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 diversary 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. 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 booby-trapped. Furniture was chopped up, and livestock taken away. 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".

By Tuesday, Nivelle had lost just under 120,000 men, and a fortnight later the offensive was coming to a
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. In Paris itself there were street battles which would not attack; red flags were also unfurled. One regiment, on being led to the front, persisted in baa-ing 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 time 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.

Petain 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 fight were to be shut away in a new military camp (nicknamed ‘Hush Camp’) and it was here that the Battalion were part, moved to a special training camp, situated south-west of Dunkirk. This was Clifton Camp (camp nicknamed ‘Clonte’) and it was here that the Battalion went into training for an amphibious landing behind the German line. 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.6 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.7 Meteorological reports for the previous eighty years had shown that the best that could be hoped for was two-to-three weeks after ‘Hather’8

When the British artillery opened fire on July 22nd, “the precarious drainage system was destroyed”.11 As the soldiers 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, 18th, “it was unanimously agreed that the attempt should be abandoned”12 but he was committed to carrying on.

At Clifton 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 8th, 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 pans 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 were captured and prisoners had been taken. At 7 a.m., runners were sent back to Battalion headquarters to ask for new instructions on what

TWENTY
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, 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.

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".  

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.

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

In Memory of Limerick Men who died in both World Wars 1914-1918 1939-1945

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 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.

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 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. 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 relieved of their part of the 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 Munsters, were relieved from the front line and were to join the 48th Infantry Brigade. On 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 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 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-gunnners 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 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 weak to fire a rifle.26

Earlier in the 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 Méricourt 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 at once. 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, returned 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 the heads of German passed, the men 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 forwards, the pass-word was given twice, but the Germans 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 rest of the men charged across the bridge, they discovered, to their horror, that it was damaged on the far side; the girder had been cut and they were facing down towards the bottom of the pier. The men in front, being pushed forward by the surging crowd, became
finally reached. The Munsters marched 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 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.

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 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

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 official 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 communiqué of the Germans.”

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

The cenotaph at Pery Square, Limerick.
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 battlefield 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. Michael 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 to re-organise the 1st Battalion with the 2nd. This arrangement did not long last 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. 

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 choose 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. 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 German’s new line of defence, the Beaufrevoir 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’ 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 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 others, with 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 Beaufrevoir 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 villages of Bazeul. 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, resis-
tance was overcome; some of the gar-
rison were seen running away, while others were killed in hand to hand 
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. Mean-
while, some Munsters and Dublin fusiliers lost direction in the fog and, when it cleared away, found them-
ths near Bazuel. After fighting their way into the village, they had to aban-
don 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 po\qtion, 1,000 yards west of the vil-
lage. On the morning of the 19th, the 25th 
Division marched through the Bat-
talion'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 follow-
ing fortnight was spent at 
Maretz; where the Munsters went 
through the usual process of re-organi-
sation. Several drafts arrived, which 
brought the strength to nearly 400 man-

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 bil-
lets 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 advanc-
ing troops. Companies 'A' and 'C', 
accompanied by three tanks, were to 
ter 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 North-
umberland 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 morn-
ing at 6 a.m. and advanced towards the 
village of Noyelle; the 7th Wiltshires 
were on their left and the Northumber-
land Fusiliers were in support. Outside 
the village, a river had to be crossed; 
the bridge was down and the Germans, 
had in houses on the far side, had 
several machine-guns trained north. 
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 Ger-
man 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 surren-
dered to the Munsters before the Wilt-
shires arrived. Later on that day, the 
village of St. Remy was taken. Through-
out the night of the 6th and all day on 
the 7th, the Battalion came under 
heavy artillery fire; the shelling con-
tinued 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. whirlst 
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 morn-
ing 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.

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-rank-
ing sources before the shelling finally 
ceased.

By midday, the Allies and the Ger-
man 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 
fraternalization 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 roses, 
flares, signal-lights and burning 
exports. The next day would bring a 
million problems of withdrawal and 
repairation, 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 wel-
come, they had fought bravely under 
derperate 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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