

Sioux fighter returns for WWI

John Donnelly's story

by Eric Villiers

As Muslim extremists continue to remind the world that the sovereignty of the exotic Philippine Islands in Southern Asia is still an issue, the remarkable story of an Armagh-born adventurer has come to light. 'Shoeing Smith' John Donnelly had a long and colourful career in the US Army stretching from run-ins with Chief Sitting Bull, through to the 1898 Spanish-American War and the subsequent savage Philippine-American War, which lasted until 1902. Donnelly it seems thrived on action and in 1915, as the US appeared intent on staying out of WWI, he sailed home to do his "bit" against Germany.

In the mid-1880s with Ireland still recovering from the effects of the Great Famine John Donnelly shipped out to America to begin a life-long adventure. Like many of his generation he was fascinated by America's Wild West and - no doubt inspired by heroic tales such as Custer's Last Stand - was headed for the 7th Cavalry. Perhaps, even as a youngster, he had ideas of avenging that famous defeat, which had shocked the world and humiliated America. On June 25, 1876 by the banks of the Little Big-horn River, Montana, the Sioux nation, led by Chief Sitting Bull annihilated some the US army's finest cavalrymen.

Custer, with around 600 men at his disposal, led the attack by splitting his force to trap the Sioux camped in the river valley. However when Custer - known and despised by the Sioux as 'Long Hair' - charged the settlement he had a force of just 263. All of them of course died and the barbarity of the Sioux in stripping the bodies naked and mutilating everyone except Custer, made Sitting Bull America's most wanted man. Ever since there has been speculation that Custer's body was spared because of the exceptional bravery he'd shown in the fight.

Custer had planned a pincer move that required perfect timing. That didn't happen and even it had, attacking an encampment of 12,000 that

stretched for eight kilometres seems at best foolhardy and at worst suicidal. Custer may not have known that he was in fact taking on the entire Sioux nation since the chiefs, Crazy Horse and Red Cloud had recently arrived at the Big Horn for an alliance led by Sitting Bull. The defeat resounded around the world and left the 7th Cavalry itching for revenge. Tales of such exploits would surely have had a profound affect on John Donnelly, then a small boy. Born

in an age before film John's appetite for western life would have been fed by 'penny dreadfuls' - the weekly comics - which, with their cliffhanger dramas, were the forerunners of cinema's weekly serials and television's soap operas.

With Victorian railway barons opening up whole continents and a new century approaching, the American west became the focus for adventurers and fortune hunters from all over the globe. John Donnelly became one of them and at

some point joined the legendary 7th to become a shoeing smith.

It wasn't long before he had his first taste of action in the 'Indian wars' and in 1890 he fought at the so-called Battle of Wounded Knee. Just how heroic any US soldier was that day remains a matter for conjecture, for it was in reality a massacre of unarmed men, women and children. Nevertheless he was wounded in the engagement on December 29, 1890.

Around 200 Sioux were camped at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota. They had surrendered the previous day at Pine Ridge just days after the reservation police had killed Sitting Bull. The tribe were surrounded, disarmed and cooperating peacefully when a squabble broke out over a young brave's new hunting rifle. A shot was fired and immediately from close range the soldiers, backed by the new Gatling machine guns fired into the crowd whose



After Chief Sitting Bull's victory at Custer's Last Stand the US Cavalry saw Wounded Knee as a final act of revenge.

Life of US army veteran captivates the city

In December 1915 John Donnelly's story in the Ulster Gazette described him as "Shoeing-Smith John Donnelly" whose mother lived in Poplar Street, a small terrace that ran off Banbrook Hill down to Railway Street.

Earlier the family lived in Albert Place (adjacent to Lonsdale Street). By 1915 when he returned home his father Patrick was dead and his mother Susanna and his brother Patrick had moved to No. 2 Poplar Street.

The Donnellys appear to have been an exceptional family and, according to the Gazette, around Ulster Patrick (Jun) earned "some noterity as a 'local poet'".

John was just the sort of 'returning hero' that newspapers delighted in reporting during WWI. Of course a man of his experience, even in his forties would have been a valuable asset in campaigns that still widely employed horses.

If he did join up then he appears to have survived the war since the only local 'John Donnelly' listed among the war dead by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is a Royal Irish Fusilier from Blackwatertown.

As for his service in US uniform the Gazette indicates that the cavalry smithie ended his service as a First Sergeant in the 3rd Missouri National Guard, having at various times, between 1885 and 1915, served with "the 1st Battery RFA, the Light Battery 4th US Artillery and the 7th Cavalry".

only weapons were clubs and knives.

Fleeing Indians were tracked down, often for miles and shot. Later 146 Indians including 44 women and 16 children were buried in a mass grave. Around 30 soldiers were killed, most of them caught in the 'friendly' cross fire of their own machine guns. Whatever history thinks of those campaigns now, like most US fighting men of his time Donnelly was proud of his part in subduing the Indians at places like Wounded Knee, Pine Ridge and the Rosebud Reservation.

Most likely some of the troopers alongside him at those actions were among the 350 men who had been at the Big Horn, in the other arm of the pincer envisaged by Custer. They were led by Major Marcus Reno whose tactical retreat, back across the Big Horn, saved him and his men

from Custer's fate. Like Reno's veterans Donnelly would have felt that Wounded Knee wiped the slate clean and certainly it's ferocity concluded the US conquest of the North American Indians.

