

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, who were 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 their aid by carrying out a diversinary 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.¹ Every house in the abandoned areas was blown up. Trees were chopped down and laid across roads. Thousands of booby-traps were laid; some of which were extremely ingenious. A new shovel lying among old ones, would be wired to a bomb, as would an innocently opened door; even fountain-pens left on desks were

THE SECOND MUNSTERS 1914 — 1918

by *Des Ryan*

Part Three

booby-trapped. Furniture was chopped up, and livestock taken away.² All this should have been a warning to Nivelle but he choose to ignore it.

On April 6th, America entered the war on the Allied side. The British Army attacked at Arras, in a blinding snowstorm, on April 9th, and by April 12th they had captured a position known as Vimy Ridge. Nivelle's offensive began, in similar conditions, on Monday, April 16th. The men, who had been led to believe that this would be the deciding battle, were cut down in

their thousands. A French officer described what happened: "We found nothing but barbed wire. If it hadn't been for that we'd have been far ahead, instead of being killed where we stood".

A corporal, who had been using a rifle as a crutch, said: "We just couldn't keep moving ... Too many blasted machine-guns, which we couldn't do anything against".³

By Tuesday, Nivelle had lost just under 120,000 men, and a fortnight later the offensive was coming to a



A drawing by Christopher Clark of Munster and Dublin fusiliers returning from the Somme, 1916.

grinding halt. By May 3rd, 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. One regiment, on being led to the front, persisted in behaving like sheep to indicate that they were like lambs being led to the slaughter.⁴ When they were told to shut-up, they returned to the rest billets from which they had come. In Paris itself there were strikes and demonstrations among the civilian population. On April 28th, General Petain was made Chief of the General Staff, and shortly afterwards Neville was asked to resign.

Petaín 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. Figures vary on how many 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 ringleaders were banished to various French colonies. Especially disruptive units were sent to the most dangerous fronts.⁵

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 they called the Siegfried Line; the Allies preferred to call it the Hindenburg Line. The fusiliers re-crossed the Somme on March 18th 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.⁶ On May 24th, 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 July 4th, from there they marched to their billets at Champermont Camp. On July 10th, German

artillery shells rained down on the camp, destroying most of the huts and killing seven men; another forty-one were wounded. Luckily most of the Battalion were out working at the time or the losses would have been greater. 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 1915.⁷

On July 19th, the 1st Division, of which the Munsters were part, moved to a special training camp, situated south-west 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 (who had replaced General John French as head of the British forces in December 1915) believed he could force a successful conclusion to the war by driving the German forces out of Belgium. The French Army's mutinies and the fear of the German submarines operating out of Belgium were a blessing to Haig, as they were used to justify his Flanders' campaign. 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 could not soak through the ground; it formed into swamps and pools and sluggishly spread towards the already swollen rivers and canals.⁸ Farmers living on the reclaimed marshland were made responsible, at the risk of heavy fines, for the state of repair of the ditches and dykes on their land.⁹ Meteorological reports for the previous eighty years had shown that the best that could be hoped for was two-to-three weeks of fine weather.¹⁰

When the British artillery opened fire on July 22nd, "the precarious drainage system was destroyed".¹¹ As the sol-

diers went over the top on July 31st, the rain began to fall. By August 4th, the ground was turning into a swamp. After setbacks on August 10th and 16th, "Haig was advised that the attack should be abandoned"¹² but he was committed to carrying on.

At Clipon Camp, on October 15th, it was announced that the landing was postponed but the Munsters remained there until October 29th. 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

On November 6th, 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. Wolff, the official Canadian historian, describes the moments before their entry:

"It is not too much to compare the Canadian troops struggling forward, the pangs of hell racking their bodies, up the Ridge, (Passchendaele was fifty-feet above ground level) their dying eyes set up the summit, with a Man who once crept up another hill, with agony in soul and body, to redeem the world and give Passchendaele its glorious name".¹⁵ It was on that day also that the Munsters moved into the battle area. On November 8th, they passed through Ypres on their way to the front line. On November 10th, a new effort was made to extend the front line. The Battalion had instructions to capture three or 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. Their artillery opened fire at 5.55 a.m., zero-hour being 6 o'clock. 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.¹⁶ 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, and 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.¹⁷

At 8.30 a.m. the Germans renewed the attack on Void Farm. During this attack, Captain Delmege, a Limerickman, was wounded and captured. He had served in Gallipoli and was later posted to the 2nd Munsters. A local press report, based on a letter addressed to his father, gives a short account of the battle:

"It was his own expressed wish to lead the company. They took the place, but were shelled out of it and counter-attacked. Captain Delmege was so badly wounded that they had to leave him in a shellhole, and when the place next day was retaken he was not to be found".¹⁸

