

# It should have been over by Christmas

Some County Armagh men in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers part One - From Mons to the first trenches

by Amanda Moreno MA

In doing the research for 'Angels and Heroes' in 2004 I came across many references in the Regimental archives to the men from County Armagh who served in the Royal Irish Fusiliers in the First World War. Generally, records for those who were killed in the war are easy to find, but records of those who served and survived are not readily accessible. Locally we are very lucky to have the

men from the city and county have left their homes to fight or die in all corners of the globe in the service of this fine Regiment. Few homes in both city and county will not have a family connection with the Regiment and this is particularly so in the First World War.

The Armagh Guardian reported that at 11pm on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1914, just four days after the war started, around 300 Re-

with St. Malachy's band (who had been refused permission to march with the parade to the station) were waiting and played and cheered as the soldiers marched through the station. The station master, Mr. McAllister and his men sounded the fog signals as the train steamed on its way to Greenore.

The Royal Irish Fusiliers arrived in Boulogne, France on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1914 and immediately began to move towards the enemy. By this time the rest of the British Army had established a defensive line at Mons, near Brussels, in an effort to halt the advance of the Imperial German Army in the race for Paris and the sea ports of France and Belgium. As the Royal Irish Fusiliers stepped off the train at Le Cateau the Regiment found themselves as Rearguard to a chaotic retreat as the British army fell back from Mons.

A vivid description of the fighting was given to the Armagh Guardian by Pte R McCauley of Barrack Hill, Armagh when he returned home in September 1914. Their attack at Le Cateau having failed,

the Regiment were ordered to retire, but the message did not get through to McCauley's section. When his officer Major Robert Gray, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Gray of Charlemont Place, Armagh, was wounded and taken prisoner, McCauley realised they were surrounded. McCauley and Pte Tommy Steenson (also



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*The young soldiers of the 1st Battalion at Bordon before going of to war in August 1914*

resources of the Irish and Local Studies Library, especially its archives of the Armagh Guardian, from which I found most of the following reports.

The Royal Irish Fusiliers have been an integral part of the history of the City of Armagh since the Regiment was formed in 1793. Through the years since, many

servists<sup>1</sup> marched through the crowded streets of Armagh to the railway station. They were led by the band of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers and the mounted troop of the Ulster Volunteers, followed by the local UVF Company who were singing patriotic songs. A number of the Nationalist Volunteers

from Armagh) managed to join a section of the Royal Irish Rifles and made their escape, but McCauley was shot through the foot by a Maxim machine gun bullet. He had to walk seven miles before he was picked up by an ambulance and thence to a London hospital. McCauley told the Armagh Guardian that “it was simply hell, if you can imagine the worst hail storm you ever saw, and every bit of hail, a bullet or a shell, you will understand what it was like”.

In the disorder and confusion of the

his family in Abbey Lane, Armagh that he was safe and well.

The relatives of Pte Harry Warnock were not so lucky. The War Office did not send a letter until October 1914 informing them that he had been missing since the battle of Le Cateau on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1914; it was several weeks later before they found out he had been taken prisoner. Likewise, it was the end of November before Mr Thomas White of Mill St., Tanderagee found out that his son John, a Private in the Royal Irish Fusiliers was

tale was from Drummer McMahon of Banbrook Hill, Armagh printed in the Armagh Guardian at the end of October when McMahon had been sent home to recuperate. He related how his officer, Lt Liesching of the Royal Irish Fusiliers saved the lives of McMahon and Pte Vaughan also from Armagh. Despite being wounded himself, Lt Liesching half dragged and half carried McMahon “through a hail of shells about a quarter of a mile up a hill”. He added that the London hospital he was in was visited by



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*The band of the Royal Irish Fusiliers in Lurgan c1915*

retreat many soldiers, especially the wounded, became trapped behind German lines. Most became prisoners of war, others were sheltered by local French families for years and occasionally for the duration of the war<sup>2</sup>. Lance Corporal G Preston, wounded in the jaw and side by shrapnel balls, wrote to his wife at Ballinacor, Portadown about his experiences in the retreat from Mons, “...four signallers and myself, we were handicapped with bicycles and in a terrible state of mud and couldn’t get our machines along, the result was that we were left behind. I juked more shells in half a day than I did through the African campaign”<sup>3</sup>. The Guardian also reported that Pte J Bridgets also wrote to

safe and well though a prisoner in Senelager, Germany. Another prisoner, Pte Joseph Conn wrote to his aunt, Miss L Conn of Allistragh, from the POW camp in Padderborn that “he is well and is now progressing favourably, as he is well treated.”<sup>4</sup> He added that they are only allowed to write two postcards a month.

Knowing what a vital link it was between official sources of information and the public, the Armagh Guardian clearly took its role very seriously as it continued to print lists of casualties and the missing throughout the war.

The Guardian also kept the local populace up to date with exciting and morale boosting tales of ‘daring do’ from their county Regiment. One such

the King and Queen and both stopped by his bedside and spoke to him.

It was the Regimental Associations and dedicated individuals like Mr. Delmege Trimble, editor of the Armagh Guardian who formed the Comforts Fund which sent food parcels to the soldiers in the trenches and to the prisoners of war. These comforts ranged from cigarettes to copies of the local newspaper. The Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum holds the set of filing cards that Mr. Trimble used to record a soldier’s preference for cigarettes or plug tobacco, their shoe and hat sizes. When the Regiment was in Persia in 1920 the soldiers sent three fine Persian carpets to Mr. Trimble as a way of saying thanks.