It was another eight years before Donnelly got the chance to fight again for his adopted country in a major campaign. Perhaps the west was becoming too tame for him and when the US and Spain squabbled over sovereignty of the Philip-

pinis, he again signed up for the fight. The Spanish-American War broke out in 1898 and was over quickly after the US navy defeated the Spanish fleet. It was three months before an expeditionary force arrived to invade Manila and among the most effective units landed was an elite outfit, the 1st Volunteer Cavalry, a.k.a. 'the Rough Riders'.

Donnelly's own story makes no reference to the 1st or the Roughriders, which is hardly something he would have left out, so he may only have ridden alongside them not actually with them. On the other hand Roosevelt's Ulster background (his mother was from County Antrim) did attract a high proportion of Irishmen. Furthermore, as Roosevelt said when he proposed the new flying unit, he particularly wanted volunteers who had fought in the Indian territories. With his cavalry experience and adventurous spirit it would have been a natural progression for Donnelly, who had already hopped from regiment to regiment in search of action. In any event his time in the Philippines would more than fulfil his boyhood dreams of daring escapades.

Roosevelt's flair for publicity enabled him to portray the Spanish-American War as his very own 'good little war', even though he was in battle for just one day. He'd been allowed to resign as assistant secretary of the Navy to form the 1st Volunteers and his idea attracted a wide cross section of young America. Soon cowboys and college boys, miners and soldiers were rushing to join him.

Roosevelt sealed his men's legendary status with his colourful depiction of



Chief Big Foot pictured as he lay frozen in the snow after the 'Battle of Wounded Knee'



General George Custer - his exploits would have inspired John Donnelly as he grew up in Armagh.

one particular action on July 1, 1898. After an uphill charge in Santiago they captured Kettle Hill and immediately swung back for another charge across the valley to seize San Juan ridge.

By writing his own story Roosevelt glamourised engagements like San Juan Hill so successfully that his men became media darlings. Later his cinematic re-enactment became part of the publishing industry that sprang up to produce thousands of films and stories about the Roughriders for books, magazines and comics

Although the war ended a month later with a US victory the Filipino generals rejected American authority and retreated into inaccessible mountains from where they exacted bloody and brutal reprisals. After one massacre US General Jacob F. Smith launched such indiscriminate retaliation that he was court-martialled

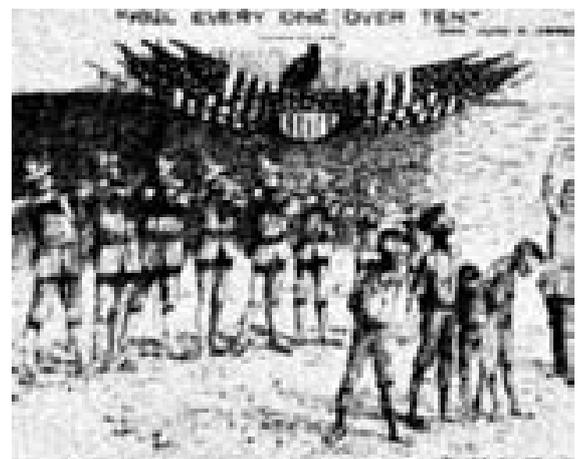
and forced to retire. By then over 1,000 rebels were still fighting in what became the Philippine-American War. It was during this time on the island of Jolo, a Muslim stronghold, that Donnelly was wounded in action for a second time. Injured and separated from his unit he hid out before being rescued by a tribe of headhunters. For nine months he was protected by the tribe and lived like a native until he was found.

In those days before the mechanized slaughter of WWI changed forever the romantic notion of war as an adventure, Donnelly had found himself fighting alongside men who would individually become modern American icons. Among the Roughriders were Tom Mix, who by 1910 was

a world-famous film star; the writer Damon Runyon who went on to pen the hit musical *Guys and Dolls*, and of course Roosevelt, who became the youngest ever US President in 1901. .

Although John Donnelly stayed on in the army for another ten years the Philippine-American War, which claimed the lives of 4,200 US soldiers, 20,000 Filipino fighters and 200,000 civilians, was his last significant action in US uniform. Peacetime seems to have held few attractions for him and by 1915, perhaps exasperated by the USA's refusal to enter the conflict in Europe, he once again went looking for a war. In the autumn of 1915 he sailed for Ireland, where, as the *Ulster Gazette* put it he was returning home, "... in order to do his 'little bit.'" The wording suggests, or maybe the reporter knew that contemporary readers would know that Donnelly was home to volunteer. However it's far from clear that he did since he was well over forty at the time.

It would be nice to think that the US veteran of 30 years never made it into WWI and retired with his romanticism intact. War as he knew it had changed beyond all recognition. Brutal as it was, hunting down renegades on the open prairies or in Asian jungles was a far cry from the industrialized attrition that passed for war in France's muddy fields, where the strategy of both sides never rose above the tactical twinning of slaughter and stalemate.



'Kill All Over 10': Boys being executed by the US army in retaliation for attacks by Philippine insurgents