

THE ROYAL MUNSTER FUSILIERS

1881-1922

In 1922, all the Irish regiments whose catchment areas were in the Irish Free State were disbanded and their colours presented to King George V in Windsor Castle. This exhibition looks at the forty-one year history of the Royal Munster Fusiliers whose catchment area included Limerick city and county. Thousands of Limerick men served in this regiment, which saw service all over the world, particularly in the Boer War and First World War.

This exhibition is part of the Limerick City and County Council Decade of Centenaries Programme, which is organised by Limerick City and County Library Service and funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Decade of Centenaries 2012-2023 initiative.

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Researched and Curated by Dr Stephen Griffin.



**An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán**
Department of Tourism, Culture,
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THE BRITISH ARMY IN IRELAND

English armies had been in Ireland throughout the early modern period. During the Tudor period, the English army often numbered somewhere between 1,200 to 2,500 men and depended on mercenaries and land magnates for recruits. When in conflict with the Irish lords, the army could balloon to over 20,000. In the 1660s, a new army was established during the reign of Charles II and this was regimented by 1683. The 1680s also saw the Irish army transformed into a Catholic force as the Lord Deputy, Richard Talbot, earl of Tyrconnell set about removing Protestants from the army. Following the War of the Two Kings fought between the Catholic James II and Protestant William III in 1689-91, restrictions were imposed in 1701 to stop the Catholics from enlisting in the army in Ireland. During this time many men departed to serve in the armies of France, Spain, and the Austrian Habsburgs.

British soldiers garrisoned in eighteenth century Ireland found the experience boring. Officers looked upon Ireland as a step backwards and a place where they missed out on career advancement. As a result, absenteeism was common. Irish enlistment in the British army gradually rose during the eighteenth century. Penal restrictions which blocked Catholics from serving in the British Army were removed in the 1770s and Catholic Irishmen were enlisting in both the regular army and the armies of the East India Company by the end of the century.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Irish would come to make up roughly 40% of the British Army. 42,897 Irishmen were in the British army in 1830 and this had decreased only slightly to 41,218 ten years later. Irish soldiers were

looked upon as disciplined and organised and they served throughout Britain and the Empire. Soldiers also continued to be stationed in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century with the numbers of those garrisoned eventually growing to roughly 25,000.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy also maintained a steady presence in the officer corps of the British Army. A substantial number of officers in the British and Indian armies were of Anglo-Irish stock. Some of these included Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, Frederick Roberts, Earl of Kandahar, Garnet, 1st Viscount Wolseley, and Sir Henry Wilson. Whereas the Irishmen who served under them were predominantly Catholic, these officers were Protestant. They accounted for almost one fifth of all officers in the British Army and almost one third of all officers in the Indian Army. The India regiments became a much sought after posting for aspiring young officers who could not afford to support themselves in the expensive British Army.



Fig 1; Royal Munster Fusiliers Church Parade. Ballymullen Barracks, Tralee, Co. Kerry (NAM, 1996-06-26-6) © National Army Museum, London.



Fig 2; British soldiers being inspected outside Limerick City Hall (IWM. Q 34458) © Imperial War Museums.

THE BRITISH ARMY IN LIMERICK

Unsurprisingly, members of local Anglo-Irish families from Limerick played an important part in the eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century army. Both Sir Eyre Coote (1726-83), whose family hailed from Kilmallock and Sir Joseph O'Halloran (1763-1843), son of the famed Limerick antiquarian Sylvester O'Halloran, played prominent roles in securing British rule in India. Similarly, Eyre Massey, 1st Baron Clarina (1719-1804) fought to consolidate British rule in North America during the Seven Years' War (1756-63).

In the eighteenth century, soldiers experiencing indigestion and bowel discomfort referred to having a 'case of the Limericks'. Such statements reflected the army's view of being garrisoned in the city. Nonetheless, as the third city of Ireland, and as a site of strategic importance upon the Shannon, Limerick was a major garrison for the British Army with four barracks located in its vicinity. The first and oldest of these was the Castle Barracks situated within King John's Castle and constructed in the 1740s. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars saw the construction of two further barracks. The New Barracks is better known today as Sarsfield Barracks and this was completed in the 1790s. In 1807, the Ordnance Barracks was built on modern day Mulgrave Street. Finally, the Strand Barracks came into being in 1841. Located on what is now Clancy's Strand, the barracks was formally the House of Industry which was intended to provide relief to the poor.

Joining the army provided men with economic security as they would be paid, fed, clothed, housed, and they would also receive medical attention. In the 1880s, an army private could expect to earn £40 per annum. His counterpart in Ireland who did not enlist and who worked

as a labourer could expect roughly £25 per annum. The army preferred to draw recruits from rural Ireland where men with agricultural backgrounds would have experience of physical labour and were viewed to be fitter and more capable of carrying out the more taxing duties of soldiering such as digging trenches. However, as the population of Ireland declined in the 1840s due to famine and emigration, more soldiers would come to be recruited from urban areas: 'the back streets and alleys of large towns... in public houses and beer shops.'

