

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

ACTIVE SERVICE

Outbreak of War

On 28th June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist. In response, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Russia stepped in to support Serbia. France's treaty with Russia drew them in. Germany marched on France, through neutral Belgium. Due to the terms of an old treaty with Belgium, Britain declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914.

When war was declared, 20,000 Irishmen were already serving in the British army and a further 30,000 Irish reservists were called up. These soldiers and reservists became part of the British Expeditionary Force, sent straight to Belgium. All Irish soldiers that did enlist were volunteers as conscription was never introduced in Ireland. Various economic and social factors combined with propaganda campaigns encouraged local men to enlist. Fewer farm workers enlisted as working conditions and wages were much better compared to the working environment within the textile industry and factories which witnessed a high level of enlistment.

The 36th (Ulster) Division

The 36th (Ulster) Division was formed in September 1914, as an infantry division within the British Army. The new division was established for recruiting members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) who demonstrated their loyalty to the British Empire. The division is remembered for the casualties it suffered during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. The battle began on 1st July and ended on 18th November. During the battle, the German Army was attacked by men from the United Kingdom, France, Canada, India, Newfoundland, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia. Every region and county in the United Kingdom lost men that day. The casualty figures for the Allied Forces was 419,654 from Britain and the Dominions and 204,253 French. The German casualties were between 465,000 and 600,000, of which 164,055 were killed. The battle is recognised as the largest battle on the Western Front during World War One.

The 16th (Irish) Division

While members of the Ulster Volunteer Force joined the 36th (Ulster) Division, members of the Irish Volunteers who followed Redmond's call to support the war effort joined the 16th (Irish) Division. Therefore, the division was made up mostly of Catholics and nationalists from all over Ireland, though the officer class was mostly Protestant and often unionist.

During January and February 1916, the division was introduced to trench warfare and suffered significant losses during the Battle of Hulluch. By July 1916, the 16th (Irish) Division was re-positioned in the Somme Valley and was fully engaged in the Battle of the Somme. By August 1916 the division helped capture Ginchy. Over 10 days in September, the division suffered over 4,000 casualties.

The 10th (Irish) Division

The 10th (Irish) Division was made up from the first 100,000 men that enlisted in Ireland during the first fortnight of the War. Redmond praised the 10th Division, but it was criticised by unionists for having its numbers made up by non-Irishmen. Yet, it is assumed that 70 per cent of its men and 90 per cent of its officers were Irish. The 10th (Irish) Division was sent off from training camps in Ireland to England with no bands, no flags and no public farewell or welcome. There was also very little media coverage of the division and likewise the government and army officials did not comment heavily on its movements. This was very different to the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions.

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Captain Arthur O'Neill MP

Captain Arthur Edward Bruce O'Neill, MP for Mid-Antrim, was the first Member of Parliament to be killed during the War. He was the son and heir of Baron and Lady O'Neill of Shane's Castle. He joined the 2nd Life Guards in 1897 and took part in many operations during the Boer War. As a Unionist politician and a soldier, he was an officer in the North Antrim Regiment of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

He died on Friday 4th November 1914, just three weeks after re-joining his regiment, during a bayonet charge on German positions at Klein Zillebeke during the First Battle of Ypres.

His third son, Terrence O'Neill was Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1963 to 1969.



Captain Arthur O'Neill
The Ballymena Observer, 7 May 1915

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William Calderwood

William Calderwood was born and raised in Duneaney, Glarryford, in last decades of the nineteenth century. He and his family left their rural homeland to find better opportunities in the United States. William emigrated to America on 11th October 1909. At the outbreak of the War, he decided to fight, and, as the United States was neutral, joined the 116 Canadian Infantry. He was wounded in France and reported missing. Another soldier reported that he had seen him being killed, bayoneted, during a German attack on their position.

