



# THE SECOND MUNSTERS IN FRANCE 1914 - 18

BY DES RYAN

**T**he Royal Munster Fusiliers were formed from the amalgamation of the 101st and the 104th Foot Regiments, Bengal Fusiliers. These two regiments became the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royal Munster Fusiliers, under an order passed in July, 1881. Although the regimental headquarters were in Tralee, many of the fusiliers and their officers were Limerickmen.

After spending their first 33 years on tours of duty through much of the British Empire, the Munsters were stationed at Aldershot when the German invasion of neutral Belgium brought England into the war on 4 August, 1914. The Munster Fusiliers formed part of the British Expeditionary Force to France. On 13 August, they left Southampton for the French port of Le Havre, arriving on the Belgian front on 22 August, where they formed part of the 1st of the two British armies, totalling 86,000 men, on a 20 mile front near the Belgian mining town of Mons.

The Germans attacked on the morning of Sunday, 23rd. As the battle raged all that day around the coal fields of Mons, the Munsters somehow escaped the German onslaught. About 5 p.m. the French 5th Army, which was to the right of the fusiliers, began to give way and retreat. Due to a lack of communication between the French and the British, Sir John French, the British commander, did not receive news of the retreat until 11 p.m. Later that night (2 a.m. on Monday 24th), the 1st and 2nd armies received their orders to disengage and pull back. It appears that the strategy was to hold the Germans at bay during daylight, and then fall back under the cover of darkness. That Monday morning, the Munsters were digging in as the German attack was renewed.

On 25 August, the retreating Munsters were expecting to billet at the French town of Landrecies. As the 1st

Army entered the town, they encountered on the road a body of troops who wore French uniforms and whose officer spoke in French. Suddenly, these troops, 'without the slightest warning, lowered their bayonets and charged'. They were German soldiers and, like the 1st Army, were also scheduled to billet that night at Landrecies. General Haig, thinking he was under heavy attack, telephoned the headquarters to send help. Assuming the worst, GHQ sent orders altering Haig's line of retreat for the next day. This move was to split the force in two, the result being that the 1st and 2nd armies lost contact for several days.

After a bayonet charge and a fierce artillery battle and a tiring march on Wednesday the 26th, the Munsters had reached the village of Fesmy, where they received their orders to cover the withdrawal of the remainder of the rearguard.

At 12.30 a.m., the road at Etreux was reported to be clear of all transport. At 1 p.m., orders were dispatched to all rearguard units to retire at once. This



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message failed to reach the Munsters, who were now under heavy attack at Fesmy.

Around 2 p.m., there was a lull in the fighting and the Munsters began evacuating their positions. The field-gunners went first and took up positions outside the village to cover the men's retreat. Meanwhile, A Company and a troop of Hussars, after being driven out of Bergues, retreated southwards towards Oisy, arriving about 3 p.m. By 5.30 p.m., nearly all the battalion was assembled at Oisy. As the fusiliers prepared to leave the village, the Germans tried to surround them. The Munsters opened fire and a bridge over which the Germans were forced to come was filled with the dead and dying. Gradually, the fusiliers left the village and after a final burst of fire, they leaped to their feet and ran for it. Unknown to the Munsters, the German 19th Reserve Infantry Division (who were some miles away) heard the fighting and anticipated the fusiliers' next move to the village of Etreux. The Germans moved into the village and waited.

As the Munsters edged their way towards Etreux, they were surrounded. The rattle of musketry and the booming of guns could be heard everywhere; the air itself vibrated. On all sides, the dead lay in huddled heaps, while the wounded, with grey faces, tried to rise, or crawled in maimed agony a little further on to die. Bit by bit, the shattered remnants of the battalion fell back into an orchard. The German forces surrounded them with a ring of shells and bullets. As the hours passed, ammunition could only be renewed by taking what was left from the dead and dying. Gradually, the German's crowded in on them from all sides and, at 9.15 p.m., the little band of not more than 250 men were overpowered. They had held out against at least 9 battalions for nearly 12 hours.

On the next day, about 1500 wounded Germans were assembled in the village, this number did not include the casualties at Fesmy and Oisy. The Munsters were allowed to bury their dead comrades, at least 110 men, in the orchard which had been the scene of their last stand. (In 1921, the orchard was bought, a wall was built around it, with iron gates facing the Extreux-Landrecies road. On the 4 June, 1922, Father Francis Gleeson performed a dedication ceremony in the cemetery).

As the Germans moved into northern France, groups of fusiliers were trapped behind the lines. In one case, a party of twelve Munsters were hidden by a miller and his family. The Germans having discovered this, raided the house and executed the miller and eleven fusiliers. The twelfth, a man named Carey, had left the house the night before to give a hand at a neighbouring farm.

After the battle at Etreux, those fusiliers who were lucky enough to escape southwards reformed at the town

of Jonqueusea. At a roll-call parade, at St. Gobain on 29 August, the battalion could only muster 5 officers and 196 other ranks. Reinforcements arrived on 6 September. Meanwhile, the Germans advance into France was stopped at the Battle of the Marne which had just begun.

Some of the Munsters who had been badly wounded at Etreux were still there in October.

Towards the end of October, the Munsters were moved up to Ypres ('Wipers') salient and for four days in November they were in the thick of the fighting. Reorganised as a battalion on 9 November, they were ordered into the front line. On the 10th, they marched to the woods near Klien Zillebeke, where they relieved the Grenadier Guards. On the next morning, intense artillery fire was opened up on them, and the constant vibrations from exploding shells knocked out the fillings from the men's teeth. As the Prussian Guard approached, they could be heard singing 'Die Wacht am Rhine', the air was filled with bursting shells and with tree splinters which flew in every direction - the falling trees burying the fusiliers as they lay in their shallow trenches. The men fought in groups of twos and threes, wave after wave of Germans were shot down. Due to the rain and snow that had fallen, the area was now a sea of mud, and the Munsters had a job in trying to stop the mud from clogging their rifles. As the Prussian Guard came closer, the fusiliers charged, scattering them in wild disorder at the point of the bayonet.