The army also ensured that local industry would experience an increase in trade. Over 1,000 soldiers were garrisoned in the city's barracks and these required provisions, equipment and food for men and animals. In particular, the Limerick Clothing Factory supplied thousands of uniforms to the army and by the turn of the nineteenth century, the factory was one of the city's largest employers.



Fig 3; Soldiers on parade at Ordnance Barracks, Limerick (NLI-CAB-02675) © National Library of Ireland, Dublin.



Fig 5; British soldiers march past the Treaty Stone (IWM. Q 34464) © Imperial War Museums..



Fig 4: Ordnance Barracks, Limerick, 1898 (Limerick Museum).

ARMY LIFE IN LIMERICK

An article from 1896 describes the daily routine of a British soldier. Beginning at reveille a sergeant would take a roll call after which the soldiers cleaned the barracks and then fell in for parade at 7am. The parade would normally last forty-five minutes, and breakfast would then be served at 8am. All men would need to be properly dressed (in uniform) by this time. Following breakfast all dishes and tables were cleaned. At 10am soldiers who had committed offences were 'told off' by their commanding officer. In between these various activities there would be parades at 9am and 11am. Dinner was at 1pm and a final parade was held at 2pm after everything had been cleaned. Except for tea-time which was held at 4pm, soldiers were then free for the rest of the afternoon and evening. Soldiers could attend evening classes organised within the regiment and designed to award them certificates of education. Attending 'wet canteens' which served beer, was also a popular pursuit in the evening. Beer was not allowed during the three main meals in the barracks.

An infamous incident involving the Royal Munster Fusiliers took place in 1893. Drunken soldiers on furlough from Cork refused to give up their tickets for inspection on the Dublin train and then beat and threatened the train guards. At Limerick Junction, Munsters from Limerick then boarded and destroyed the First-Class carriages. Other carriages were also destroyed as they moved through the train. They were eventually stopped at Inchicore where the military authorities detained them. Soldiers who tried to hide under their seats 'were speedily dragged out'. Despite incidents such as these Irish soldiers were not noted for their indiscipline or lack of reliability. Charges

brought against soldiers were often due to minor infringements such as 'drunkenness' and 'neglect of duty'.

A soldier's day to day activities mostly included military drills and exercises in the morning. Playing sports was a common pastime in the afternoon and numerous references can be found to sports teams within the ranks of the Royal Munster Fusiliers. The British Army is often linked to Limerick rugby. While there are connections between the army and rugby, the military did not introduce the sport to the city in the nineteenth century. This honour goes to the city and county's upper and middle classes who learned the game while studying in the public schools of England and who then brought it back with them when they returned home. There are also close links between the military and the city's brass bands which were modelled upon those used by the army. Members of bands such as the Boherbuoy and St Mary's Fife and Drum also served as musicians in the army.



Fig 6: Royal Welsh Fusiliers on parade with band and mascot © Limerick Museum.



Photo of the First Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers (Limerick Museum) 1992.0116
First Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers © Limerick Museum.



Fig 8: Mayor of Limerick welcomes officers of the Irish Canadian Rangers to the city (IWM. Q 34457) © Imperial War Museums.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE ROYAL MUNSTER FUSILIERS

The origins of the Royal Munster Fusiliers lay in the armies of the East India Company. A trading company first chartered in 1600, the East India Company was at the forefront of British expansion in Asia. Focussed upon India, it formed three presidencies: Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Each presidency possessed its own private army to defend the Company's commercial and political foothold on the subcontinent. With the relaxation of laws against Catholics serving in the military, there was a sizeable increase in Irish enlistment in the Company's armies. By 1813, the Company had four recruiting offices in Ireland with Irishmen accounting for almost half of all its recruits in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1857, Indian soldiers in the Bengal Army rose against their European officers. When the 'mutiny' was put down in 1858, the government of India was transferred from the Company to the Crown and its soldiers were to be incorporated into the British Army. Thereafter, the Royal Bengal Fusiliers became the 101st Regiment of Foot with the Bengal Fusiliers becoming the 104th Regiment of Foot.

In 1881, the infantry of the British Army became organised into territorial regiments with recruitment to take place in specified regions in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. With the amalgamation of the 101st and 104th Regiments of Foot, the Royal Munster Fusiliers were born with both the 101st and 104th forming the new regiment's 1st and 2nd battalions. The South Cork, Kerry, and Limerick County Militias became the 3rd, 4th, and 5th battalions respectively. Recruits would be drawn from Clare, Cork, Limerick, Kerry, and Tipperary and their appointed headquarters was to be in Ballymullen Barracks in Tralee.