Later, his family were informed that he was a POW and alive. When he was released, William set the story straight. A German soldier was about to bayonet him but was stopped by a German Officer on the grounds that that he was wounded and not in combat. After the War, he returned to The States and settled in Illinois.



William Calderwood in 116 Canadian Infantry uniform.

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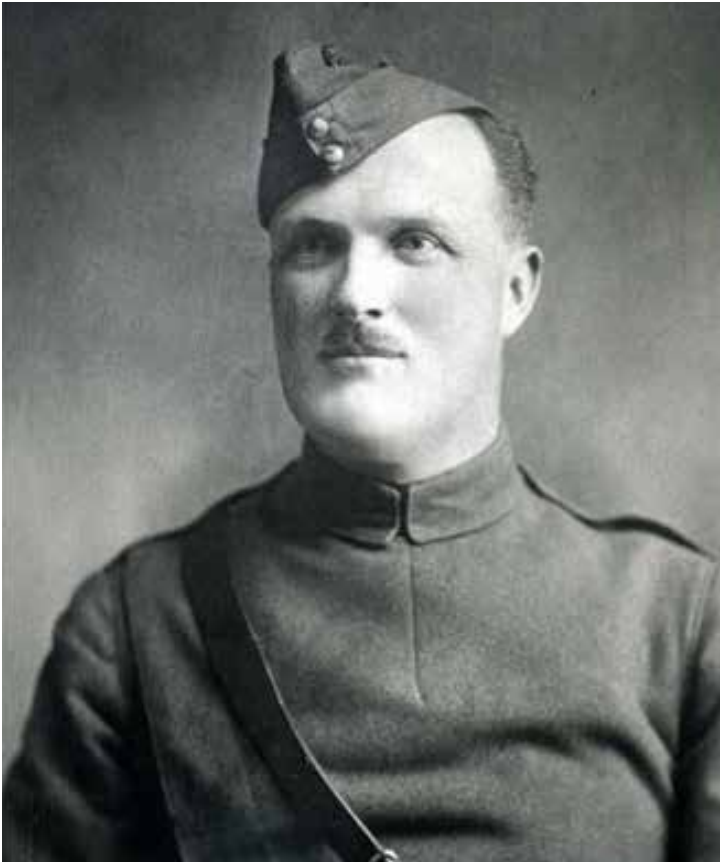
FOCUS STORIES

ACTIVE SERVICE

James Donnelly

James Donnelly, a father of two, from Ballintoy was working in Belfast before war broke out. His brother Frank, had previously fought in the Boer War; this perhaps inspired James to enlist. He had a strong sense of duty and, despite being 40 years old, was able to join the 59th Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps. The squadron was a reconnaissance unit based on the Western Front, where it lost several planes to the legendary Red Baron. The 59th was celebrated, with considerable inaccuracy, in the film "Dawn Patrol" starring Errol Flynn.

James Donnelly was one of the last casualties of the Royal Flying Corps, dying on the 31st of March 1918. The following day the organisation was reformed as the Royal Air Force.



James Donnelly in uniform
Courtesy of Miriam Thompson

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ACTIVE SERVICE

Private John Meeke

Private John Meeke had lain in an unmarked grave in Derrykeighan Old Churchyard for 80 years, when in 2005 Robert Thompson and Keith Beattie recovered his story. John rescued Major William Redmond under heavy fire during the Battle of Messines, being wounded twice. In 1917 in Ireland this was a celebrated act of heroism, but since then has been all but forgotten.

Meeke was a stretcher-bearer for the 36th (Ulster) Division. He was born on 13th April 1894, the third of a family of 10. He lived with his parents on the Montgomery estate, Benvardeen, in County Antrim. Major William Redmond was a Nationalist MP and an officer of the 16th (Irish) Division. His brother John was leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party.