The Germans had found him and had him removed to a hospital. When he was on the road to recovery, he was transferred to Mainz in Essen.¹⁹

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 Jordeson wrote:

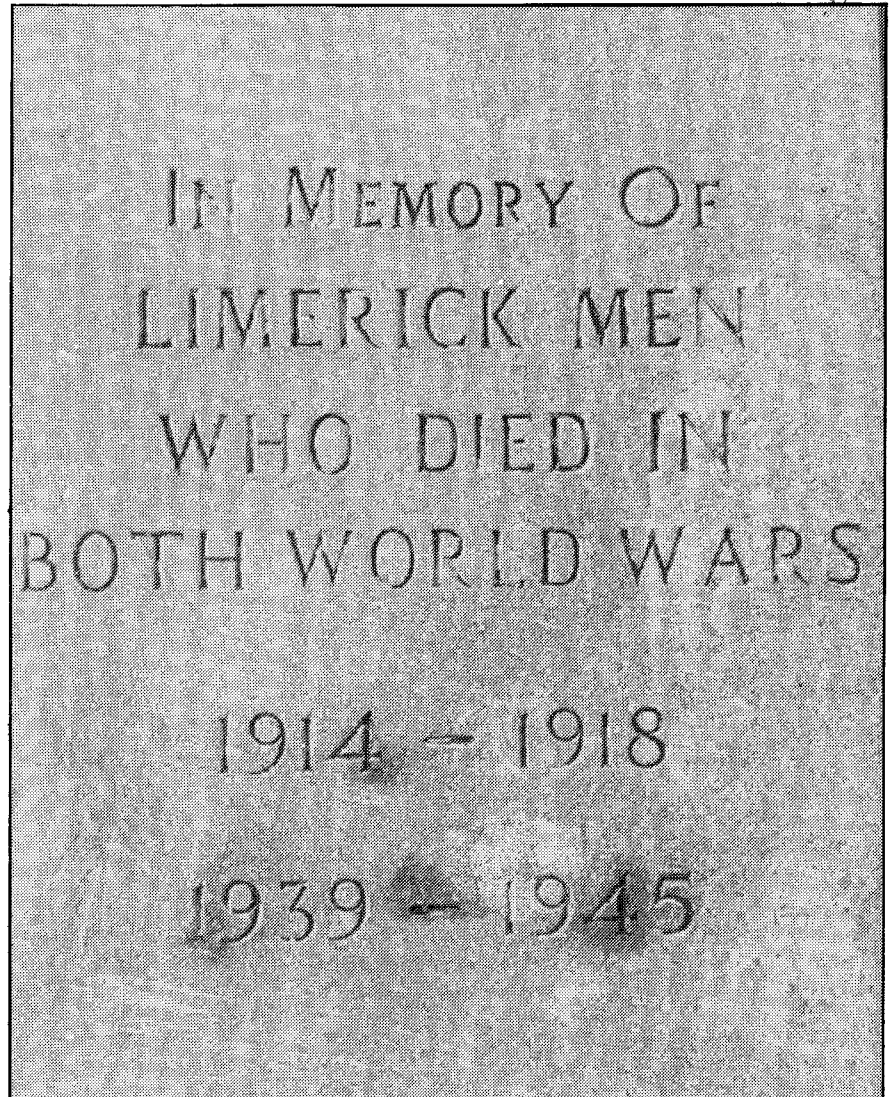
"He was one of my company, and he fell while taking part in an attack on a German position on the 10 inst. He was a good and gallant soldier, and being a Limerickman myself, I was proud to have him in my company".²⁰

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 them, with deadly results. Casualties were by this time enormous, and many of those who fell badly wounded were drowned where they lay.²¹

now remained. The rest had been either killed, wounded, or missing. Five Munsters were killed that day trying to carry messages to the rear – one man did eventually succeed in making the terrible journey.²²

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



Inscription on the Limerick cenotaph at Pery Square.