While the 2nd Battalion spent the 1880s stationed in India and Burma (modern day Myanmar), the 1st Battalion was in Britain and Ireland. The 1st Battalion quickly gained a reputation as an efficient force. They were the victors in bayonet exercises held at the All-Ireland competition at the Military Tournament of 1891. They also gained a reputation in route marching – an exercise introduced to the army in 1895. The Munsters impressed their superiors when completing the exercise in 1895 by marching 123 miles in six days. They completed the exercise again in 1896 marching 156 miles in six days. In March 1896, they then received 'the Queen's Cup' from Queen Victoria in recognition of their record setting win in an inter-regimental shooting contest organised by the Army Rifle Association. Not for nothing did Field Marshal Garnet, 1st Viscount Wolseley reputedly remark during a discussion of English battalions: 'Well, I have an Irish battalion which can beat the whole lot you mention, and that is the 1st Battalion of the Munsters, now in Ireland.'



Fig 9; Badge, headdress of the Royal Munster Fusiliers (IWM, INS 7232) © Imperial War Museums.



Fig 10; Royal Munster Fusiliers insignia and cap badges © Limerick Museum.



Fig 11; Recruitment poster, 'The Royal Munster Fusiliers are earning eternal fame fighting for you' © Imperial War Museums.

SERVICE ACCROSS THE EMPIRE

It is suggested that the Munsters's nickname: 'the Dirty Shirts' stems from their service in India when their regimental forebears in the Royal Bengal Fusiliers discarded their tunics to fight in their shirtsleeves in the Indian heat in 1857. When not in Ireland or Britain the 1st and 2nd battalions of the Munsters were stationed in various corners of the British Empire in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. The 1st Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers served in Canada (1881-3), South Africa (1899-1902), India (1902-12), and Burma (1912-14). The 2nd Battalion was active in Malta (1882-4), India (1884-6 and 1888-1901), Burma (1886-8), South Africa (1901-2), and Gibraltar (1904-7).

Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book*, did much to influence Victorian Britain's views of Irish soldiers as hard-drinking, hard-fighting, overly romantic and incredibly courageous. In his poem 'Shillin' a day', Kipling, who wrote extensively on the British soldier in India, wrote the following lines which describe the travels of an Irish soldier on garrison duty in the empire:

*My name is O'Kelly, I've heard the Revelly
From Birr to Bareilly, from Leeds to Lahore,
Hong-Kong and Peshawur,
Lucknow and Etawah,
And fifty-five more all endin' in "pore".*

At least one third of the British army spent its time in India. Here they served against the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan on the North-West Frontier Province (modern day Pakistan). Regardless of a soldier's background in Britain or Ireland, those who served in India were seen to be racially superior to both the indigenous

soldiers who served alongside them and the local populations which they controlled.

In India in the 1880s and 90s the 2nd Battalion was described as being 'in hard condition and capable of any exertion. The spirit in the Battalion is excellent, and *esprit de corps* of a high order pervades all ranks.'

In February 1908, the 1st Battalion took part in an expedition to defeat the Zakha Khels, a sub-group of Afridi Pashtuns, tribesmen who dwelt on the southern side of the Khyber Pass which connected the North-West Frontier to Afghanistan. The Zakha Khels, who had been raiding into British territory, surrendered two weeks later. Two months later, the Munsters took part in a campaign against another tribe of Pashtuns known as the Mohmands. Marching through the Khyber Pass they saw action at the fortified village of Khargali where Companies 'D' and 'G' of the Munsters together with the 40th Pathan Regiment, succeeded in driving the Mohmands out of the village and into Afghanistan. An outbreak of cholera, which killed 35 men, brought an end to the Munsters's involvement in the remainder of the campaign.



Fig 12; Officers club in Rawalpindi, India (NAM, 1999-09-59-25) © National Army Museum, London



Fig 13; Afghan tribesmen, North West Frontier, 1878 (NAM, 1972-02-9-7) © National Army Museum, London.

IRELAND AND THE SECOND BOER WAR (1899-1902).

The Second Boer War began in October 1899 as the British Empire expanded in southern Africa and sought to gain control of the Transvaal Republic and Orange Free State which were inhabited by Dutch-speaking settlers, the Boers. From the onset, the war did not go according to plan for the British. The Boers were well armed, resourceful and they knew the terrain. As a result, the British experienced defeats in battles such as Colenso (1899) and Spion Kop (1900). However, the British soon gained the upper-hand and were able to take control of the Boer Republics by September 1900. The Boers then began a guerrilla war. In response, the British initiated a scorched earth policy and destroyed Boer farms. The families of Boer militiamen were sent to concentration camps where 28,000 (mostly women and children) died. Overall, total casualties are estimated at 22,000 British soldiers, 34,000 Boer combatants and civilians, and at least 14,000 indigenous Africans. The war also proved to be Britain's most expensive conflict in almost 100 years.

The Irish were to be found on both sides of this conflict. Nationalists supported the Boers whom they saw as standing up to British Imperialism while Protestants in Ulster also sympathised with their Boer co-religionists. In South Africa, Irish Nationalists had already formed two Brigades of volunteers, one of which would be led by John McBride. However, the brigades relied heavily on non-Irish recruits and never numbered more than 300 men. The Irish Transvaal Committee was formed to support the Boer cause and to discourage Irish enlistment in the British Army. Its members included James Connolly, Arthur Griffith, and Maud Gonne. There were pro-Boer demonstrations and protests in Dublin, the most famous of which was in December

1899 and quickly turned into a riot when the police baton-charged the crowd.

