

Death of Private Patrick Leen 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers

by Tom Donovan



On Easter Monday, 24 April, 1916 a troop of the 6th Reserve Cavalry, which included some 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers, was sent from Marlborough Barracks (now McKee Barracks) on Blackhorse Avenue to face the rebels in Sackville (O'Connell) Street, Dublin. As the troops advanced down Sackville Street the rebels opened fire from the G.P.O. and surrounding buildings. Earlier the troops had also come under fire in the area of Church Street and North King Street, where six or seven of their men were hit by rebel fire.¹

After the Lancers were fired on by the rebels four were killed and their bodies and horses were left lying in Sackville street for the week. The remainder of the Lancers scattered. Apparently James Connolly said that if the rebels had held their fire they would have killed even more.

Reports of this attack state that Private Patrick Leen from Abbeyfeale, County Limerick was with the party of 5th Lancers.² It was maintained that he was not killed at the scene, but died of wounds on 1 May 1916.

An interesting anecdote was relayed by Pat Hogarty, a member of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association, to his son Pat who received a query from a Catholic priest some years ago. The priest said that he was following up on some information that he had received from his two aunts, who were both in their 80s. The family story was that their relation was serving in the Lancers during Easter Week and he refused to shoot at the rebels and was executed. Following some research Pat Hogarty discovered that the soldier in question was indeed Private Patrick Leen. When he relayed his research to the priest he replied that his two aunts would not be happy as they regarded their relative as a hero of the Republican type. However, Pat Hogarty argued that Private Leen was indeed a hero, as he died doing his duty. It is not known if the priest ever passed the story to his aunts.³ It was

not unusual for confusion to reign when dead and wounded from both sides of the conflict lay on the streets for days.

A contemporaneous account of Private Leen's death gives a totally different version of events and appears to be the definitive account. It may also be why his relatives did not believe he shot at rebels. He was indeed a member of the 5th Lancers, but had only joined a short time before the Rising. He had been an assistant accountant in the offices of Dublin Corporation prior to joining the army. On Easter Monday he was on leave at the Fairyhouse Races, and returning found it impossible to reach his barracks. After a few days he reported to the Royal Irish Rifles in Portobello Barracks⁴ and was subsequently doing sentry duty at Kelly's tobacconist store on Camden Street,⁵ which had been looted.

He was seated in a room upstairs when the rifle which his comrade was cleaning went off accidentally and shot Private Leen in the leg. Septic poisoning necessitated amputation, but the operation proved too much for the poor fellow and he died in the Meath

Hospital on 1 May, 1916. He was buried in the Royal Hospital Cemetery, in Kilmainham, Dublin.

Patrick Leen was born in Abbeyfeale in 1894. His mother and mother-in-law ran a public house, shop and boarding house in the town. By 1911 Patrick had followed the path taken by his older brothers and was a boarder in Rockwell College, County Tipperary. He then went to Blackrock College in Dublin and on leaving he took up employment with Dublin Corporation. He joined the British Army with the intention of fighting at the front in the Great War, but he was caught up by the events of Easter Week.

He was only 22 years old and was a very promising sportsman. While in school he captained the Rockwell rugby team and played full back for the Munster Schools team in the inter-provincials for two years. A year later he played full back for Blackrock and represented Leinster at the trial inter-provincials.⁶

He left his widowed mother and grandmother, in Abbeyfeale, to grieve his loss.⁷



Kelly's tobacconist shop as it is today

Three of Patrick's brothers became priests and joined the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Rev Daniel Leen was priest at St. Mary's Rathmines at the time of his brothers death and two others Rev Edward Leen and Rev James Leen were both in Rome.⁸ Another brother John was also studying for the priesthood but died from poisoning at the age of 21.⁹

Kelly's tobacconist store, where Leen died, was central to a controversial incident that same week.¹⁰ On Tuesday 25 April Captain Bowen Colthurst gathered a group of soldiers and marched them towards Kelly's shop. He mistakenly believed that Kelly was a Sinn Féiner and a supporter of the Rising.

Francis Sheehy Skeffington had been arrested earlier and brought with the soldiers as a hostage. On the way to Kelly's shop Bowen Colthurst shot dead J.J. Coade, a 19-year-old youth, who was returning from a sodality meeting at the church in Rathmines. He was reported to have struck the lad with the butt of his rifle and then shot him in the back as he walked away.

Colthurst led his men towards Kelly's shop, firing shots at random and sending the populace running for cover. One of those who ran was the unfortunate Thomas Dickson, who heard the commotion and entered the shop for safety. Dickson, described in contemporary reports as 'deformed' and a 'Scotchman' was editor of a paper called *The Eye Opener*. He was arrested with Patrick McIntyre, editor of the *Searchlight* newspaper, who was already inside the shop. The two men, together with Sheehy Skeffington, were marched back to Portobello Barracks and placed in the guard room. The following



Leen's Hotel, Abbeyfeale, County Limerick.

morning all three were shot dead on Bowen Colthurst's orders.¹¹ The shop was destroyed by grenades after this raid by the military and may have been looted, so Private Leen and his comrade were placed there as sentries. It was a fatal posting for Leen.

Acknowledgement

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Headstone on grave of Private Patrick Leen
(Courtesy of findagravewebsite.ie)

References:

1. <http://www.irishfamilyroots.com/page39.html>
2. Neil Richardson, *According to their Lights; Stories of Irishmen in the British Army, Easter 1916* (Cork, 2015). The Commonwealth War Graves website (www.cwgc.org) has a typed grave registration document recording the date of his death as 24 April. This entry has a line drawn through it and 1 May handwritten over it.
3. <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=45239&page=2>
4. Portobello Barracks is now known as Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines.
5. This shop gave its name to Kelly's Corner on Camden Street, Dublin.
6. *Weekly Observer* 13 May 1916.
7. NAI Census returns 1901 and 1911. The Leen family later had an hotel trading as Leen's Hotel, in Main Street, Abbeyfeale..
8. *Weekly Observer* 13 May 1916. The three Leen brothers became leading members of the Holy Ghost Order. Edward Leen who was ordained on 26 May, 1901 published many books and befriended Bishop Shanahan. Rev James Leen became Coadjutor Bishop of Mauritius and Rev Daniel Leen had his ministry interrupted by ill health. See: http://www.spiritan.ie/irish_spiritans_remembered.pdf
9. <http://sedevacantist.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=805>
10. For more on this incident; see Des Ryan, *Death of a Pacifist* in this journal.
11. *The Irish Times*, An Irishman's Diary 23 February, 2004.
12. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=107047967>