On 12 November, the Munsters began to dig their trenches to a depth of four feet. That day also, the senior NCO., of the Battalion, Quartermaster-Sergeant Fitzmaurice, was killed, leaving Regimental Sergeant Major John Ring, a Limerickman, in command. The rifle fire was very heavy that day, and the men had to throw their food from one trench to another; any attempt to carry it along the line was to court certain death.

On the 13th, the Germans broke through on the Munsters' left and could actually be seen coming around behind them. At that moment, some forty men of C company attacked. Onward swept the wave of Munsters, and in a short time the lost trenches were regained. That night, under cover of darkness, they moved back to their old positions.

On the morning of the 14th, a number of German soldiers came forward as if to surrender. The Munsters shouted at them to drop their rifles and come in. A few did so, but some yards from the trenches the rest of them dropped as if one man and a second wave of Germans opened fire. This was the last attack that the Germans made against the battalion during the battle for Ypres.

On the 15th, the fusiliers were relieved by the Grenadier Guards. As they staggered back to the rest area, hungry, haggard, caked in mud, and wet

through, there was a feeling among the men that they had avenged the deaths and capture of their comrades at Etreux. Their next two nights of rest were spent bivouacking in the rain and bedding down in a field 3 inches deep in water.

On 21 December, the Munsters were sent down to a gap in the line between Festubert and the village of Givenchy. There is some confusion as to what happened next. On the 22nd the battalion received orders that the original line was to be retaken. The day before there had been a number of contradictory orders, and it would appear that this was to prove fatal for the Munsters. They left the trenches that morning at 7 a.m. As they moved out into no-man's-land, past Givenchy, a shot rang out, and what appeared to be a battery of machine-guns opened up on them. Within ten minutes, over 200 men were hit. They took shelter in a country road with shallow ditches. There was no sign of support, either from left or right. Later on, they would discover that they had been 500 or more yards ahead of the advancing troops.

To make matters worse, the battalion was shelled by its own artillery. At 10 p.m. that night, they received orders to withdraw. On Christmas Day, an unofficial truce was observed on some parts of the front line, but not where the Munsters were.

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 the month, the Munsters were having a relatively quiet time repairing and maintaining the trenches, but they were soon back in the front line, holding an area between Givenchy and the La Basse canal. While there had been sporadic fighting throughout the month, the Germans made a determined attack, on 25 January, to take the town of Bethune.

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.

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

On St. Patrick's Day, the fusiliers attended a Mass which was said by Fr. Gleeson, the battalion chaplain.

In early May, the French army launched its spring offensive at Arras. To stop the Germans from sending men and supplies down the line, the British army carried out a supporting attack, but their



*The Munster Fusiliers on parade at the New (now Sarsfield) Barracks, Limerick.*

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 8 May, 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 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*.

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 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.

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

As the Munsters left the trenches at 5.30 a.m., 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 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.

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. The survivors took up positions along the bank of the stream and began firing back at the German infantry who were 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.

At 10.30 a.m., the battalion was ordered to retire. 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 1930's 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 German 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 British generals were reluctant to launch a new offensive so soon after their spring losses, but General Joffre was adamant that they participate. The British armies 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. on 25 September. Not having enough firepower to support their whole front, it was decided to use a new weapon - chlorine gas.

On 24 September, the Munsters were six miles behind the front line, and by 4 a.m. on the 25th, they had reached their objective. General Haig, commanding the 1st Army, had placed high hopes for the success of the attack on the use of the gas. 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 although there had been well-prepared plans to stop the release of the gas, Haig was told it was too late. As the gas blew back, many of the infantry were poisoned by it. One source put the figure at 2,639 casualties, which included seven fatalities.

On other parts of the front, the gas drifted into the German trenches. There can have been few among the infantry who were packed like animals along the

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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.

As the communication trenches became filled with the wounded and gassed, the Munsters were ordered to move into the support trenches. 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.

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 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. This is known as the battle of Loos.

The Munsters remained in the captured German trenches until the 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.*

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.

Throughout the winter of 1915, the Munsters were out of the front line and spent their time making and re-making trenches, under intermittent shell and rifle fire. The work was hard and tedious.

In early December, a request arrived

at the offices of the *Limerick Chronicle*.

*As a reader of our paper, I would be very much obliged if someone would send us out a melodeon to help keep the boys in good trim. As you know, the Irish lads are very fond of music, especially these long cold winter nights in France.*

*Priv. P. Costello BEF*

*2nd Battalion,*

*Royal Munster fusiliers.*

On 21 February, 1916, the Germans launched an offensive against the French city of Verdun. But things did not go according to plan and, by the end of March, the French had lost 89,000 men, and the Germans 82,000. To relieve the pressure on the French, it was agreed that the offensive on the Somme would begin on 29 June, but, owing to bad weather, it was postponed until 1 July.

That February, the Munsters were back again with the 3rd Brigade, who were still in the Loos sector. In May, there were four battalions of the fusiliers at the front. The 1st Battalion, back from the fiasco at Gallipoli, were stationed at Mazingarbe, the 2nd at Le Brebis and the 8th and 9th near Loos. Leading up to the Battle of the Somme, raids were made on the German trenches, and the Munsters took part in one of them, on the night of 25 June.

Trench raids were sometimes made to 'instil fighting spirit'. They were also made to gather information on the opposing enemy units, and created uncertainty as to where a major offensive might take place. A trench raid was a brutal affair and one of the most dreaded duties. Such raids called for the use of a variety of weapons; knives, spiked clubs, rifles, bayonets, grenades, sharp entrenching tools, fists, boots - at close quarters. When a raid ended, the trenches were left piled with the dead and wounded. And when the raiding party made its escape, the wounded sometimes lay in no-man's-land, lingering for as long as a week, while they died in agony.

That day, 25 June, was also the second day of the bombardment of the German trenches on the Somme.

As the morning of 1 July broke, it gave no hint to the soldiers the scale of the ordeal to come. The men had been told that the German infantry and their trenches would be destroyed by the artillery, that the attack would be a walk-over, and that they would be able to smoke their pipes or cigarettes as they advanced. It was also made known to them that no prisoners were to be taken. At 7.22 a.m., the order was given to fix bayonets: 'The clinking of steel sounded, down miles of narrow, twisting trench.'