Despite Maud Gonne's efforts to stop enlistment, evidence shows that recruitment carried on as normal and even increased. At first, the war was widely supported in Britain and an estimated 47,000 Irish men served in the army during it. The 5th Battalion of the Munsters departed the Strand Barracks in Limerick for South Africa in April 1900. Eyewitnesses described the departure as 'heart-breaking, and at times comical.' The soldiers 'straggled forward in knots of twos and threes' to the train station surrounded by a crowd of women and children. The account describes wives carrying military equipment while the men quickly visited the public houses. Some of the men were drunk and had to be carried to the station. The train eventually departed 'amid the frantic waving of hands and handkerchiefs, the farewell shouts of the men, and the awful cries of the women left behind.'



Fig 14: Major John McBride



Fig 15: Boer women and children in concentration camp, 1901 (NAM, 1992-03-194-36) © National Army Museum, London.

THE MUNSTERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The 1st Battalion of the Munsters had been ordered to South Africa in August 1899. After war was declared they fought at the Battle of Belmont in November 1899. The Boers had besieged the town of Kimberley and the battle took place as the British attempted to relieve it. During the march the British column encountered Boer resistance at Belmont. The Munsters took part in driving the Boers off Table Mountain situated to the east of Belmont. In the aftermath, one private from the Munsters wrote the following letter to his wife:

‘We had a great battle on the 23rd, and there were bullets flying at each side of us and poor fellows falling around. The Guards lost a lot of men, but, thank God, there were none of ours hit... I had nothing to eat for two days only two flags – as we call them – they are biscuits. The evening before we started we got the bread; it was welcome, and we finished the half loaf. It was not the firing I was thinking of, it was the bread. There was one hundred and fifty on our side killed, and, wounded...’

In July 1900, the Battalion then saw action at Slabbert’s Nek. Throughout the rest of the war the Munsters were involved in skirmishes with the Boer commandos. They also guarded convoys and partook in garrison duty. In 1901 they went on ‘expeditions to farms’ presumably to burn Boer homesteads and destroy livestock.

Following this the Munsters were then used to protect the Kimberley railway. Kimberley itself was relieved in February 1900. In April the Munsters then assembled at Warrenton to the north. Here they regularly encountered the Boers who had dug trenches just across the Vaal River to the north of the town and who inflicted constant fire upon the British positions. A tongue-in-cheek letter from one of the Munsters remarks on life in South Africa:

‘It is a very nice thing to hear a few shots going off in front of you, and to hear the bugles sounding the alarm, and then to remain in the trenches all night in khaki, and perhaps when it is raining all night... We are making roads and redoubts from 5am to 11am; sleeping from 12pm to 3pm and 8.30pm to 3am; fatigue from 4pm to 6pm; and from 3am to 4.30am we are in the trenches. We are getting very good food, but the water is out of the river... To look at it is enough... we have a singsong concert from retreat to first post, and if the Boers were near us they would begin to think they had come to an opera or variety concert.’



Fig 16; Boers at Spion Kop © Project Gutenberg, archive.org.



Fig 17; Royal Munster Fusiliers, 1899 (NAM, 1988-01-135-27) © National Army Museum, London

IRELAND AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

War was declared between Britain and Germany on 4 August 1914. The First World War initially began in the Balkans and quickly escalated into a conflict between the Entente Powers (chiefly Britain, France, Italy, Russia, and the USA) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire). The fact that the belligerent states controlled global empires ensured that their overseas territories would also experience warfare. In addition to the trenches of Europe, there was fighting in Africa and the Middle East and there were also brief hostilities in Asia. The First World War was a conflict between industrialised societies. They mobilized mass armies of men while millions of women were employed in wartime industries. To maintain support for the war at home, governments used visual propaganda. On the front, men engaged in trench warfare while industrial production and technological developments saw the eventual utilisation of phosgene gas, submachine guns, aircraft, and tanks.

At the time, Ireland was in the middle of the Home Rule crisis in which Nationalists sought self-government for Ireland within the Union. Unionists dismissed that prospect. The crisis intensified in 1913 with the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers. With the coming of war both Nationalists and Unionists sought to convince the British government of their loyalty in a bid to secure their demands once the war eventually ended. The Ulster Volunteer Force contributed 30,000 men, both volunteers and reservists. Amongst Nationalists, the Irish Parliamentary Party's active recruitment resulted in the enlistment of over 140,000 men. These included 24,000

recruits and 7,500 reservists from the Irish Volunteers. In total, over 206,000 Irishmen served in the British forces during the First World War.