On 7th June 1917 both the 36th and 16th Divisions advanced together into the battle on Messines Ridge. John Meeke was searching the battlefield for wounded men when he saw Major Redmond fall. He faced heavy machine-gun fire and



Headstone to Pte John Meeke 'Hero of Messines', Derrykeighan Old Church Graveyard

other artillery to get to him. As he bandaged Redmond's wounds, Meeke was hit on his left side. Redmond ordered him to retreat. Meeke refused and moments later he was hit again. Once more he disobeyed Redmond's order to save himself. Under a constant barrage of bullets, both men were rescued eventually by a patrol from the 36th (Ulster) Division who were escorting German prisoners back to British lines.

Unfortunately Redmond died from his injuries several hours later. Meeke insisted on returning to the battlefield to search for more casualties, until he too was taken to the field dressing station for treatment. He was awarded the Military Medal for bravery. Near the end of the war Meeke was once again wounded, when an explosive bullet hit his leg. The damage was extensive, and he subsequently went through eight operations to mend it.

John came back to Benvardeen after the war, and took work as a gardener on the estate. Sadly, he developed tuberculosis shortly after marrying in 1922 and died on 7th December 1923. No headstone was erected for John; he was remembered by a simple epitaph on his brother's headstone, reading: "Also in memory of Pte. John Meeke M.M. R. Innis Fus. Who died Dec 1923 aged 25 and is buried nearby". (In fact, John was 29. A local paper reporting his death included errors in his biographical information).

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Tom McKinney

Tom McKinney was born in 1893. He attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and Ballyhaise Agricultural College, where he prepared to take over his farming inheritance at Sentry Hill, Carnmoney. Sadly, this never came to pass. He died in July 1916 at the Somme. On 8th September 1914, Tom enlisted in the Public Schools and University Men's Force, which he was eligible to join due to his time at 'Inst'.

Tom was placed in the 20th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, who were sent to Surrey for training. From this time onwards, Tom frequently corresponded with his beloved family at Sentry Hill. By 21st November 1915, Tom had arrived at the Somme and had his first experience of trench life. However, it was not until February 1916, that he gave any indication of the dangers he faced at the Front. His letter on the 18th noted that he had had a near shave, sustaining a scalp wound, for which he was medically treated. Later, as a war trophy, Tom sent home the soft cap he was wearing during this incident. Censorship at the Front limited the details soldiers could share with those at home, but on the 4th April, Tom did offer insight into his soldiering duties:

'we snippers generally shoot at Germans but it requires a lot of patience and continual watching through a loophole before one is likely to see a Boche – when there is no prospect of seeing a German, we shoot at their periscopes.'



Photograph taken in the garden at Sentry Hill which includes Tom, in uniform, standing with his only sibling, sister Elsie. Seated in the middle is John McKinney, Tom's father, flanked by Tom's aunts, Janet (on right) and Meg (on left). Sentry Hill Collection

During the 'Big Push' of 1st July, Tom's battalion was ordered to occupy key British fortifications in the Givenchy area and to support the 1st Battalion of the Cameronian Regiment, who led the attack in this sector. The latter were mown down by enemy fire that day. On 2nd July, surviving Scottish troops were withdrawn and were replaced by men from Tom's battalion. They remained there until 8 July. On 3rd July, Tom became a casualty of German shelling. He sustained a shrapnel wound to the thigh and was evacuated to receive medical attention. Tom's family were notified by telegram on 6th July. A few days later, they received a letter from Tom's friends advising them that his injuries were

'Not at all considered dangerous.'

On 7th July, Tom was admitted to the military hospital at St. Omer's. From there, a Sister Dempster regularly wrote to his family with updates. Within a week, his condition gradually became more critical. Despite the best efforts of medical staff, a bacterial infection, 'gas gangrene', had set in and caused his wound to rot. Tom died at 7.30pm on 19th July 1916. Being a well-connected family, the McKinneys received many letters expressing sympathy and offering consolation. His family was overcome with grief, particularly his grandfather William Fee McKinney, who died the following year.