At 7.30 a.m., the artillery barrage which had preceded the attack stopped and 120,000 British soldiers began their advance across no-man's-land. Within a matter of hours, over 19,000 men lay dead on the battlefield. At the end of the day, another 40,000 were wounded.

By the time the Munsters arrived in

the battle area, the fighting had been in progress for nearly two weeks. On 2 July, the German garrison at the fortified village of Fricourt had retreated to the village of Contalmaison. Although Contalmaison had been one of the first day objectives, it was not taken until sometime between the 10 and 12 July. The fusiliers arrived there on the night of 14 July. The German artillery had been shelling the village with gas-shells, and, when the Munsters entered it, the men had to wear inferior gas-helmets for protection. A mile to the left of them was the village of Pozieres and on their right was Mametz and Bazentin le Petit Wood. In front of them stood three lines of German trenches. On the night of 16 July, the Munsters were ordered to capture a section of the German first and second line trenches, on a front of 800 yards. As they moved up to make the assault, they had to pass through an old communication trench, full of dead German soldiers. As the Munsters moved about in the darkness, they were shelled by the German artillery, and some of the men also walked into their own artillery barrage. Around midnight, the fusiliers made a dash towards the enemy trenches. The German soldiers put up a strong resistance and the Munsters suffered heavily; but eventually the Germans were driven out. Again, their casualties were heavy.

After capturing the trenches, they spent all of the next day on the alert. Around noon on the 18th, the long-awaited German counter-attack began. It had rained heavily and the Munsters' trenches were full of mud and water, making many of the rifles unworkable. The fighting was touch-and-go for a while but the fusiliers held their ground. Throughout the afternoon, the fighting continued intermittently, the Munsters capturing five German soldiers. Near midnight, they were relieved by another battalion.

The Munsters had been under bombardment for 100 hours; they had suffered 170 casualties, they had had no sleep or food during the fighting.

On 10 August, the transport section of the Munsters took part in the 3rd Brigade Horse Show, winning four firsts and one second out of five events. On the 20th, the battalion moved back to the front line, a quarter of a mile north of Bazentin le Petit, where they suffered more casualties. On the 24th they were ordered to capture a section of trench, 400 yards long, which was still in German hands. The left and the right of this trench had already been captured, but the German infantry held the bit in the middle. (It was said that another British officer had already refused to attack this position). In the event, the British artillery barrage had been misdirected and had done very little damage to the Germans. The attack was doomed, even before it began at 7 a.m., in daylight, with "A" Company on the right and "B" on the left. Concealed



*Fr. Francis Gleeson gives general absolution to the Munster Fusiliers , at Rue du Bois, 8 May, 1915, from a painting by Fortunino Matania.*

German machine-guns opened up and the assault came to a halt. A Company then came under a counter-attack as the Germans tried to pull down the barricade that separated both sides. The Germans were beaten back by a small company of Munsters, who were waiting in reserve. A week later, the Germans evacuated the position.

In early September, the fusiliers manned the support trenches between Bazentin le Petit and Mametz Wood. On the 12th, they moved out of the trenches for what was to have been a month's rest but, by the 17th, they were on their way back to the front again. (During the short interlude, a new and ferocious-looking weapon had appeared on the battlefield - the tank). The Munsters took up a line between Martinpuich and Flers, where they defended their trenches until 25 September, were withdrawn from the front and given their promised month's leave which they spent in huts at Feuguiers, near Abbeville.

At the end of October, the battalion was brought back to an area known as High Wood, near Mametz Wood. They spent their time, from 4 a.m. until noon the next day, restoring communications and rebuilding roads that had virtually disappeared. On 14 November, the Battle of the Somme ended. In its 140 days duration, the British armies had advanced only six miles at a cost of 400,000 casualties. The total number of casualties between the Allies and the Germans was estimated at over 1,300,000.

In late November, the Munsters were back in the front line between Eaucourt

l'Abbaye and Flers. The weather had been very bad and the trenches were in a terrible state. Heavy rain had turned the countryside into a bog and the Munsters' trench into a muddy river. Conditions were so bad that when the Munsters were taking up positions on the fire-step, they had to cling 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'.

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 1 January, 1917, the Battalion was resting

near Bercourt Wood, east of Albert.

In December, 1916, General Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, was removed from his position and replaced by General Robert Nivelle, one of the defenders of Verdun. Although Nivelle was seen as a hero, his appointment was to have serious consequences for the French army, by this time suffering from war-weariness. Nivelle had decided to attack the German army south of the Somme, roughly on a front between Soissons and Reims. The British army came to his aid by carrying out a diversionary attack north of the Somme at Arras. Meanwhile, the Germans, although knowing of the impending French attack, were straightening out their front line on the Somme front, between Arras and Soissons; in some parts they withdrew to a distance of between thirty and fifty miles.

As the Germans retired, they destroyed the towns and villages. Key towns such as Péronne were devastated. Trees were laid across roads. Thousands of booby-traps were laid, some of which were extremely ingenious. All this should have been a warning to Nivelle but he chose to ignore it.

On 6 April, America entered the war on the Allied side. The British army attacked at Arras, in a blinding snowstorm, on April and, by 12 April, they had captured a position known as ~~Vimy~~ Vimy Ridge. Nivelle's offensive began, in similar conditions, on Monday, 16 April. The men, who had been led to believe that, this would be the deciding battle, were cut down in their thousands.

By Tuesday, Nivelle had lost just



*Munster and Dublin fusiliers returning from Ginchy, Somme, 1916.*

system was destroyed. As the soldiers went over the top on 31 July, the rain began to fall. By 4 August, the ground was turning into a swamp. After setbacks on 16 August, Haig was advised that the attack should be abandoned, but he was committed to carrying on.

At Clipon Camp, on 15 October, it was announced that the landing was postponed but the Munsters remained there until 29 October. By that time, the battle for Passchendaele was entering its final phase.

Concrete German strongpoints, known as pill-boxes, and rain-filled shell-holes dominated the landscape. For the wounded, seeking refuge in a shell-hole was at times fatal. Exhausted and losing blood, they crawled into the holes, only to learn that this move could cost them their lives. Slowly they would slip down the muddy sides, too weak to hold themselves up. Their feeble whispers often could not be heard by their comrades passing by. Each shell-hole with blood on its water usually meant another corpse entombed below.