In addition to an unknown number who were already serving before the war, a further 4,000 Limerick men were to join up between 1914 and 1918. The highest day for enlistment in the Royal Munster Fusiliers's districts was 29 April 1915 when 74 men were recruited in Limerick. Additionally, Limerick had the highest rate of recruitment per head of population in the Munsters's catchment area. The increase in recruitment saw four new battalions, the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th added to the Munsters. 93% of Limerick recruits, from both city and county, joined the Munsters in the city. The percentage of enlistments from Limerick's four parishes were:

St. John's (36.4%).

St. Michael's (32.8%).

St. Mary's (13.8%).

St. Munchin's (6.7%).

One family from Upper Henry Street, the McKnights, would see seven sons join up. Of these, six would serve in the Munsters. One of the brothers would be killed at Gallipoli whilst three others were wounded on the Western Front. The seventh brother, who served in the Leinster Regiment, was also wounded.

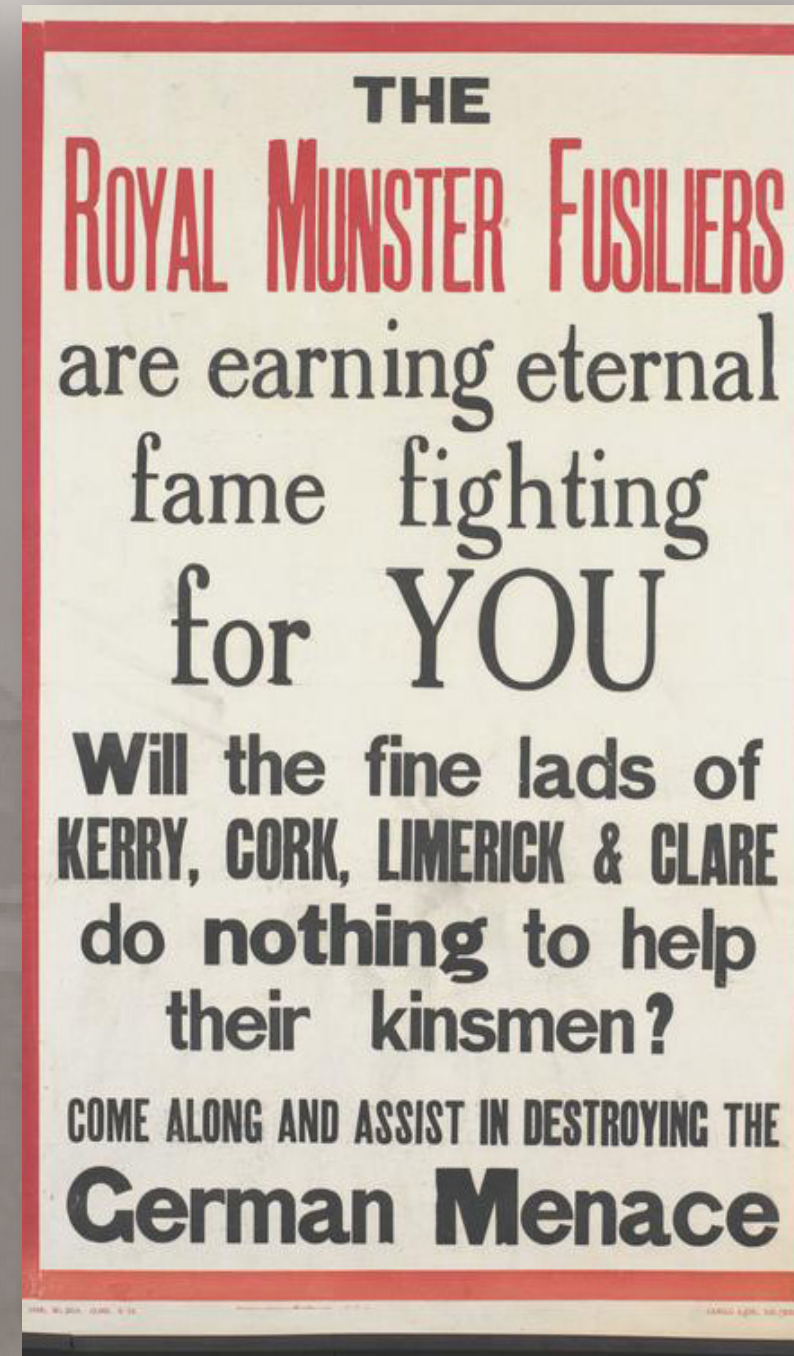


Fig 18: Royal Munster Fusiliers poster 'The Royal Munster Fusiliers are earning eternal fame fighting for you' (IWM. PST 13612) © Imperial War Museums.

