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ife in the trenches was indescribably miserable. There were three lines of trenches; the first, at the front line, was protected by machine-guns and barbed wire entanglements; behind were the support and reserve trenches. It was said of the Munsters that they 'waste men wickedly' because they did not keep properly under cover in the reserve lines.¹

To get from one trench to another they had to pass through what was known as the communication trench. Through this network ran the telephone wires which were fastened by staples to the side of the trenches. When it rained, the staples fell out and the wires fell down, tripping the soldiers as they moved through the trenches.

For a newcomer, travelling by night in the trenches was a hazard. If the wires did not trip him up, he was liable to fall into a hidden hole. The trenches were dug in a zig-zag pattern in order to contain a bomb explosion and also to stop the enemy soldiers from firing down the full length of the trench. A well dug trench, raised with sandbags, provided full cover for a standing man. To fire over the top of the trench, a step which was known as a fire-step, was cut out of the mud. Rain was one of the greatest problems, for when it poured, the soldiers could be standing for hours in mud and water up to their waist. During a battle, the wounded

THE SECOND MUNSTERS 1914 — 1918

by Des Ryan

Part Two

would slip, unnoticed, "into the slime and would often drown and lie concealed for days".²

Standing in muddy water for hours caused the feet to swell and rot (this condition was known as 'trench feet'). The soldiers also caught trench-fever. One of the most frightening periods of all, for both sides, was when the artillery pounded the trenches. Bodies and earth flew everywhere and men were buried alive. For the soldiers trapped in the trenches, there was nothing to do but pray. The men had names for the different calibre German shells: 'Coal Boxes' or 'Jack Johnsons', because

when these shells exploded, they gave off clouds of black smoke. Another shell was called a 'Whizz Bang', because, unlike a normal shell which gave off a shrieking sound as it approached, this one arrived silently.

What was the daily routine in the trenches like? Before dawn, all the men were awakened and quickly took up their positions on "the fire-step in case of a German attack at first light".³ The German infantry probably did the same on their side of the line. Both sides might fire off a few shots. If there was no attack, it was hoped that a quiet day would follow.⁴ Breakfast was cooked



A recruiting drive by the Munster Fusiliers in Ennis, 1914.

over little fires, and men shaved and washed, provided they had enough water to do so. In quiet sectors, both sides observed a truce in this morning domestic period. Any artillery which did not obey this rule was roundly abused because it only encouraged prompt retaliation.⁵ As the day dragged on, the men tried to relax or catch up on sleep, but this was almost impossible as some soldiers walked by, kicking the legs of their sleeping comrades. The officers inspected the trenches and jobs were found for the soldiers before the first shell arrived. In some units a measure of rum was issued, and hot meals were brought up from the rear.

In the evening, if the German trenches were near enough, a sing-song might start. Each side would take turns and, as darkness fell, applause and encores would sound out across no-man's-land. But, for the most part, the two sides neither saw nor heard each other for long periods.⁶ When darkness fell, work began for both sides: damaged trenches were repaired; food, stores and ammunition were brought up to the front lines; sentries were posted for the night; raiding parties went out and, as daybreak came, another routine day had dawned on the Western Front.⁷

In the disastrous Gallipoli campaign of 1915, the 1st. Battalion of the Munsters, who were entrenched at Suvla Bay, had to jump out of their trenches when, after a heavy rainfall, the water came gushing down them. It happened so fast that some of the men were drowned. During the night of the flood, a pony, a mule, a pig and two dead Turkish soldiers were swept into the trenches. Many Munsters died in the trenches from exposure in the snow and winds of that winter.

Disillusioned with the cries of 'home before Christmas', the armies on the Western Front were, by January 1915, settling down to a war of attrition. And by then, the trench system had stretched from Nieuport in Belgium, down through France, to the Swiss frontier.

In the early days of January 1915, the Munsters were having a relatively quiet time repairing and maintaining the trenches. But this respite did not last long, and they were soon back in the front line, holding an area between Givenchy and the La Bassee canal. While there had been sporadic fighting throughout the month, the Germans made a determined attack, on January 25th, to take the town of Bethune. They thought it would make a nice present for the Kaiser, whose birthday was on the 27th. One machine-gunner describes what happened:

"On the morning of January 25th, the Germans commenced a lively cannonade on the right and left of our positions, as they were the weakest points in our lines. Our batteries and

heavy artillery soon began with deadly effect, and lasted for over three hours, smashing their trenches to pulp. Shells were going at the rate of a hundred a minute - like hailstones. At about 8.30 the same morning large masses of Germans were to be seen advancing on the right of the canal (La Bassee), which was about fifty yards across. It looked very critical for the time being; however, we were not to be daunted; we held our ground until the last, but the numbers told. The battalion on our right had to fall back to their reserve trenches, leaving our battalion, the Munsters, in a terrible position and exposed to a murderous fire. Then came the most arduous task of the day: there was nothing for us but to retire. The next moment we heard our machine guns opening rapid fire at the rate of 500 rounds a minute, covering our retirement. Then, the same evening, the order came that the trenches should be taken at all costs, and of course the Munsters had to do the work again ... Just before dusk, our artillery opened a terrific fire to cover our advance; then they (the Germans) were only 70 yards away. The first dash we made we gained our lost trenches, leaving many dead in front of us and plenty helmets and jack-boots, very good souvenirs; but, after the charge, they had good reason to know the Munsters, who played a most prominent part in the gallant charge".⁹

In the village of Givenchy the Germans charged down the street and, in the fierce hand-to-hand fighting which followed, they were driven out.

The Munsters had another break from the fighting during the last two weeks of February, and were inspected by Lieut-General C.C. Monro, who commented: "Everybody knows what the Munsters have done, and how they did it. I have every confidence in the Regiment".¹⁰

Between the 10th and 12th March, the British Expeditionary Force gained a piece of ground, 4,000 yards by 1,000 yards, at the loss of nearly 13,000 men.¹¹ It was also around this time that one of the senior commanders of the B E F was dismissed for protesting against the cost in casualties of repetitive frontal attacks.¹²

On St. Patrick's Day, the fusiliers attended a mass which was said by Fr. Gleeson, the battalion chaplain. Major Rickard, who was then in charge of the battalion, read out a message which he had received the previous day from Lieut-General Monro:

"Tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day. Will you therefore convey to all the ranks of the Royal Munster Fusiliers my very best wishes on this great anniversary for all Irishmen, and at the same time tell them that I fully recognize the fine fighting spirit they

have displayed throughout the campaign? They have behaved like true Irishmen; I am very proud to have them under my command. May all good luck attend the Battalion".¹³

During Easter, news was received of an impending German attack. But this information did not deter Fr. Gleeson from carrying out his



priestly duties to the men, and he spent four days in the front line, about 150 yards from the German trenches. It might be said that many Catholic priests earned a reputation for being in the front line with their men.

In early May, the French Army launched their spring offensive at Arras. To stop the Germans from sending men and supplies down the line, the BEF carried out a supporting attack, but their main objective was a position behind the German lines, known as Auber's Ridge. The Munsters, who were with the 1st Army, were to attack from the trenches outside the village of Rue du Bois. On the evening of May 8th, the fusiliers marched through the village and halted on the side of the road, about

500 yards from the trenches. In front of each company was a green flag, with an Irish harp and the word 'Munster' embroidered on it. Fr. Gleeson, on horseback, and wearing his stole, faced the men, who were standing in a U-shaped square. Behind Fr. Gleeson, a crucifix had survived in a damaged shrine. As the

Second World War.

Fr. (later Canon) Gleeson, served for many years in Dublin and donated the stole used at Rue du Bois to a Munsters' Museum. He died in 1958, and one old Munster commented: "A canon when he died - a saint when next we all meet again".

At 5 a.m. on the 9th May, the artillery

parapet with a cheer. Every man tried to beat the others to get there first".¹⁵

But the elaborate preparations were all in vain. As the Munsters left the trenches, a shell exploded among B Company, killing a number of men. A Company also suffered heavy casualties from German machine-gun fire but continued to advance to within 50 yards of the German front line trenches, where they laid down and waited for the artillery to stop. At 5.40 a.m. the barrage lifted. To the right and left, other battalions were held up by the intense fire. A and C companies got to the edge of the German trenches, but could not advance any further. The attack was failing. "Several of the Munsters could be seen standing on the German trenches waving one of the Green flags; then one of them was shot and the rest disappeared".¹⁶

Meanwhile, what was left of B Company cleared the German trenches in their area, and continued the advance. As they reached the stream, "some of the men tried to swim across but barbed wire had been staked across the bottom and they were drowned".¹⁷ The survivors took up positions along the bank of the stream and began firing at the German infantry who were by then pursuing them. By this time, the artillery had received word that the attack had failed and that they were to open fire again. Those Munsters who were now behind the German lines were trapped. They could not go forward and retreat was cut off. Most of the men, with the exception of two or three who were captured, were killed by their own artillery. Major Rickard, who had been with "D" Company, was killed instantly as he left the trenches that morning.¹⁸

At 10.30 a.m., the battalion was ordered to retire. As one report stated: "We were the only Regiment in the Brigade who succeeded in doing the job we were put out to do, but eventually found ourselves in the same place as we had started".¹⁹ By 11 a.m. what was left of the battalion had returned to Rue du Bois - 200 men out of 700. Later that day, another attack was ordered, with what was left of the Munsters in support, but that also failed.