On 6 November, with cold rain beating down on them, soldiers of the 2nd Canadian Division fought their way through the rubble of what was once the village of Passchendaele.

It was on that day also that the Munsters moved into the battle area. On 8 November, they passed through Ypres on their way to the front line. On 10 November, a new effort was made to extend the front line. The battalion had instructions to capture three of four wrecked farm buildings and some pill-boxes which the Germans were holding; each man was carrying an extra bandolier, 150 rounds of ammunition, steel helmet, two Mills bombs (a forerunner of the hand-grenade). They also carried three days' rations, waterproof sheet, extra water to drink, and a gas and smoke helmet. As the

Munsters moved forward, keeping a distance of fifty-yards behind their artillery barrage, they were attacked by three German aircraft which bombed and machine-gunned them as they advanced. By 6.45 a.m., all the objectives and a number of German prisoners had been taken. At 7 a.m., runners were sent back to battalion headquarters to ask for new instructions on what they were to do next.

At this stage, they were only 800 yards from the summit of Passchendaele Ridge and the company commanders were eager to try to reach it. With no sign of new orders forthcoming, they decided to continue the advance, but the going was tough and at 7.30 a.m., owing to the treacherous terrain and muddy conditions, the advance came to a standstill. Most of the rifles were clogged with mud, and the men tried to clean them by pouring water down the barrels. At 7.50 a.m., German infantry could be seen preparing for a counter attack. At once, the Munsters released four carrier pigeons with a message asking for artillery support. The artillery opened fire soon afterwards; pounding the ground held by the battalion, the missing the advancing Germans. The fusiliers were in a quandary: some of them stayed where they were; others retreated to their original objectives. As the German infantry advanced on a place known as Void Farm, they found the Munsters ready and waiting for them. The fusiliers opened up with their rifles and machine-guns and threw the last of their Mills' bombs, but still the Germans tried to advance. Suddenly, a new wave of bombs landed in front of the Germans. Although they did not explode, they were enough to drive the Germans back for a while. The much feared 'bombs' were nothing more than clods of mud, pressed to resemble bombs in size and shape.

At 8.30 a.m., the Germans renewed the attack on Void Farm. During this attack, Captain Delmege, a Limerickman, was wounded and captured. When he was on the road to recovery, he was transferred to Mainz in Essen.

Another young Limerickman had not been so lucky. Private John O'Brien, from Arthur's Quay, a baker by trade, had been killed earlier that morning. In a letter to his father, Captain Jorleson wrote:

*He was one of my company, and he fell while taking part in an attack on a German position on the 10 inst. He was a good and gallant soldier, and being a Limerickman myself, I was proud to have him in my company.*

As the struggle for Void Farm raged, the Germans found a weak spot on the right of the Battalion. Slowly the fusiliers began to fall back to their own lines to avoid being surrounded, although one group still held one of the pill-boxes. When the Munsters reached the vicinity of their own line, the German artillery concentrated on the, with deadly results. Casualties were by this time enormous, and many of those who fell badly wounded were drowned where they lay.

At 9.30 a.m., a party of thirty Munsters, with the support of their comrades in the captured German pill-box, regained the nearest farm. That afternoon, another battalion was brought in to reinforce the line. Meanwhile, halfway up Passchendaele Ridge, scattered groups of fusiliers still continued to hold out. By nightfall, and with no hope of being rescued, most of them had been captured by the Germans. At 10 p.m. that night, after a twenty-seven hour struggle, the remnants of the battalion were ordered to fall back. Out of the 650 men who had taken part in the operation, only 247 now remained. Five Munsters were killed that day trying to carry messages to the rear - one man did



*Commemorative plaque to the Munster Fusiliers at wayside shrine.*

under 120,000 men, and a fortnight later the offensive was coming to a grinding halt. By 3 May, mutinies were beginning to break out in the French army. Regiments refused to man the trenches, others said they would defend their trenches but would not attack; red flags were also unfurled. In Paris itself there were strikes and demonstrations among the civilian population. On 28 April, General Petain was made chief of the general staff, and shortly afterwards Neville was asked to resign.

Petaïn visited the front lines and restored morale and discipline. He promised the men more leave (one of the regiments had been in continuous action since Verdun), increased family allowances to soldiers' wives and improved canteen facilities. But there were to be other consequences. Although General Nivelle was merely demoted, those soldiers who had refused to let themselves be slaughtered in futile attempts to break the German line were executed. One source gives the figure as twenty-three and another as fifty. Two hundred and fifty more were marched to a quiet sector and annihilated by their own artillery. Over a hundred ring-leaders were banished to various French colonies. Especially disruptive units were sent to the most dangerous fronts.

In January, 1917, the Munster Fusiliers marched south, across the Somme River, and took up a position on the front line, not far from the village of Barleux. They remained in this area until St. Patrick's Day. By that time, the German army had

evacuated its positions around the town of Peronne and were withdrawing to a new line of defence which the Allies called the Hindenburg Line. The fusiliers re-crossed the Somme on 18 March and began work in the Peronne area by restoring communications which had been destroyed by the retiring Germans. Some of the Munsters became victims of the numerous booby-traps that the Germans had planted. On 24 May, the Battalion won three competitions at the 1st Division's Sports Day. Towards the end of June, the Munsters moved up to the Belgian coast to near the town of Nieuport. About twenty miles below them, at Messines, the opening shots had already been fired in what is officially known as the Third Battle of Ypres, a battle that was to culminate in the blood and mud struggle for Passchendaele Ridge.

The Munsters were relieved at the front line on 4 July, from there they marched to their billets at Champermont Camp. On 10 July, German artillery shells rained down on the camp, destroying most of the huts and killing seven men; another forty-one were wounded. Regimental Sergeant-Major John Ring, oblivious to the danger, supervised the evacuation of the remaining soldiers. When the Battalion returned to the front two days later, it again came under heavy artillery fire. One of the men, unable to stand the strain, rushed forward towards the German lines. He was followed by a private named Donovan who brought him back, under

heavy fire, to their own lines. Private Donovan was one of six Munsters who, after the fighting at Etreux, in August, 1914, had hidden in France for a number of months. Eventually, he escaped through Belgium and Holland and rejoined the Battalion in August, 1915.