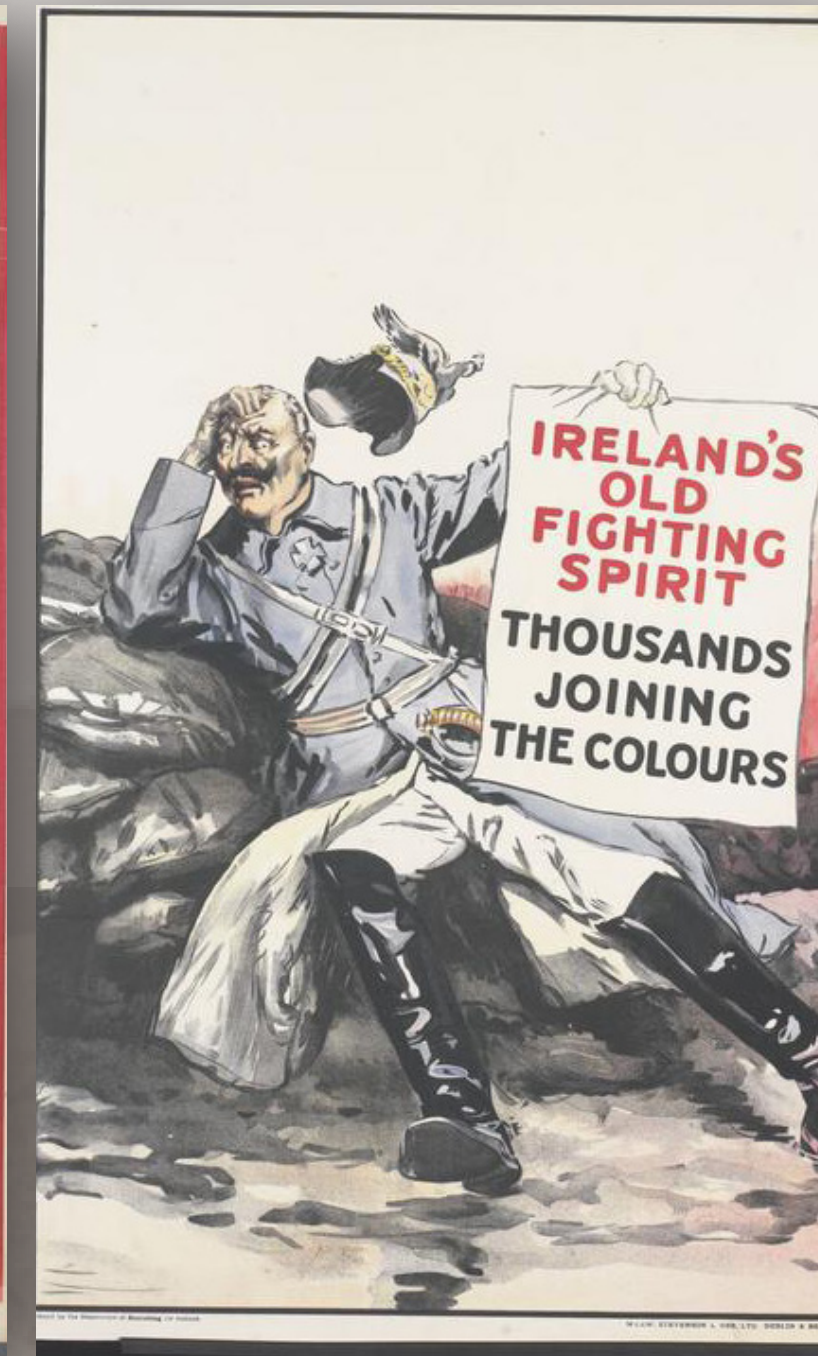


Fig 19: 'Ireland's Old Fighting Spirit' poster (IWM, PST 13644) © Imperial War Museums.



Fig 20: 'Your Country Needs You' poster © Imperial War Museums

THE WESTERN FRONT

The Western Front stretched from the North Sea to Switzerland and consisted of 440 miles of parallel Allied and German trenches. The Munsters saw action at many of the most well-known battles of the Western Front. They were present at Mons, Givenchy, Aubers, Loos, the Somme, Messines, Passchendaele, the Kaiserschlacht, and the Hundred Days Offensive. In particular, the 2nd Battalion spent the duration of the war on this front and 'went into battle' at full strength on thirteen occasions. In ten of these instances the battalion returned with less than 6 officers and 300 men.

One of the most famous actions in which the battalion was involved, was the 'action' at Etreux on 27 August 1914. The British Expeditionary Force had been forced to withdraw following the Battle of Mons and the Munsters formed the rear-guard. Under orders to not retreat unless called or unless forced to do so by the Germans, the Munsters were attacked at 10.30am and withdrew southwards at midday. Orders from the British command were sent out which ordered the battalion to retreat but they were never received. By the evening, the surviving Munsters had withdrawn to an orchard outside the village of Etreux where they were surrounded by the enemy. By 9.15pm only 250 out of 998 officers and men remained and they subsequently surrendered. 96 men had been killed and the remainder were reported missing. The majority of these were captured and many later died from their wounds. After Etreux, one officer of the Munsters wrote that he had: 'a bullet right through my throat and all the biceps of my left arm are blown away. Our fellows who were in the South African War say it was child's play to this.'