As the fighting continued, the German advance from Mons was eventually halted just 10 miles east of Paris near Magny, which is now the site of Euro Disney. Then began the hard and bloody fight to regain all that lost ground and drive the Germans out of occupied France and Belgium. Again the Regiment was in the thick of it, steadily pushing the Germans back across the rivers of the Aisne and Marne. By the end of October 1914, both sides were almost equally matched and as neither side could be pushed any further both armies started to dig in. Thus began the stalemate of trench warfare on the Western Front.

The Curator of the Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum would appreciate further information about any of the soldiers named in this article. All photographs in this article are copyright of the Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum. ❖

## References

- 1 After a soldier left the army he was committed to spending a number of years on the 'Reserve' and could be immediately recalled for service in time of war.
- 2 The story of two Royal Irish Fusilier soldiers (Thomas Donohoe from Co. Cavan and David Martin from Belfast) with two English soldiers became the subject of a book by Ben McIntyre. The ending of 'A Foreign Field' is unfortunately a sad one, for all four soldiers ignored a German amnesty and the option to become prisoners. They were eventually betrayed, found guilty as spies and executed in Le Câtelet in May 1916.
- 3 Boer War 1899 to 1902.
- 4 Correspondence from POWs was heavily censored by their captors and they were 'encouraged' to say that they were well treated.

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*The following are only those soldiers from Co. Armagh who served with the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, and were killed between 26 August 1914 and 31 December 1914.*

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### **Commemorated at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre Memorial**

#### ***Burns, Samuel, Private, No11122***

Born and resided in Bessbrook, County Armagh, and enlisted in Newry. He was originally listed as missing and was accepted as having been killed in action on 27 August 1914, by the War Office on 20 January 1916. In his will he wrote "In the event of my death, I give all my love to all I leave behind. That's about all I can do, so they can go to the bank and draw. I leave breath and my money. They can spend it anyway."

#### ***McConville, Charles Vincent, Private, No11215***

Born and resided in Shankill, County Armagh, and enlisted at Lurgan. He was originally listed as missing and was accepted as having been killed in action on 26 August 1914, by the War Office on 9 June 1916.

#### ***Summerville, William, Private, No11402***

Born, resided and enlisted at Portadown. He died of wounds on 17 September 1914 at Bucy le Long.

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### **Buried at Cité Bonjean Military Cemetery**

#### ***McCann, Thomas John, Private, No11495***

Born, resided and enlisted in Portadown. He died of wounds on 21 October 1914.

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### **Buried at Méteren Military Cemetery**

#### ***Shiveral, Samuel, Private, No9115***

Born at Keady, County Armagh, resided at Sittingbourne, Kent, and enlisted at Hamilton, Lankashire. He was killed in action on 14 October 1914 near Houplines.

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### **Buried at Houplines Communal Cemetery Extension**

#### ***Daly, James, Lance Sergeant, No9719***

Born in Peshawar, India, resided and enlisted in Armagh. He was killed in action on 26 October 1914 at Houplines.

#### ***Livingstone, James, Private, No11317***

Born and resided in Shankill, County Armagh, and enlisted at Lurgan. He was killed in action on 26 October 1914 at Houplines.

#### ***Todd, William Francis, No7365***

Born and resided in Shankill, Co. Armagh, and enlisted at Portadown, County Armagh. He was killed in action on 22 October 1914 at Houplines.

Woodhouse, Thomas, Private, No8355

Born and resided in Portadown, and enlisted at Armagh. He was killed in action on 21 October 1914 at Houplines.

**Woods, William John, Private, No7445**

Born in Portadown, resided in Cowcaddens, Glasgow, and enlisted at Portadown. He was killed in action on 14 November 1914 near Armentières.

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### **Buried at Honnechy British Cemetery**

**Neill, George, Private, No10772**

Born, resided and enlisted in Portadown, County Armagh. Originally listed as missing and was accepted as having been killed in action on 27 August 1914, by the War Office on 15 December 1915.

**Parks, Robert, Private, No9990**

Born and resided in Shankill, County Armagh and enlisted in Portadown, County Armagh. Originally listed as missing and was accepted as having been killed in action on 26 August 1914, by the War Office on 24 July 1916.

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### **Buried at Trois Arbres Cemetery**

**Hawvey, William, Private, No11158**

Born and resided in Portadown, and enlisted at Armagh. He died of wounds on 8 November 1914 at No 10 Field Ambulance.

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### **Buried at Strand Military Cemetery**

**Cordner, Thomas, Private, No11254**

Born and resided in Portadown, County Armagh, enlisted in Armagh. He was killed in action on 9 November 1914 at Houplines.

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### **Commemorated at the Ploegsteert Memorial**

**Clarke, William, Private, No5598**

Born in Bessbrook, County Armagh, resided in Newry, County Down and enlisted in Armagh. He was killed in action on 7 December 1914 near Armentières.

**Mahaffey, Joseph, Private, No6612**

Born and resided at Shankill, County Armagh, and enlisted at Lurgan. He was killed in action on 21 November 1914 near Armentières.

**Moore, Robert James, Private, No8403**

Born and resided in Armagh, and enlisted at

Lurgan. He was killed in action on 29 November 1914 at Nieppe.

**Watson, William, Private, No4734**

Born in Armagh, resided in Lurgan, and enlisted at Finner Camp, County Donegal. He served with the 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers and was mobilised into the 1st Bn when the Great War started. He was killed in action on 27 November 1914 near Armentières.

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### **Commemorated at the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial**

**Graham, Albert, Private, No8692**

Born and resided in Shankill, County Armagh, and enlisted in Lurgan. Originally listed as missing and was accepted as having been killed in action on 25 April 1915 at St. Julien, by the War Office on 18 September 1916.

**Toman, John, Private, No5180**

Born in Lurgan, resided in Portadown, and enlisted at Lurgan. Originally listed as missing and was accepted as having been killed in action on 25 April 1915 at St. Julien, by the War Office on 29 September 1916.