On 19 July, the 1st Division, of which the Munsters were part, moved to a special training camp, situated southwest of Dunkirk. This was Clipon Camp (nicknamed 'Hush Camp') and it was here that the Battalion went into training for an amphibious landing behind the German lines. The 1st Division were to make an assault on the Belgian coast at Zeebrugge and Ostend in order to capture the German submarine bases which were at that time causing serious losses to Allied shipping. The landings were due to take place about two weeks after the opening of General Haig's Flanders offensive.

General Haig believed he could force a successful conclusion to the war by driving the German forces out of Belgium. The ground over which the battle was to be fought was reclaimed marshland. The city of Ypres had once been a seaport and it was now an inland city only because of the man-made drainage systems. The ground between Ypres and Passchendaele was composed of clay fields. When it rained the water formed swamps and pools and sluggishly spread towards the already swollen rivers and canals.

When the British artillery opened fire on 22 July, the precarious drainage



eventually succeed in making the terrible journey.

After the Battle of Passchendaele, the Munsters were moved to Eikhoek camp where they went into training and were re-organised as a battalion. On Christmas Day, 1917, each company provided the dinners for its own men. There had been heavy snowfalls in the area and, when a thaw set in on 6 January, 1918, the training ground was a foot deep in water. By this time, the battalion had been brought up to a strength of 867 men. Rumour had it, at that time, that the German army was massing troops on the Western Front, with the aim of crushing their opponents before the arrival of the American army.

On 29 January, 1918, the Munsters learned that they were to sever their connection with the 1st Division in which they had served since the beginning of the war. They were now transferred to the 16th Irish Division. Father Gleeson, their Battalion chaplain, was left behind and remained attached to the 3rd Brigade. On 2 February, they boarded the train that took them down to the old battlefields of the Somme, where they were to join the 48th Infantry Brigade.

On 10 February, they took up positions on the front line, just outside the village of Epehy. On 21 March, the long awaited and much feared German offensive (code-named St. Michael) began. The greatest artillery barrage the world had ever seen pounded the 3rd and 5th armies; the fusiliers were part of the latter force.

A heavy white fog hung over the Munsters' positions which made it difficult to see ahead. By 10 o'clock that morning, the troops on the right of the Munsters had retreated. Desperate fighting continued into the night, when orders were received that all Irish troops were to withdraw towards Tincourt, to which the 48th Brigade had already retreated. The Munsters reached this village, in small parties, during the early hours of 22 March. During the previous day, they had fought eighteen hours longer than any of the other units in the area, and had withdrawn undefeated after one of the greatest attacks of the Great War.

On 22 March, the battalion spent an undisturbed day near Tincourt. That night, a defensive position was taken up behind Tincourt Wood. At 5.30 a.m. on 23 March, and in another thick fog, the retreat continued towards Doingt where the Munsters took cover in an old trench, just outside the village. At 10.30 a.m., the advancing Germans were spotted. For the fusiliers another day of fighting had erupted. At 1 p.m., under mounting German pressure, the troops on the left of the Battalion began to withdraw. Once again, the Munsters were left on their own, as the soldiers on the right had also gone. The fusiliers held on for another hour, while maps were studied for a line of retreat. Eventually, a path was found,

and they started falling back. As the afternoon dragged on, they reached the town of Peronne; later on that evening they crossed the Somme river, just before the last bridge was blown up.

On Sunday 24 March, the Munsters were relieved from the front line and were ordered to fall back to a deserted village known as Cappy where they got a well deserved rest. The afternoon of 25 March was spent guarding bridges in the line of retreat on the Somme River, with the instructions to blow them up if the Germans attacked. Later on that night, orders were received to demolish the bridges. By 26 March, the battalion had passed beyond Chuignolles, taking up positions in some old French trenches to the west of the village. The 66th Infantry Division passed through the Munsters' lines; soon afterwards the pursuing Germans appeared on the horizon. Slowly the Germans worked their way around on the left of the Munsters, getting on to the main road just behind them. It was time for the fusiliers to make a run for it. Behind the trenches, a crossroads had to be passed, and it was on this spot that the Germans concentrated their fire. The Munsters charged through the danger zone, halting only when they came near their Battalion H.Q. As darkness set in, the pursuing Germans gave up the chase. It was often noticed that when the retreating soldiers laid down to rest, the Germans followed suit, too weary to fire a rifle. At this stage, the Germans had pushed the Allies back nearly forty miles. That night, the Munsters were to the east of Mericourt village where they formed a defensive line with the 2nd Dublin Fusiliers and the South Irish Horse.

The Germans attacked early the next morning, but the Munsters, with artillery support, beat them back each time they tried to advance. Just about noon, a battalion on the left of the Munsters was withdrawn. The Germans soon spotted this gap and occupied it. A counter-attack was organised, and a party of nine Munsters drove the Germans back out and re-established contact with the South Irish Horse.

