

1918: Leitrim's Sons Remembered

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*Mohill Men in the trenches
in World War 1*

COURTESY: LEITRIM OBSERVER

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month — a momentous moment in history, ending WW1, one of the deadliest conflicts in the story of the human race. At Compiègne in Northern France, in the humble setting of a railway carriage, the headquarters of the Supreme Commander of the Western Front, Ferdinand Foch, the Armistice ending the Great War was signed. The guns fell silent, the bombs ceased to rain down, the trenches were abandoned and the world breathed a sigh of relief. The cratered landscape of Europe and further afield bore testimony to the unimaginable loss of life on the Somme, the slaughter at Gallipoli, and the horrors of Messina Ridge. The enormity of these events almost overshadowed the loss of life in 1918. But in the hearts of those whose husbands, sons and brothers lay in marked or unmarked, unknown graves, a great sorrow was embedded and Leitrim mourned the loss of her sons.

At the end of 1917, the German High Command found itself in a particularly favourable position.

The Russian Revolution of that year had the effect of ending the major arena of fighting on the Eastern Front, thereby freeing up thousands of troops for active participation on the Western Front. A major German offensive was in the planning stage and its early implementation was imperative before the American army fulfilled its fighting potential on European soil. The offensive would target the British army which the German strategists considered to be exhausted after fighting four bloody and fruitless offensives in 1917 at Arras, Messines, Passchendaele, and Cambrai. The driving of a wedge between the British and French armies was high priority. The early months of 1918 were regarded as relatively quiet on the Western Front but even in 'quiet' war times, lives are lost. For Leitrim, January claimed the life of Hugh Joseph Reynolds, Drumshanbo and February that of marine Peter Reilly.

The Spring Offensive

21st March—7th August

The first phase of the German Spring Offensive, Operation



New headstone at the family plot in Kiltoghert, Co Leitrim for Michael Moffatt—WW1 veteran

Michael, commenced on March 21st. In just five hours the Germans fired one million shells at the British lines — over 3,000 shells every minute. For Commander Ludendorff and the German army, day one was an overwhelming success. However, for Leitrim, March 21st saw the deaths of Patrick Coyle, Manorhamilton, Robert Johnston, Killargue and Michael Friar, Drumshanbo. By the time Operation Michael ended on April 5th Leitrim's list of war dead included John Gallagher, Rossinver, Thomas Hannon, Manorhamilton, Peter Mc Loughlin, Cloone, John Doonan, Carrigallen, Michael Gannon, Dromod, Christopher Ingram,

Glenkeel, Irish Guardsman Martin Hannon and James Robert Buchanan, Drumkeeran. In two weeks the Germans had advanced 40 miles, inflicted 200,000 casualties, captured 700,000 prisoners and taken 1,000 Allied guns.

Despite the high number of casualties in his army, Ludendorff pressed on with a second assault, Operation Georgette, on April 9th. This time the concentration would be further north in the flat country west of Lille. Now that so many British troops had been drawn south for recent fighting, this area was considered vulnerable. It was an area of high priority and of major concern to the British.

Northern France had the ports of Calais, Boulogne, and Dunkirk, vital inlets for the life-blood of the British army, in both men and materials. In early gains, the German bite into British positions was 10 miles wide and 5 miles deep but the British forces proved more stubborn than expected and doggedly obstructed the German advance towards the Channel. Despite relentless days of hard fighting, which left the German troops exhausted and lacking momentum, the gains made became trivial and the German Commander, Ludendorff, ended Operation Georgette on April 30th. Leitrim men Thomas Peyton of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Bernard Rooney, Glenade, Frederick St. George Cooke, Carrigallen and Sergeant Francis Farrell, Drumlish were among the 76,300 British losses. This figure included those killed, wounded,