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The Torbitt Family

Four months after the outbreak of war, four members of the Torbitt family were featured in the Larne Times and Weekly Advertiser for their patriotism and willingness to take an active role in the War. Robert, William and Thomas Torbitt had all enlisted in the 12th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles (Central Antrim Volunteers), and their sister Mary had joined the Factory District Nursing Corps.

Their Father, originally from Ahoghill, was a weaver. Their Mother was from Bracknamuckley, Portglenone. In 1901, they lived at 19 Ballybeg, Ahoghill, but by 1911 they resided at, Old Glenarm Road, Larne. They had nine children. Before the War, William, like other members of his family worked at Larne Weaving Company. He was also bandmaster of the Sir John Smiley Flute Band. He enlisted, aged 23. He was killed in action on 1st July 1916, at the Somme. By June 1919, a compensation payment of £4 7s 8d was made to his next-of-kin, his father. He is listed on Gardenmore Presbyterian Church



Roll of Honour on Larne War Memorial and is remembered at Thiepval Memorial.

His brothers, Thomas and Robert, survived the War. Thomas had enlisted in Larne on 15th September 1914, aged 19. He served with the British Expeditionary Force from October 1915 until September 1918 and was wounded twice. Afterwards, he worked as a skipper on a Kelly's Coal Boat. During World War Two, he served with the Merchant Navy. He also survived this conflict. Robert was only 17 when he enlisted, in September 1914. By March 1918, he was "missing". This information was sent to the Reverent Robert Millar, Curran Road, Larne, so that he could notify the family. Robert had been taken Prisoner of War.

After the War ended, Robert resumed working at Larne Weaving Company. On 22nd June 1921, he married his wife, Isabella, at 1st Larne Presbyterian Church. Until his death, Robert suffered greatly from his war wounds and injuries. Because of this, he secured one of 12 newly built ex-servicemen houses, located on Upper Waterloo Road, Larne, where Isabella lived until 1978. Robert died on 5th December 1959. His death certificate confirmed that the coronary thrombosis which killed him, stemmed from old gunshot wounds on the neck and left thigh. He had sustained these during the War. Both Thomas and Robert were awarded the 1914-1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal for their service in World War One.

Newspaper feature on the Torbitt family
Larne Times & Weekly Telegraph, 12 December 1914

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John Heaney

John Heaney was born in Dungiven to Catholic parents, and like many from rural backgrounds, travelled to find work. John had travelled the well trod path to Scotland and found himself in Ayrshire when war broke out. John was only 19 or 20 working in Scotland as a migrant farm labourer. Instead of coming home to enlist for the war effort, John quickly joined the Royal Scottish Fusiliers in Kilmarnock, and later disembarked in Gallipoli on 7th June 1915.

On the twelfth of July an attack was made on Turkish trenches. General Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander in Chief of Mediterranean Expeditionary Force commented in dispatches:

“a fine feat of arms had been accomplished, and a solid and enduring advance had been achieved.....”

John Heaney from Dungiven was amongst the 3,000 Allied soldiers who died in the accomplishment.



John Heaney
Courtesy of John O'Kane

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James Harper

James Harper was a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Like many others, he enlisted for Imperial service in the 36th (Ulster) Division. Local volunteers were organised into the 10th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, known as 'The Derrys'.

'Urgent...You will parade at the Drill Hall Limavady on Tuesday morning the 15 September at 7:45am and from there proceed by train to Finner Camp Ballyshannon. Your dress will be your ordinary clothes (no uniform) with overcoat of you so desire.'

Signed by M.M McCausland Commander 2nd Battalion, North Londonderry Regiment U.V.F 12 Sept 1914

Courtesy of A Harper

The Derrys were part of the first advance at the Somme on 1st July 1916. James died that day. James' body was never found. He is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing.



Surviving photograph of a platoon from The Derrys, taken at Finner Camp in 1914. James Harper's sister has highlighted him amongst the group.

Courtesy of A. Harper