

FROM THE CELLAR TO THE VICTORIA CROSS

AND MANY MORE FAMILY MILITARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Peter Gordon

MY FATHER HAD three grand-uncles on his Mother's side of the family—the O'Connors. The first was a Surgeon in the British Army. The second was a businessman with a grocery shop and the hotel in Boyle, Co Roscommon. I have no details of the third only that he had a son called Luke—my Father's Uncle. Luke was offered an apprenticeship in his Uncle's shop. When he accepted the offer he was in for a disappointment. Instead of the prized apprenticeship he was put to work in the cellar of the hotel taking care of the casks of beer and wine. One night in a fit of pique and in revenge to his perceived wicked Uncle, he turned the taps of the casks ON, fled and joined the British Army—Welsh Guards Regiment at the age of 17 (now called the Royal Welsh Fusiliers).

Luke provided distinguished service in many battle fields including Crimea, Lucknow and in the Ashanti Expedition of 1873. For his many deeds of valour, he was promoted up the ranks until he became a Major General and received the award of the Victoria Cross. He was presented with the VC by Queen Victoria in Hyde Park, London on June 26th 1857. He was the very first soldier to receive this award for gallantry. He was later knighted.

Perhaps hearing of all these stories of his

Uncle Luke inspired my Father to leave school early and join the British Army. After receiving basic training, he was sent to South Africa to take part in the Second Boer War from 1899-1902. His parents were far from pleased and bought him out of the Army. He resumed his education in Blackrock College, after which he attended the newly established Veterinary College in Dublin. He was one of its first graduates.

Following graduation, he went to the University of Edinburgh for further research and studies specialising in Equine Science. Upon returning to Ireland he set up his practice in Mohill, County Leitrim. According to the Mohill native, historian and academic, Dr Padraig McGarty, he along with about 200,000 (the figure is disputed) answered the call of people like John Redmond to help Britain in her hour of need and Ireland would be granted her freedom. We know too well how that finished.

In 1915 he abandoned his extensive practice and re-joined the British Army—this time as an Officer in the Royal Army Veterinary Corps where he was put in charge of the Allied horses in World War I. He received the Military Cross for Gallantry and Distinction in the Field and also received a Mention in Despatches from Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig.

After the War, the British Government were asked by the French Government for help in setting up Departments. My Father was sent to advise on Agriculture. In appreciation of his work, he was awarded the Merite Agricole, in 1919. After this he retired from the British Army, turning down offers of higher rank if he would stay. Due to his many accomplishments, he was permitted to retain the title of Captain in civilian life. He resumed his practice in Mohill. His reputation was such that his duties included the treatment of the horses of the Irish Army at the Curragh. He was involved in the Royal Agriculture Society of Ireland and acted as a Judge at major agricultural shows. He was also a well-known breeder of short-horned cattle.

He married my Mother, Margaret Reynolds of Rooskey. My Mother served in the Red Cross and was awarded the Medal of the Red Cross Society and the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem in recognition of valuable services rendered during World War I. My Mother was based in Marseille where she tended to the wounded soldiers.

In my youth I was offered a cadetship in the British Army—my Mother would not hear of me accepting this offer. Perhaps she had seen too many young men broken up from the ravages of war?