In May 1915, the 2nd Battalion then took part in another event for which they are remembered. During the Battle of Aubers Ridge, the battalion received absolution from their chaplain Fr. Francis Gleeson outside the village of Rue du Bois. This event, which occurred only 500 yards from the frontline, was later immortalised in a painting by Fortunino Matania. The following morning, artillery shelled the German lines for 40 minutes before the infantry advanced. The Munsters advanced through No Man's Land under enemy fire after which the survivors who broke through to the German trenches then endured fire from their own artillery while their ammunition quickly ran out. The attack began at 5am and the Munsters retreated at 11am. In the prelude to the battle, the 2nd Munsters had recovered their strength and had stood at 726 officers and men. Only 203 officers and men returned to the British line following the attack on 9 May.



Fig 21; Fortunino Matania, The Last Absolution of the Munsters at Rue de Bois © Limerick Museum.



The Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Royal Munster Fusiliers returning from the victory at Ginchy (Limerick Museum) 1998.2227

Fig 22; Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Royal Munster Fusiliers returning from the victory at Ginchy © Limerick Museum.

GALLIPOLI

The Ottoman Empire had joined the war on the side of Germany in October 1914. The Gallipoli campaign of 1915, in which the 1st, 6th, and 7th Munsters saw action, was intended to allow the allies to attack Constantinople and knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war. The campaign quickly developed into a stalemate in which the allies held several beachheads, endured heat, dust and ‘thousands of green flies as big as bumble bees’ and were unable to move further inland. In total, over 132,000 men would be killed.

The 1st Munsters took part in the first landings in April 1915. On the morning of 25 April, they endured heavy enemy machine-gunfire from Sudd-el-Bahr fort as they landed at Cape Helles. The battalion lost 54 men on the first day. The following morning, the Munsters took part in the capture of the fort during which the actions of Corporal William Cosgrove would result in him becoming the first man from the regiment to receive a Victoria Cross. The battalion spent much of the next two months on duty in the trenches repelling Turkish assaults. By mid-July they had 500 men. On 21 August they attacked what was known as ‘Scimitar hill’ and lost 3 officers and 79 men dead and an additional 5 officers and at least 200 men wounded. By November, men were being evacuated from the trenches as the weather changed for the worse. Men died in flooded trenches and from exposure. The 1st Munsters were sent to Egypt and afterwards to the Western Front. Almost 45% of the 1st Munsters losses between 1914 and 1918 were inflicted during the Gallipoli campaign.

The 6th and 7th Munsters formed part of the 10th (Irish Division) which landed at Suvla Bay in August 1915. The attack, which began on 6 August, was intended to outflank the Turkish positions and to break the stalemate.

On the second day, the 7th Munsters had taken over 70 casualties. Nine days later, the 6th Munsters took part in an attack which saw them advance by one mile and fend off Turkish counterattacks. They lost 43 men including Gus Neilon of Prospect who played rugby with Young Munsters. The battalion remained at the front throughout the next day during which it faced heavy artillery fire from the enemy. The action at Suvla Bay took a heavy toll on the 6th and 7th Munsters. By 19 August, the 6th Munsters had lost 519 officers and men while the 7th Munsters lost 513 officers and men. By September, the battalions had been consigned to trenches where sickness became the main cause of casualties. Thereafter, the 10th Division was sent to Macedonia to fight against the Bulgarians.



Fig 23; Beach at Cape Helles, 1915 (NAM, 1965-10-209-14) © National Army Museum.

THE 'IRON TWELVE'

During the retreat from Mons in the summer of 1914, numerous British and French soldiers were trapped behind the German lines. Allied soldiers and refugees hid in the woods of northern France with as many as 120 Munsters trying to escape. To catch them, the Germans pulled much needed men and materials from the front. Eleven soldiers, five from the Munsters, five from the Connaught Rangers and one soldier from the King's Hussars, were sheltered by French civilians in the village of Iron for five months. In February 1915 the soldiers were betrayed to the Germans. This was caused by a love affair involving the son of their helper and a jealous husband. On 25 February 1915, the eleven soldiers and the Frenchman who had helped hide them were executed. It remains the largest execution of British soldiers by the Germans in the First World War. It is estimated that the Germans executed at least fifty British soldiers during the war. The villagers in Iron who had aided the soldiers were imprisoned in France and Germany. Family members who remained in Iron were made homeless and relied on charity and begging to survive until their relatives were released.

There were 2,500 Irish prisoners in German camps by December 1914. Almost 600 of these were from the 2nd Battalion of the Munsters, captured by the Germans after Etreux in 1914. In 1915, over 30 men from the 7th Battalion were captured by the Bulgarians. During the German Spring Offensive of 1918, a further 500 men from the 1st and 2nd Battalions were captured. Prisoners from the Munsters were at held at Giessen, Limburg, and Sennelager in Germany. Accounts from the camps give contrasting reports regarding life within them.

One soldier wrote of the lack of food and poor hospital conditions. The experience of living in the camps certainly contributed to the early deaths of former prisoners after their release. Successful negotiations between Britain and Germany would ensure that badly wounded men would be released from captivity. As a result, small groups of Munsters were released and allowed to enter neutral Switzerland. Following the Armistice in 1918, the prisoners were released and returned home.

