular Army had 188,500 men and 14,000 officers. By the end of the war on Sept. 2nd 1945, the U.S. army had 7,700,00 young Americans who were in one respect or another affected by the general mobilisation order which was the response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Phil was called up and sent for training to Camp Blendan in Florida where he was assigned to the 142nd Infantry as a rifleman. Then it was off to the war in Europe.

Cassino Bombed

Phil was involved in many battles there, the most notorious being the battle on the Cassino front. From January to May 1944, the Germans withstood the Allied attacks there. Cassino itself is a small town between Naples and Rome, dominated by a Benedictine Monastery. It is said that the fighting in the streets of Cassino resembled that of Stalingrad in its ferocity. It was a prolonged, dramatic combat. Men were flung into breaches like shovelled earth. Weather conditions were very severe. Phil avoided frostbite by rolling a blanket from his knap-sack around his feet. For eleven months of the Italian campaign, Phil never slept on a bed of any kind. Some of the fighting took place during the pitch darkness of early morning. Guns and shells blasted. Hundreds were blown to bits. Phil became conditioned to the screams of death.

The writer, Rene Chambe, has left this account of what it was like. "Night passes The enemy is counter-attacking furiously everywhere. He is driven off by a bayonet and grenade. Ammunition runs out again; the parsimoniously distributed mouthfuls of food which make up our rations are far away. Hunger comes again and with hunger thirst, the terrible thirst which gnaws at your stomach and drills into your brain. As for sleep, that real sleep which restores, we haven't had any for a long time. Men are falling asleep now under shelling in the midst of mines and bullets. They're killed almost before they know it. Only wounds wake them up. Some answer back, aiming their rifles and throwing their grenades in a state of half consciousness."

On the morning of Feb. 15th, 1944, 142 four engined and 87 two engined American bombers flew over Monte Cassino in three waves dropping 453 tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs. The Monastery of Saint Benedict with its priceless and irreplaceable works of art, was reduced to a complete and absolute ruin. On March 15th, 775 aircraft dropped 1,250 tons of bombs on the little town of Cassino and the immediate surroundings. From Jan. 16th to March 31st, the American 5th Army (Phil's) suffered casualties amounting to 52,130 killed, wounded or missing of which 22,219 were American, 22,092 were British, 7,421 French and 398 were Italian.

After Cassino, Phil and his fellow soldiers marched on Rome. They passed through flattened towns and villages, some with just a church spire or a barking dog — emblems of the misery of war. They saw the agony of mothers and wives; they saw children starving. But despite the widespread hardships, the decencies in life were not forgotten. On one occasion a little girl asked him for matches. Later, she returned with a piece of cake which her mother had managed to bake. The pathetic spectacle of lines of trucks evacuating stunned parents and screaming children reminded Phil that war does not involve soldiers only. For four days, he

survived without food or drink by sucking the dew from the bark of trees. While crossing a river by boat, Phil and his fellow soldiers were plunged into the water. He was knocked unconscious, but he was saved by a comrade. Phil regularly served Mass for the Army chaplains including an Irishman, Fr. Quinn, who gave him a Rosary. Although Phil realised that war was the province of chance, he knew that one's religious beliefs should never waver despite the circumstances.

Survival



John Reilly, U.S. Air Force

It seems ironic that Phil attributed his fortune in surviving the war to the fact that he was wounded. He was hit by a piece of shell at Mignano, Italy, in Dec. 1943. The 'Yankee Boomer' magazine of Sept. 7th, 1944 published the following under the heading, 'Medals earned in combat are awarded to eight men now serving with MRS Outfits' — "Pt. Phillip Reilly, 794th M.P.s, Purple Heart for wounds received near Mignano, Italy on Dec. 5th, 1943, while serving with the 142nd Infantry. Reilly is from New York City"

Phil was carried down the mountainside to a field hospital. He spent a month there. During that time, most of his comrades were killed during the assault on Rome. The American Army eventually entered Rome on Jun. 4th, 1944. Phil was later assigned to some duties in Rome. The war in Europe ended in May 1945 and in the Far East in Aug. 1945. Phil was discharged from the Army on 11th October, 1945.

His brother, John, had been in the U.S. Air Force and he survived the war also. Both of them came home to Ireland in June 1946. John returned to the U.S.A. to continue his career in the Air Force. He died there in 1972. Phil remained in Carrigallen where he married and had five of a family. He died in Oct. 1985.