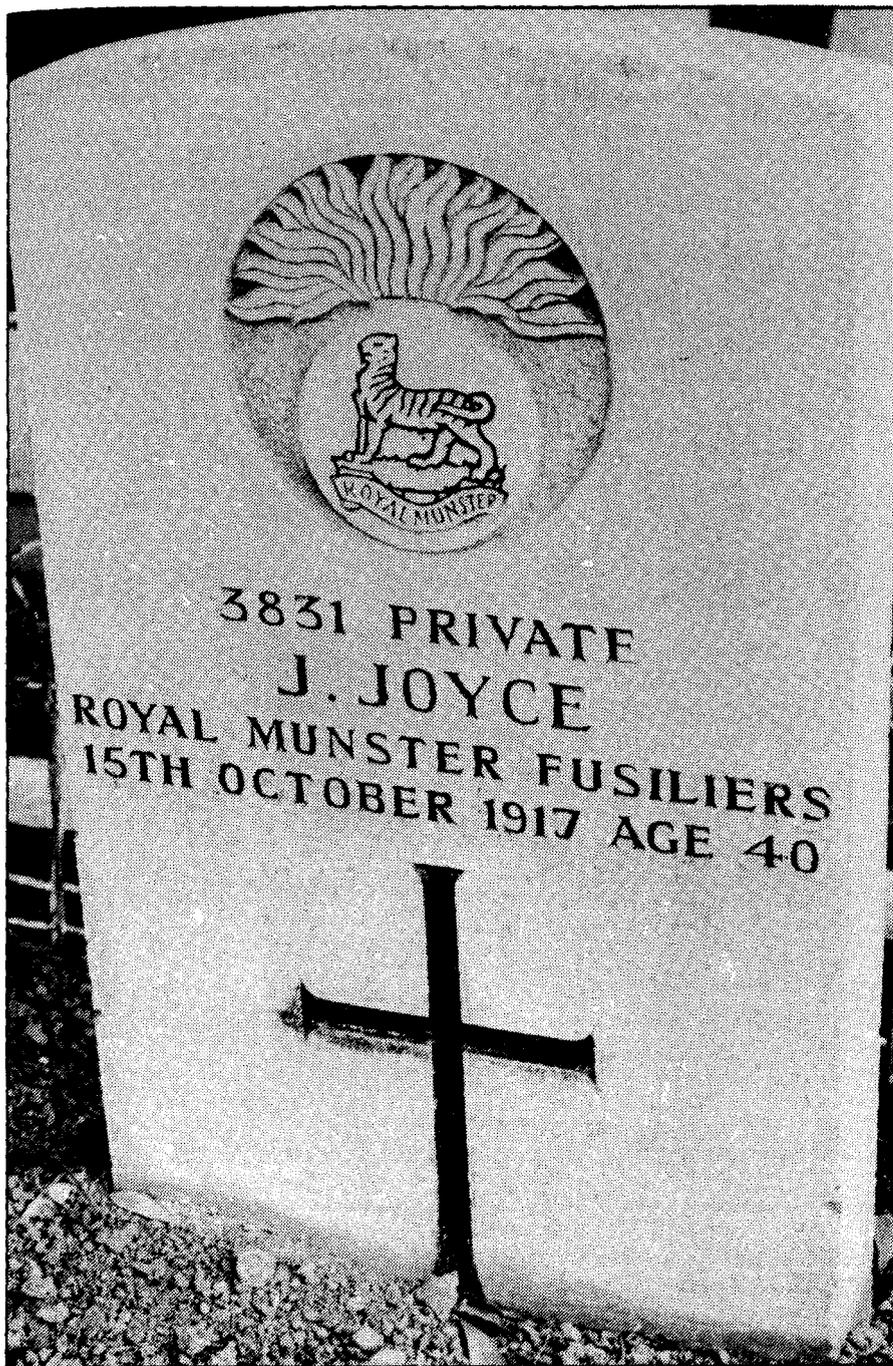
Throughout the afternoon, repeated German attacks were beaten off. At 7 p.m., the officer commanding the Dublin Fusiliers, who were on the right of the Munsters, came across to report that there was no one guarding the far-right. Runners, who had been sent out earlier that day, arrived back with the news that the Brigade H.Q. had been evacuated, and so, after six days of fighting, it appeared that the remnants of the three regiments were surrounded and cut off. After consultations between the three commanding officers, it was decided to fight a way through. At 8 p.m., the withdrawal began; one man, a Corporal Padfield of the Munsters, remained behind with a Lewis machine-gun, with instructions to fire occasionally until 10 p.m. and to try and make his way back to

the battalion. Meanwhile, the four hundred strong column of weary men headed northwards to cross the Somme River, as it was thought that the Germans had failed in their attacks in this sector. As the column crossed the Crozat Canal, a diversion of the Somme, they found that the Eclusier Bridge was held by the Germans. Unable to cross, the men made their way back across the canal bank to the next crossing at Chipilly Bridge.

Here again, their hopes of crossing faded when large numbers of Germans could be seen, across the river, in the village. The officer commanding the Munsters suggested that the bridge be rushed. It was also suggested that if they knew the German pass-word, they could get across before the Germans realised what was happening. A captain from the Dublin Fusiliers went forward, heard the pass-word being given, and then made his way back to the waiting men. As the mixed column of Munsters, Dubliners, and South Irish Horse moved forward in single file on both sides of the road, they were challenged by the German sentries. The reply was given but it wasn't good enough to fool the Germans, and they opened fire immediately. Everyone rushed forward shouting, firing, and cursing; some of the men tripped over a large tangle of wire that the Germans had laid across the road. As the rest of the men charged across the bridge, they discovered, to their horror, that it was damaged on the far side; the girders had been cut and were facing down towards the bottom of the pier. The men in front, being pushed forward by the surging crowd, became jammed at the bottom of the pier and had to be hoisted back up. As the fighting continued, the Germans were swept aside and ran away screaming from the desperate turmoil. The bridge was then crossed successfully, although one party got lost in the confusion and did not rejoin the main body until they met at the next bridge; here, the German guards fled without a fight.

At this stage, the men were extremely tired, but the march had to be continued. As they headed for Saily Laurette, a small wooden bridge, over which the column was to pass, suddenly blew up and they had to pass through some of the worst bogland between the canal and the river. When they reached the crossing for Saily Laurette, they found that the Germans had already occupied it. The Germans opened a heavy fire on the column, causing them to retrace their footsteps and head back towards the canal. Here, they ran into a German officers' patrol. Not knowing who was who in the dark, the two opposing groups met; some words were exchanged; then the German officer shot dead a Dublin Fusilier, and was at once gunned down by the retaliating fusiliers, who then wiped out the whole patrol.

Following the Crozat Canal and the Somme had proved to be a dangerous



Grave at St. Lawrence cemetery, Limerick.

strategy, and so it was decided to take a bearing from the stars and head westwards. This proved to be a wiser move, and at 3.30 a.m. on 28 March, the Allied front line at Hamel Wood was finally reached. The Munsters marched into the village of Hamel at 4 a.m. and, after having something to eat, settled down to a long overdue sleep, but it proved to be short-lived. At 6.30 a.m., the village had to be evacuated, as it was expected that the Germans would bombard it. Exhausted and disorientated by the lack of sleep, the fusiliers gradually pulled themselves together and took up a position in support of a group known as 'Carey's Force', east of the village. To use General Haig's own words, Carey's Force was composed of 'details, stragglers,

schools' personnel, tunneling companies, Army troops companies, field-survey companies and Canadian and American engineers'.