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, and 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

been heavy snowfalls in the area and, when a thaw set in on January 6th, 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.²³ 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. A captured German officer confirmed this, when he said:

"If we succeed in beating our adversaries in the West, it will mean a rapid German peace with annexations, but if we experience the same defeat as

at Verdun, it will be a disastrous peace. We shall have attained the maximum of our efforts, and ought to end the struggle. The situation at home will not allow us to go on".²⁴

On January 29th, 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 February 2nd, 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 February 10th, they took up positions on the front line, just outside the village of Epehy where they relieved the Dublin Fusiliers, and they, in turn, relieved the Munsters. On March 21st, the long awaited and much feared German offensive (code named St. Micheal) 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. The bombardment had started at 4.30 a.m., with gas-shells dropping on the support positions and ordinary heavy shells on the trenches. At 9.40 a.m., all along the front, crack German stormtroopers spearheaded the assault. By 10 o'clock that morning, the troops on the right of the Munsters had retreated. Desperate fighting continued throughout the morning. At noon, the Battalion, isolated and fighting in small groups, continued to hold out. A wounded fusilier, being brought to the rear by stretcher-bearers, had walked straight into the Germans who ordered the party to turn around and go back. They arrived back to their beleaguered comrades, with the Germans hot on their heels, at about 6.30 a.m. As the fighting continued into the night, 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 March 22nd. 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 March 22nd, 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 March 23rd, 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. By 2.30 p.m., the 49th Brigade and the 1st and 2nd Dublin fusiliers had retreated. 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 March 24th, 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 March 25th was spent guarding bridges in the line of retreat on the Somme River, with the instructions to blow them up if the Germans attacked. However, the day was quiet and some of the men went off searching for food for themselves and their companions. Later on that night, orders were received to demolish the bridges. By March 26th, 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. As the fusiliers waited, two German Horse Artillery guns trundled forward. When they came within firing range, the Munsters machine-gunners opened fire and the Germans retreated. Large numbers of German infantry could be seen massing north-east of Chuignolles, while their machine-gunners crept forward into the village. 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.²⁵ It was often noticed that when the retreating soldiers laid down to rest, the Germans followed suit, too weary to fire a rifle.²⁶ Earlier on that day, behind the front lines, in the town of Doullens, the French General, Foch, was appointed "to co-ordinate the operations of the Allies on the whole Western Front".²⁷ 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: the Dublin Fusiliers going first, followed by the Munsters and then the South Irish Horse. 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, and headed down 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, one of the German soldiers having been first knocked out by a Dublin Fusilier who was a boxer.²⁸

Following the Crozat Canal and the Somme had proved to be a dangerous 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 March 28th, 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".²⁹

The Munsters remained in their support positions until the morning of March 30th, 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.³⁰

Gough; whether during the course of the offensive on the 22nd and 23rd March this Irish Division held the front between Epehy and Roisel and Tincourt; whether, as stated in offi-



The cenotaph at Pery Square, Limerick.

It would appear from contemporary reports that the Munsters got very little credit for their attempts to stop the German advance in its early stages. The following two newspaper accounts are from August and October 1918:

"During the past six months, official tributes have been earned by and paid to the English, Scottish, and Colonial troops in France, but a veil of silence has been drawn over the achievements of Irish troops, although it is common knowledge that in the early days of the German offensive they acquitted themselves with credit. When the House of Commons reassembles, Mr. John O'Connor will ask whether at the time of the German offensive on 21st March an Irish Division formed part of the 5th Army under the command of General

cial German communiques of the 23rd March, the troops holding this front put up a valiant resistance, and vigorously attacked the Germans, and in particular fought bitterly at Epehy until they were finally compelled to abandon the heights in order to avoid being encircled by reason of the retirement of the forces on their flanks; and, if so, explain why there has been no official mention of the valour of this division, or any other public recognition of their services other than the anonymous tribute contained in the communique of the Germans".³¹

When the matter was raised in the British House of Commons, Mr. Macpherson, the Under-Secretary of State for War, gave the following reply:

"No official mention of the valour of

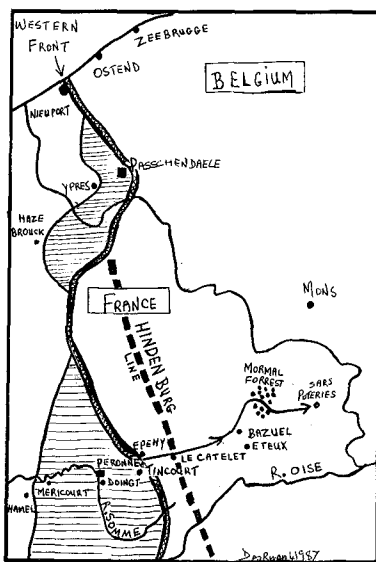
this division has been made so far, for the reason that, owing to the severity of the fighting and conflicting reports, added to the fact that a big proportion of this division was cut off, evidence of the behaviour of this division, as a whole, has been impossible to obtain. Evidence however of the gallant behaviour of a battalion of the Munster Fusiliers of this division has been received, and an article describing the conduct of this unit would shortly be submitted to the Press for publication".