After the war, the shrine at Rue du Bois was bulldozed into a pile of rubble to make way for a road. In the 1930s the owner of the land built a little wayside memorial chapel on this new road from Bethune and Armentiers. In 1971, it was discovered that the owner of a nearby cottage had the original plaque that had been placed at the shrine to commemorate the Munsters.

After the Allied failure to drive the Germany Army out of France and Belgium in the spring of 1915, General Joffre, the French Commander, was eager to have another crack at the Germans before the winter set in. The generals of BEF were reluctant to launch a



Some Limerick Fusiliers in South Africa.

shadows of night began to fall, the men stood bare-headed and received a general absolution from the priest. Then, the whole regiment sang the *Te Deum*. Recalling the event, a month later, Fr. Gleeson has this to say:

"The world has rarely, if ever, seen a body of men marching to battle as the Munsters did on that memorable battle-eve. There, in the twilight, the whole Battalion stood bareheaded and deeply reverent, while I imparted the Sacrament of Penance to all. They were all at Holy Communion the Sunday before".¹⁴

This famous scene was painted by the artist, Fortunino Matania, and prints of it have hung in many homes. The original painting was destroyed, in a bombing raid by the Luftwaffe, during the

opened fire on the German lines. A new method was being used - the 'creeping barrage'. Instead of leaving the trenches when the firing had stopped, the men moved across no-man's-land while the artillery was still firing in front of them. The Munsters, as part of a larger force, were to attack the German positions, near the village of Lorgies. The attack had been rehearsed beforehand, using an area similar to the one they were about to attack. Aerial photographs of German positions were given to all who needed them. Special bridges were constructed for the crossing of a stream behind the German front line. So all was ready for the great push forward. "At 5.30 a.m., the assault took place. When the commanding officer gave the order for the attack, every officer and man mounted the

new offensive so soon after their spring losses, but General Joffre was adamant that they participate. The BEF were to attack on a front between the La Basse canal in the north and the town of Lens in the south. The attack was set for 6.30 a.m. September 25th. Not having enough firepower to support their whole front, it was decided to use a new weapon – chlorine gas.

Chlorine does not suffocate; it poisons, stripping the lining of the bronchial tubes. The inflammation produces a massive amount of fluid that fills the lungs, blocks the windpipe and brings froth from the mouth. Its victims take up to two days to die, coughing up pint after pint of yellow fluid. Any metal object that the chlorine comes in contact with is tarnished – buttons, watches, coins, rifles, all turn a dull green.²⁰ During the preparations for the offensive (known as the Battle of Loos), the men were forbidden to use the word gas – they were told to call it the ‘accessory’.²¹

In the 24th of September, the Munsters were six miles behind the front line, and at 11 p.m. that night, they marched off in heavy rain to their ‘positions of readiness’. By 4 a.m. on the 25th, they had reached their objective and, while they waited for zero-hour, some of the men tried to get some sleep. This time the fusiliers, instead of being with the leading troops, found themselves in a supporting role to the 1st Brigade (the Munsters being in the 3rd).²² The 1st Brigade were to advance towards Hulluch and the 2nd were to attack south of a landmark known as ‘Lone Tree’. The French were to move in from the south and the Belgians from the north.

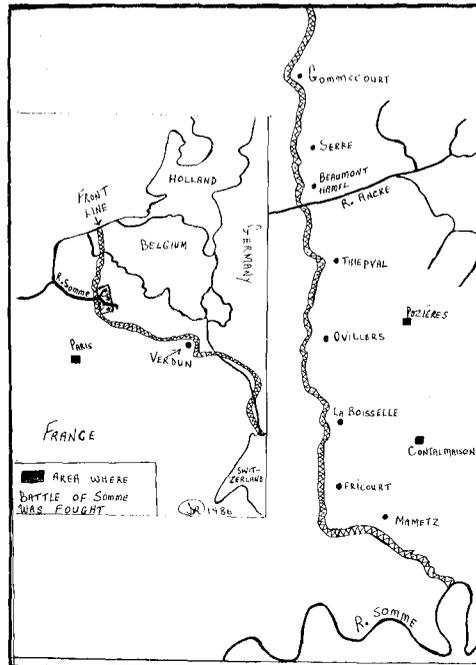
General Haig, commanding the 1st Army, had placed high hopes for the success of the attack on the use of the gas. An officer in one of the battalions had misgivings about its use and was heard to remark: “It’s not soldiering to use stuff like that. It’s dirty and it’ll bring us bad luck. We’re sure to bungle it”.²³