The Munsters remained in their support positions until the morning of 30 March, with a strength of about 140 men. A major attack was expected that morning, and the fusiliers, now divided into two fighting groups, went forward to the front line in full view of the Germans. The German bombardment began at 9.00 a.m. and, an hour later, their infantry advanced to attack Carey's Force. In heavy rain, caked in mud and wet through, the Munsters beat off repeated attempts not only on their own trenches but also gave assistance to the hard-pressed units on their left. At the

end of the day, the Battalion was reduced by another 49 men, who had either been killed or wounded.

After their mauling in the St. Michael offensive, the Munsters were taken out of the line and left the trenches on 3 April. They were no longer effective as a fighting force, and there were fears that the fusiliers would be disbanded. Eventually, an order was given to amalgamate the 1st Battalion with the 2nd. This arrangement did not last long and, a week later, the 2nd Battalion Headquarters – eleven officers, and all its senior non-commissioned ranks and transport personnel – were withdrawn to form a training unit to provide instructors for the American Army, who were arriving in France in large numbers; this arrangement lasted until the end of May. On 6 June, the 6th Battalion of the Munsters arrived in France from overseas service in Palestine. They were transferred bodily into the 2nd Battalion. The 6th Battalion suffered from malaria, and special medical steps had to be taken before they could be sent to the front line.

With the failure of a second German offensive, its master-mind, General Erich Ludendorff, made a third attempt to breach the Allied line. This time, he chose the French sector of Champagne. The attack (Blücher) began at 1 a.m. on the morning of 27 May. By the 30th, the Germans were within fifty miles of Paris. But this attack also lost its impetus and, on 1 June, the American 2nd Division repulsed the Germans at Château-Thierry. On 18 July, the Allied counter-attacks began. On 8 August, after a massive British attack, the German line in front of Amiens began to crumble. More gains were made by the Allies on the 9th and 10th. The initiative was now in the hands of the Allies. By 9 September, nearly all the territorial gains of the German spring/summer offensive had been lost.

On 15 September, after many antimalarial measures, training and route marches, the re-organised 2nd Battalion of the Munsters moved by train to the town of Doullens and from there marched to Grouches, where they remained until 29 September. On the next day, Bulgaria, an ally of Germany, Austria/Hungary and Turkey, asked for an armistice, which was signed on 30 September.

By 2 October, the Munsters were back in the Epehy area, and were now part of the 150th Brigade. On 3 October, the 151st Brigade had captured most of the village of Le Catelet; the Germans held the rest and also the nearby village of La Panterie. At 2 a.m. the next day, the battalion received orders to capture La Panterie, attacking through the German-held section of Le Catelet. These villages were to be used as a jumping-off point for an attack on the Germans' new line of defence, the Beaufort Line. At 5.10 a.m. the Munsters moved forward into Le Catelet. The battalion immediately



*The fighting at Etreux, 27 August, 1914.*

became involved in street fighting, and suffered heavy casualties from machine-gun posts hidden in the village. Meanwhile, A Company, which had become separated from the main body of men, lost direction and ended up in a spot known as Prospect Hill; they remained there throughout the fighting. Scattered in the darkness and held up by two machine-guns at the northern end of the village, the Munsters, rallied by the sound of their commanding officer's hunting horn, came in from all angles and captured the two strong points and continued on to take La Pannerie South. When the Germans closed the gap in the line, detachments of Munsters from companies B and C, who had also become separated in the struggle, had to fight their way through to La Pannerie later on in the day. The 'mopping-up' troops, following on behind, captured two hundred and fifty German soldiers, who had been cut off from their own line during the fusiliers' advance.

Relieved from the front line at 6.30 a.m. on the morning of 5 October, the battalion moved into some dug-outs near the village of Gouy. That afternoon, some of the men occupied the trenches that had been captured near Prospect Hill, while some of their comrades provided search-parties to look for the dead and wounded. About 5 p.m., the battalion came under a heavy bombardment of high explosive shells and mustard gas. On 6 October, the Munsters and the

Northumberland Fusiliers made an attack on the Beauvoir Line; they were unable to break through the barbed wire and, at 5.30 a.m., had to be withdrawn.