By the beginning of April, the German juggernaut was running out of steam and, having failed to drive a wedge between the British and the French armies and also to deal a knock-out blow to the Allied forces, the German General Staff switched their attack northwards on a front between Lens and Passchendaele. This new offensive, named Georgette, began on April 9th. The main thrust of the attack fell upon a Portuguese division, who cracked under the strain and retreated. But if the Portuguese broke, so too did some of the battle-weary British troops who had just come up for a rest in what they thought was a quiet area, from the battle in the south. Having captured Messines, Ploegsteert, Armentiers and Neuve Chapelle, and unable to reach their objective, the railway town of Hazebrouck, the second German offensive came to a halt on April 29th. Passchendaele, where so many men suffered and died in the previous year, was evacuated.

After their mauling in the St. Micheal offensive, the Munsters were taken out of the line and left the trenches on April 3rd. 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 June 6th, 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, which it had contracted in the Struma Valley and Palestine, and special medical steps had to be taken before they could be sent to the front line.³³

With the failure of the 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 May

27th. By the 30th, the Germans were within fifty miles of Paris. But this attack also lost its impetus and, on June 1st, the American 2nd Division repulsed the Germans at Château-Thierry. On July 18th, the Allied counter-attacks began. On August 8th, 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 September 9th, nearly all the territorial gains of the German spring/summer offensive had been lost.



A drawing of the battle area by Des Ryan showing the Munsters' final line of advance, and (in the shaded areas) the German offensives, St. Micheal and Georgette.

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

By October the 2nd, the Munsters were back in the Epehy area, and were now part of the 150th Brigade. On October 3rd, the 151st Brigade had captured most of the village of Le Catelet; the Germans held the rest and also the nearby village of La Pannerie. That afternoon, the fusiliers had moved into a position south of Le Catelet. At 2 a.m. the next day, the Battalion received orders to capture La Pannerie; they were to attack 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 Beuvevoir Line. At 5.10 a.m., the Munsters moved forward into Le Catelet. The Battalion immediately 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, and 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.³⁴

Relieved from the front line at 6.30 a.m. on the morning of October 5th, 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 October 6th, the Munsters and the Northumberland Fusiliers made an attack on the Beuvevoir Line; they were unable to break through the barbed wire and, at 5.30 a.m., had to be withdrawn, the 2nd Dublin Fusiliers taking over their positions.

Between October 17th and 18th, 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 bent the front line back in two places. The American 27th Division, who were to the right of the Munsters, were also driven back. Eventually, an attack was got under way at 5.30 a.m. on the morning of October 18th. 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 dug-outs, 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.

As six horses were led up to pull a field-gun away, the fusiliers dashed forward and captured the horses; later on the gun itself was captured. 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.³⁵

On October 30th, Turkey threw in the towel and signed an armistice, and the Austro-Hungarian empire followed suit, on November 3rd. 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 November 3rd, the Munsters, in preparation for the assault on 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. Companies 'A' and 'C', accompanied by three tanks, were to enter the western edge of the forest; when they had crossed the Hirondelle River, they were to turn northwards and head for the village of Preux au Bois, which was to be taken by the 50th and 18th Divisions. 'B' Company was to do the mopping-up behind the Northumberland Fusiliers, who were to advance eastwards; zero-hour was at 6.15 a.m. The three companies were to re-group near a sunken road, 1,000 yards east of the starting point, and by 2.30 a.m. that day, both tasks had been accomplished. By the afternoon of the 5th, the Battalion had left the forest, crossed the River Sambre, and spent the night in 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.³⁶

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. The French, as already noted, seemed to have a policy of live-and-let-live, and all they did that morning was to post sentries and stand ready to defend their positions in case of a suicidal German attack. But the other belligerents were prepared to fight it out to the bitter end.

A young, wounded, German officer, near Valenciennes, told a battalion of British soldiers that the village was empty and, as they halted in the village square, German machine-guns opened up on them and killed or wounded over a hundred men. At 10.50 a.m., a squadron of British cavalry was sent forward to capture a bridge over the River Dendre and took up their position at 11 a.m. But the American artillery, on the Meuse-Argonne front, kept firing and it needed several orders from high-ranking sources before the shelling finally ceased.

By midday, the Allies and the Germans began to emerge from their cover; meeting in what was then no-mans-land, they shook hands, and cigarettes and wine were passed around. Orders were issued hurriedly, by the Allied authorities forbidding fraternization with the Germans. As Barrie Pitt has remarked in his book **1918, The Last Act:**

"After all, something might still have happened to wreck the negotiations, and then these men would have to start killing each other again; it would not do for them to become too friendly".

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. But this aspect of the history of the Munster Fusiliers deserves a separate study.

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- Events from the last day of the war on the Western Front are taken from **1918, The Last Act**, by Barrie Pitt, Papermac, 1984.