missing and taken prisoner. Attack and counter-attack continued during the Summer of 1918. By June the German army had been severely weakened by the huge number of casualties. Before the tide of war turned towards an Allied victory, Ludendorff ordered the last disastrous attack on July 15th. The German Spring Offensive ended on August 7th. Grieving for the lost continued in Leitrim. In May those who had fallen included Patrick Fitzgerald, Mohill, T Cassidy, Drumshanbo, James Gallagher, Aughnasheelin, all who had served with the Canadian Light Infantry, as well as Frank Flanagan, Drumshanbo and Charles Meehan of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. In June, Sergeant Bernard Walsh, Drumkeeran died and in July James Slowey, Carrigallen, Thomas Carolan, Drumsna and Francis Doonan, nephew of James McKeon, Keshcarrigan were gone.

The 100 Days Offensive

8th August–11th November

This was the final period of WW1 during which a series of attacks were launched by the Allies from August 8th to November 11th, beginning with the Battle of Amiens. After years of war the German resources, both in men and supplies were dwindling. On the other side, the Allied forces were being reinforced by American troops after the entry of the United States into the War in 1917. August saw the deaths of Leitrim's Thomas Bryson, Newtowngore and two who served with the American Expeditionary Force —



A Royal Irish fusilier teases a Turkish sniper

Patrick Houregan, Carrigallen, and Patrick Mc Sharry. In September the Hindenburg Line was breached by the combined forces of Britain and Canada. Canadian forces became legendary in WW1 for the expertise of their attack. Although the Germans were in retreat, they still presented sustained resistance leading to the deaths of Earnest Kernick Smylie, Carrigallen and three other Leitrim men whose remains were not recovered — James Meehan, Aughacashel remembered on Tyne Cot Memorial in Belgium, Thomas Harmon, Kiltoghert and Michael Guckion both of whom are listed on the Vis-en- Artois Memorial at Pas de Calais.

Perhaps fighting was more intense in October. It certainly seemed so for Leitrim. North Leitrim suffered the loss of Francis Foley, Leckanarainey, Manorhamilton, Thomas McLoughlin, Killargue, Patrick McTiernan, Fawn, Dromahair and Robert Earnest Quaille, Drumshanbo. South Leitrim lost James Boyle, Ballinamore, Patrick Kennedy, Mohill, and Robert Deignan (sic), Carrick-on-Shannon. Two other Leitrim casualties appear in the records — Frank McGreal serving with the United States army and Francis McGovern of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

The end of the war was so near then but did not come soon enough for Bernard McAllister, Ballinamore, Thomas McDonagh, Mohill and Francis Heslin of the Grenadier Guards, all of whom fell to the Hun in October. Before we close the casualty list let us also remember Thomas Bell, Mohill

who died at Allahabad, India on June 1st 1918 and two others who just about survived the war but departed this life very shortly thereafter — Daniel Rooney, Kiltyclogher who died on December 22nd and T Murray, a Captain in the Army Pay Corps, who passed away on March 30th 1919 and is interred in Jamestown Cemetery. The records also show that John Cummiskey, Mohill died on March 8th but the year is omitted. The minimal amount of information available on the Irish who fought with foreign regiments in WW1 and the gaps and inaccuracies in our own records, point to a vast area of research still to be undertaken. An unpublished document in the Department of National Defence in Canada suggests that almost 20,000 Irish soldiers served in the Canadian forces in WW1 and, of those, it is estimated that about 2,000 died. The Australian Government lists 4,731 Irish-born soldiers in its Expeditionary Force and 1,300 served in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. These two forces made up the Anzacs.

The Irish fought to the bitter end in the Great War. An Irish regiment, the Royal Lancers, with the Canadian troops, was involved in the last Allied action, the liberation of Mons, on November 11th, 1918. Every man who fought in WW1 is a hero and every Leitrim man who gave his life in the noble cause of freedom and justice, is, to us in Leitrim, a special hero whose name deserves to be recorded and whose sacrifice deserves to be remembered.



The bus taking troops up to the trenches