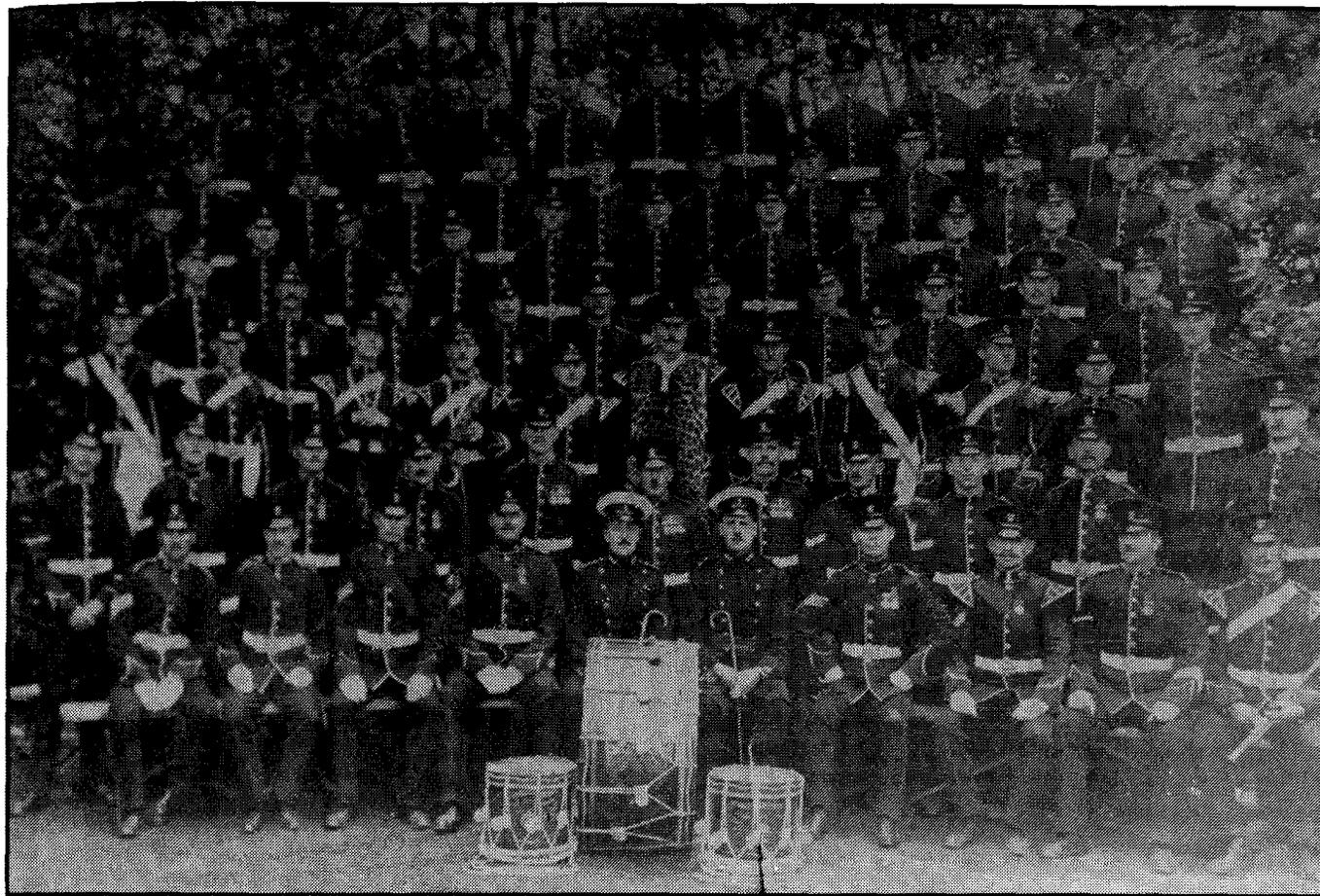
Between 17-18 October, the Munsters took part in the operations to cross the Selle River and capture the village of Bazuel. Having crossed the waterway, near the village of St. Souplet, at 9.30 a.m. on the 17th, they remained dug-in for most of the day, near a railway embankment, 400 yards from the river. Orders and counter orders followed each other in rapid succession; nobody seemed to know what to do. On top of that, the Germans had launched strong counter-attacks which sent the front line back in two places. Eventually, an attack was got under way at 5.30 a.m. on the morning of 18 October. As the day dawned, a heavy fog hung over the battlefield, and it was impossible to see twenty yards ahead. The objective was an imaginary line on a map and, at 6.30 a.m. as the fog cleared, the battalion advanced, with the Dublin Fusiliers on their right. Abandoned German dugouts, machine-gun emplacements, trench mortars and equipment of all kinds were found all over the battlefield. The last obstacle in their line of advance was an orchard, 500 yards square. This was held in strength by the Germans but, eventually, resistance was overcome; some of the garrison were seen running away, while others put up their hands in surrender.

Meanwhile, some Munsters and Dublin fusiliers lost direction in the fog and, when it cleared away, found themselves near Bazuel. After fighting their way into the village, they had to abandon it around 8.30 a.m., when a British artillery barrage came down on it. For the rest of the day, the Munsters remained in a position 1,000 yards west of the village. On the morning of the 19th, the 25th Division marched through the battalion's line and occupied Bazuel. Before the Battle of the Selle, the fusiliers' strength was 322 men; after the fighting it was reduced to 210. The following fortnight was spent at Maretz; where the Munsters went through the usual process of re-organisation. Several drafts arrived, which brought the strength to nearly 400 men.

On 30 October, Turkey threw in the towel and signed an armistice, and the Austro-Hungarian empire followed suit, on 3 November. In Germany itself revolution had broken out, and it was to be only a matter of days before the country looked for an armistice.

On the afternoon of 3 November, the Munsters, in preparation for the assault of Mormal Forest, left their billets near La Cateau and arrived at the village of Fontaine-au-Bois at 1.30 a.m. on the 4th. Here, they were allotted the task of mopping-up behind the advancing troops. By the afternoon of the 5th, the battalion had left the forest, crossed the River Sambre, and spent the night in

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*F Company 2nd Munsters, Aldershot, circa 1913.*

billets at the village of Rue des Juifs. The Munsters left that morning at 6 a.m. and advanced towards the village of Noyelle; the 7th Wiltshires were on their left and the Northumberland Fusiliers were in support. Outside the village, a river had to be crossed; the bridge was down and the Germans, hidden in houses on the far side, had several machine-guns trained on it. While the Wiltshires tried to outflank the Germans, the Munsters brought a steady fire to bear on the houses; while another party of fusiliers went downstream, waded across the river and surrounded the village. As a German field-gun shelled the road, the rest of the battalion made their way across the stream. The Germans saw that the game was up and sixty of them surrendered to the Munsters before the Wiltshires arrived. Later on that day, the village of St. Remy was taken. Throughout the night of the 6th and all day on the 7th, the battalion came under heavy artillery fire; the shelling continued until 4 a.m. on the 8th. On the morning of the 9th, the fusiliers marched eastwards to Sars-Poteries. They arrived there at 2.30 p.m. whistling the 'Marseillaise', as they marched into the village. It was also on that day that the Great War ended for the 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers, as they were 'whipped off' the pursuit and did not take part in any more of the fighting.

On the morning of November 11th, a message was sent out to all the armies on

the Western Front - French, British, American, and, of course, German - which stated that hostilities would cease at 11 a.m. That night, each side treated the other to fantastic fireworks displays of rockets, flares, signal-lights and burning explosives. The next day would bring a million problems of withdrawal and reparation, of occupation and control. Men who had been trained to kill, and had killed, would now be returning home and be expected to lead normal lives.

During the Great War - a more appropriate name would have been the Great Slaughter - more than 8,000 men passed through the ranks of the 2nd Munsters, and out of that number 4,261 were classed as killed, wounded, and missing. After the war, and prior to their disbandment in 1922, the Munsters served in Egypt and the Sudan.

When the survivors came home to Limerick and other parts of Munster, they got a mixed reception. They had returned to a changed country. The nationalist movement, led by Sinn Féin, was in the ascendant. Although they hardly expected a hero's welcome, they had fought bravely under desperate conditions and were, at least, worthy of admiration and respect.

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