In Ireland, the collection of 'comforts' to be sent to Munsters imprisoned by the Germans began in November 1914. By 1916 the RMF Prisoners of War Fund had supplied 8,775 parcels to 670 men from the Munsters who were imprisoned in Germany and Bulgaria. The cost of these was estimated at £10,000. This was made possible through public fundraising and donations although it is suspected that these endeavours became increasingly difficult as public opinion in Ireland towards the war began to change.



Fig 24: French refugees, the retreat from Mons Aug-Sept 1914 (IWM. Q 50223) © Imperial War Museums.

CASUALTIES

An Armistice was signed between the Allies and Germany on 11 November 1918. At least 37,000 Irishmen had been killed in the conflict. Over 1,000 of these men came from Limerick and 300 of those were killed with the Munsters. Limerick's youngest casualty was Lance Corporal John Nash, 2nd Battalion of the Munsters. Nash was killed in February 1916 at age 16. The Munsters lost at least 2,578 men over the course of the war and many thousands more were injured. Below is a sample list with names and ranks of men from Limerick City and County who were killed while serving with the Munsters between 1914 and 1918:



Fig 26; Dead soldiers in mass grave (IWM. Q 105720) © Imperial War Museums..



Fig 25; Casualties on the Western Front (IWM. Q 501) © Imperial War Museums.

Ashford, Private, George. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1918.

Benson, Private, James. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1915.

Burke, Lance Corporal, William. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1916.

Campbell, Private, Patrick. 1st Bn. Killed, 1915.

Carroll, Private, Timothy. 1st Bn. Killed, 1916.

Danagher, Sergeant Major, David. 1st Bn. Killed, 1915.

Donwarth, Drummer, William. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1914.

Enright, Corporal, Michael. 8th Bn. Killed, 1916.

Flynn, Private, Thomas. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1917.

Foley, Sergeant, Timothy. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1918.

Ashford, Private, George. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1918.

Benson, Private, James. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1915.

Burke, Lance Corporal, William. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1916.

Campbell, Private, Patrick. 1st Bn. Killed, 1915.

Carroll, Private, Timothy. 1st Bn. Killed, 1916.

Danagher, Sergeant Major, David. 1st Bn. Killed, 1915.

Donwarth, Drummer, William. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1914.

Enright, Corporal, Michael. 8th Bn. Killed, 1916.

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Benson, Private, James. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1915.

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Flynn, Private, Thomas. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1917.

Foley, Sergeant, Timothy. 2nd Bn. Killed, 1918.

THE FUSILIERS DISBANDED

Due to the heavy casualties incurred during the First World War, the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th battalions that had been formed in 1914 were disbanded and their soldiers assigned to the remaining original battalions. After the war, the 2nd Battalion was sent to Egypt where it aided the local police in putting down civil unrest in 1920s Cairo. Apart from the Connaught Rangers, which experienced a 60-man mutiny in India in 1920, Irish regiments largely remained quiet during the War of Independence, 1919-21. Ex-soldiers joined the Irish Republican Army while others fell victim to both the IRA and the Crown Forces who struggled for control of the country. Despite what was happening in Ireland, the British Army continued to have appeal for Irishmen and an estimated 20,000 enlisted.

In December 1922, the 2nd Battalion was in Khartoum in Sudan when it was ordered to return to England amid rumours and the eventual confirmation that the Royal Munster Fusiliers would be disbanded along with six other Irish regiments. On 11 June at 4.45pm the Battalion paraded with the Regimental Colours for the last time. The next day, 12 June 1922, the Colours were handed over to George V in a ceremony at Windsor Castle. The last regimental dinner was then held on 17 June 1922.

Throughout June and July, the men were then discharged from service. They assimilated easily into Irish society post-1922 and many of them would enlist in the Free State army. Indeed, ex-member of the Munsters would re-enlist to fight in the Second World War between 1939 and 1945. Houses for ex-servicemen

of the Munsters could be found in Limerick in Kilmallock and in the city at Rosbrien and Bengal Terrace. Nonetheless, other ex-servicemen lived in reduced circumstances.

The memory of the regiment was kept alive by its Old Comrade's Association which had been first formed in 1914. The association organised an annual dinner, and memorial services in Limerick, Cork, Tralee, and London. They also provided financial aid for former members of the regiment. The association's heyday was in the late 1920s and 1930s, however, membership steadily declined in the 1950s and 1960s. The Old Comrade's Association was disbanded in 1969. The memory of the Royal Munster Fusiliers continues to live on in the Royal Munster Fusiliers Association.



Fig 27; Colour party of the Irish regiment on the occasion of their disbandment (NAM, 1959 - 05 - 112-59) © National Army Museum



Fig 28; Presentation of colours by Edward, Prince of Wales to 1st Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers at Tavistock, 1921 (NAM, 2004-08-25-1) © National Army Museum.



Fig 29; Reception of the colours of disbanded Irish regiments by George V (NAM, 1960-03-85-1) © National Army Museum.

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