

By PADDY MORONEY

**THIS FRIDAY, November 11, is Remembrance Day for those who died in both World Wars.**

It is an event long associated with the British Legion, in Limerick as elsewhere, whose members were once numerous enough to hold a sizeable parade on Poppy Day, as it was also traditionally called.

Time has taken its toll of those who wear the poppy on their lapels: now there is no more than a dozen or so quietly living their remaining days out in Limerick.

The former cenotaph at the head of Peery Square, a stone cross of eight-sided shafts, buttressed by a down-pointed longsword on either face — "took off" in a flash of plastic explosive one dark Sunday morning during a campaign of rebellion in 1959.

**Cleared**

The scatter of granite chips from the devastated monument was cleared from the far ends of the square, but the stump of the old cross remained naked until the present, and more modern in style, memorial was erected.

No longer is the British Legion mentioned, just a simple inscription on the base bears the legend, "In memory of Limerickmen who died in both world wars."

The date of the 1939-1945 on a bold crest faces the rising sun, the years 1914-1918 face the setting sun.

This Friday's Mass in St. Joseph's Church, Limerick, at 11.15 a.m., and this Sunday's service in St. Mary's Cathedral, at 11 a.m., are the only religious commemorations in the city.

Until the Northern Troubles in the late 'sixties, a big service drew the crowds to St. Michael's Church, in Barrington Street, after which a wreath-laden parade formed up for the three-hundred-year march to the cenotaph.

A directive from the British Legion headquarters in Dublin ended the colorful commemorations in centres outside the capital and today the 200 or so members are down to only about a tenth of that figure.

Pensions to them, and to a handful of ageing widows, are still handed around.

**Limerickmen**

The number of Limerickmen who have fallen in battle and are laid to rest in the city is few, the only central resting place is the King's Island Cemetery, maintained by a resident caretaker, Mr. Alfred Sparling.

And not all of the 37 soldiers who lie there died in battle. The approaching winter of 1918, after the end of the Great War, brought with it the "black flu" — described locally as some kind of pneumonia.

It occurred when British Army personnel were required, most likely by a shortage of accommodation in the four city barracks, to camp under canvas in the marshes of King's Island.

It must be remembered that, although the war had come to an abrupt end, literally, with the Armistice — when the clatter of machine gun ended with the thunder of artillery at an agreed moment in time — a great deal of equipment had to be stored in Ireland, then the second of the two islands which made up the Empire's heartland.

Many soldiers had not yet been demobbed — a term for demobilisation and dispersal — and the Irish Troubles were gathering momentum with the Sinn Fein landslide in the "Khaki election" which followed the Great War.

Indeed, within weeks of the "black flu" in the Island Field, which claimed the lives of British soldiers, the first Dail would meet in the Mansion House in Dublin and, quite independently, the Solobeg Beg incident in County Tipperary would light the fires of a War of Independence. Martial law in Munster was only just round the corner by the autumn of 1918.

The graves in the King's Island cemetery tell their own tale of the "black flu" which took the lives of some of the soldiers camped out on the soaking marshes which today lie right beside the houses in St. Mary's Park.

The gravestones, laid in perfect order like soldiers on parade, do not follow a chronological sequence. But a re-arrangement of names and dates, on paper, is a revelation.

It appears that seven men of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and four of the Scottish Horse took the brunt of the scythe which was swept by death himself in the short space of six weeks.

First to go on October 15, 1918, was Corporal H. McBeath, of the Scottish Horse, followed only six days later by a fellow NCO, 22-year-old G. Hamilton, same regiment, and the following day by 20-year-old Private C. G. Angus, of the same military household.

Then in a grim sequence, it was the turn of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers: Private D. S. Nelson on November 2, Sergeant J. Cook only two days later with Private S. Hilliard the same day, another two days took 19-year-old Private C. H. Smith. Finally, on November 10, it was the turn of Private A. Price, same regiment.

**Same day**

That same day hit the motor transport company of the Army Service Corps with the death of Private A. MacKenzie. The following days saw the demise of Scottish horseman J. Donlop, November 15, was again as black a day for the Royal Welsh as was November 4, with the deaths of Lance-Corporal S. Colwell and Private E. Jones.

November 25 seems to have seen the last fatality of the pneumonia which took the strong with the weak. On that day, Private T. Fisher of the Tank Corps expired.

None of these are, of course, war dead. But the remaining gravestones, in two neat rows with an isolated one closer to the entrance, bear testimony to the fact that the graves were first opened in 1914, the first year of the Great War in Europe.

First to be laid there was Sergeant C. J. Chantery, who died in 1914 on the day before New Year's Eve — December 30 is on his memorial. He was only 22, attached to the 1st King's Shropshire Light Infantry, the only member of that force to be laid to rest there.

Then there is the puzzle of the graveyard — one of two, in fact. In 1915, four more were laid to rest, three of them from the Royal Army Medical Corps who expired in April, June and November. The fact that they all came from the same regiment, and were buried away from battle. But then there is the 4th tomb of that year, inscribed "2/Cpl J. Anderson, who died December 17, 1915, aged 26, eldest son of Captain Anderson of Melbourne, Victoria." The inscription describes the deceased, late of the Australian Engineers, as "a brave Anzac" — hardly the credit given to someone who had not died in the face of the enemy.

# Poppy Day fading away in Limerick

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Alfred Sparling tends the soldiers' graves at St. Mary's Park this week. □ Picture: A. F. FOLEY

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