As the morning of the 25th dragged on, Haig became worried about whether the gas would work. Around 5 a.m., he could only feel the faintest breath of air and asked his senior aide to light a cigarette. The smoke drifted in puffs to the north-east. At 5.15 a.m., a slight increase of wind was felt and Haig gave the order to carry on. But the increase in the wind was misleading and, a few minutes later, he tried to stop the discharge and the attack.²⁴ Although there had been well-prepared plans to stop the release of the gas, Haig was told it was too late. As a result of this mistake, many of the infantry were poisoned by their own gas. One source put the figure at 2,639 casualties, which included seven fatalities.²⁵ Leading up to zero-hour, 150 tons of chlorine were discharged from containers in the trenches. Smoke can-

dles were used at intervals to simulate gas. As the greenish-yellow chlorine came hissing out, it slowing built up into a cloud, from thirty to fifty feet high.²⁶

Robert Graves, in his book *Goodbye To All That*, gives us a glimpse of the chaos that existed when the gas was being released:

“The spanners for unscrewing the cocks of the (gas) cylinders were found, with two or three exceptions, to be misfits. The gas-men rushed



Drawings of the battle area by Des Ryan.

about shouting and asking each other for the loan of an adjustable spanner. They discharged one or two cylinders with the spanners that they had; the gas went whistling out, formed a thick cloud a few yards away in no-man’s-land, and then gradually spread back into the trenches. The confusion in the front trench was great; the (German) shelling broke several of the gas-cylinders and the trench was soon full of gas. The gas-company dispersed!” On other parts of the front, the gas drifted into the German trenches. There can have been few among the infantry, packed like animals along the communication trenches, sweating in their improvised talc and flannel ‘respirators’, who did not feel a sense of foreboding as they waited for the whistle that signalled the beginning of the assault.

At 6.30 a.m., the infantry clambered out of the trenches and, in a fog of gas and smoke which made it difficult to see where they were going, began their advance across no-man’s-land.²⁷

Robert Graves was at the junction of a communication trench, known as Maison Rouge Alley, when the wounded started coming in, and

recorded the scene in *Goodbye to All That*:

“What’s happened? What’s happened?’ I asked. ‘Bloody balls-up’, was the most detailed answer I could get. Among the wounded were a number of men, yellow-faced and choking, with their buttons tarnished green; these were the gas cases”.

As the communication trenches became filled with the wounded and gassed, the Munsters were ordered to move into the support trenches. When the order came down the line, companies B, C and D were first to move out and, amid some confusion, they began to move across open ground. As A Company left the trenches, they were raked with heavy machine-gun fire which had also had up the advancing 2nd Brigade. Re-grouping, A Company was ordered into the offensive, and went to the aid of the battalion, nearest to them. Jumping across the front-line trenches, they were cheered on by some of the soldiers who had been gassed and wounded. They were followed by some of their comrades from B and D. When they reached the German front line, they found that the barbed wire was still intact, and many of them died on the wire. Later in the day, A and D made a second attack, (by this time, the Germans were also being attacked from the rear) and captured 200 Germans.

Meanwhile, the advance by the 1st Brigade towards Hulluch had not been made without casualties. Units had actually entered Hulluch, but were unable to consolidate their position, and were driven out again. Sometime in the afternoon, the Munsters moved into the captured German trenches, being within 300 yards of Hulluch, and remained there for the rest of the day. That night, they worked ceaselessly in bringing up provisions and ammunition, as it was thought that they were fresh and untouched in battle, although 200 of their numbers had been killed or wounded.²⁸

The next day, Haig ordered two fresh divisions to be thrown into the assault against the German ‘Second Position’. These two divisions, the 21st and the 24th, were part of Kitchener’s ‘New Armies’, and had had very little training. Now they were to proceed across no-man’s-land, in broad daylight, with no gas or smoke-cloud to cover them, and with little artillery support. Both of the divisions had been told that all that was required of them would be a long march in pursuit of a demoralised enemy. But the Germans had reinforced their lines. At 11 a.m. that morning, the 21st and 24th left the trenches. The leading columns of the 24th passed the south-east front of Hulluch. The diary of the 15th German Reserve Regiment describes what they saw:

“Ten columns of extended line could



A headstone at Mount St. Laurence Cemetery.

be clearly distinguished, each one estimated at more than a thousand men, and offering such a target as had never been seen before, or even thought possible. Never had the machine-gunners such straightforward work to do nor done it so effectively. They traversed to and fro along the enemy's ranks unceasingly. The men stood on the fire-steps, some even on the parapets, and fired triumphantly into the mass of men advancing across the open grass-land. As the entire field of fire was covered with the enemy's infantry, the effect was devastating and

they could be seen falling literally in hundreds".²⁹

As the soldiers advanced into the German fire, they came across little pockets of dead and dying from the detachments of the 2nd Brigade. Some of these men were delirious, and stood up and screamed at them to turn back, or to fetch stretcher bearers.

On the right flank, the 21st Division was suffering the same slaughter. The diary of the 153rd German Regiment records: "dense masses of the enemy, line after line, some of their officers even mounted on horseback and advancing as if carrying out a field-day

drill in peacetime. Our artillery and machine-guns riddled their ranks as they came on".

When the retreat began, the Germans ceased fire: "no shot was fired at them from the German trenches for the rest of the day, so great was the feeling of compassion and mercy for the enemy after such a victory".³⁰

The Munsters remained in the captured German trenches during the 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th, when they were relieved by the Irish Guards. On the last day, the adjutant of the battalion was killed. Sergeant-Major John Ring had just left him, when an artillery shell hit the trench. Ring rushed back to help the dying adjutant:

"He was very badly wounded by a 'Pig's Squeak' bursting in the trench. I went to see him at once and, although we knew at the time there was no hope, he still had the old cheery smile which everyone knew so well. I had him removed to the dressing station which was situated in the 1st line German trenches; the doctor looked at him but could do nothing for him. I sent him further down to a Field Ambulance. He died before he reached the hospital".³¹

Later, in October, 350 Munsters tried to hold a sector of the trenches which should have been covered by a battalion. After being reduced by another 100 men, it was quite obvious that the task was beyond their powers and, eventually, they were withdrawn.

In November, the Munsters were visited by the Irish nationalist leader, John Redmond: "A great honour was conferred on us on the 17th. Mr. John Redmond inspected the Regiment on parade, as we were on our way to the trenches".³² Redmond had arrived in France on the previous Wednesday, accompanied by his son Lieut. W. Redmond and his secretary, and spent three days in an extended tour of the front. He had seen the muddy trenches and the conditions in which the men lived. As he arrived, a green flag fluttered in the breeze, and the band struck up 'The Wearing of the Green'. After the inspection, the regiment formed a square and, from its centre, Redmond addressed the Battalion.³³

As Redmond prepared to address the Munsters, a Taube plane appeared overhead and the anti-aircraft batteries began to blaze away at it. Every sentence Redmond uttered was punctuated by the burst of a shell or the boom of a gun. He had, he said, come from Ireland to bring the men of the Munsters a message of affection and congratulations and an expression of the gratitude that the Irish nation felt for her fighting sons. Every movement of Irish soldiers was, he said, watched with the most intense interest and sympathetic attention by those at home. He was grieved that their ranks had been



The Munster Fusiliers recruiting in Limerick in 1914.

to the side of the trench with both hands until they were literally pulled out of the mud and water by their comrades. From the moment they entered the trench to their return to the support line, every man was soaked wet, caked in mud, bitterly cold, and miserable. Most of the time it was impossible to walk through the trench and, on several occasions, a platoon of Munsters made their way along the top of the trench in full view of the German soldiers, without a shot being fired. Almost every man in the battalion suffered from 'trench feet'.⁴⁷ (Robert Graves maintained that 'trench feet' was caused by "going to sleep, with wet boots, cold feet, the depression".)⁴⁸

In December, another raid was made on the German trenches. The artillery had pounded away for half an hour before the raid and, when a patrol of fourteen Munsters went over, they found the Germans had gone and that the trenches were nearly wiped out. When they came back and made their report, two officers were asked to go and see if the Germans had come back; two soldiers volunteered to go with them. One lieutenant and a private named Welsh were killed. The Munsters remained in the area during the Christmas period.

The day finally arrived when the Battalion was relieved and they were able to leave this terrible place. On January 1st 1917, the Battalion were resting near Bercourt Wood, east of Albert. And so ended two more years of war-

fare, with no apparent end in sight, and nothing to show but mounting casualties.

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(In the first part of this article Fr. Willie Gleeson should have read Fr. Francis Gleeson).