

Soldiers from Nenagh and district in World War I

By Daniel Grace

At least 1,500 men from the town of Nenagh and the surrounding countryside fought in the Great War of 1914-18.¹ Most of them appear to have served in the Royal Irish Regiment, although a sprinkling was found in the Leinsters, the Munster Fusiliers, the Connaught Rangers, the Irish Guards, the Royal Garrison Artillery and several other regiments. Sergeant James Somers of Cloughjordan, a local winner of the Victoria Cross, served in the Enniskilling Fusiliers, but he had been born at Belturbet in Co. Cavan.

The Nenagh recruits came from mansion and cottage, from every religious and political persuasion, but were predominantly working class, Roman Catholic and nationalist. Sons of farmers seemed reluctant to join the fight – a point emphasised by Lord Dunally of Kilboy, Silvermines, when he publicly accused them from a recruiting platform at Nenagh in 1915 of being “content to stay at home on their farms and live upon the fat of the land”.²

What motivated hundreds of young men to leave home and family to flock to the colours is probably as complex as the personalities themselves. For the sons of the landed gentry, many of whom had a strong family tradition of service in the British army, it was a rallying to king, flag and empire in an hour of need. But nationalist Ireland, which provided the majority of the recruits, hardly marched to that tune.

In a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) way the message was hammered home to them from poster and platform that this war was “Ireland’s War”. When Lord Dunally reminded the nationalists of Nenagh in November 1915 that it was their duty to fight, he was probably politely but firmly ignored. But when two fellow Nenagh men of impeccable nationalist credentials – Town Clerk, F.R. Maloney, and Secretary of the



Nenagh's memorial to the dead of both World Wars. – Photo copyright Frank Burgess.

Department of Agriculture, T.P. Gill – urged that message from the same platform, they were more likely to be heeded.³

The “rape of little Belgium” undoubtedly spurred some young men to action. It was extensively reported in the local press and collections for Belgian refugees were taken up all over the locality.⁴ At recruiting meetings there was usually a soldier from the Front who spoke emotionally of the cruelties inflicted by the Germans on the men, and especially the women, of Belgium.

At the great recruiting meeting at Nenagh in November 1915, for instance, a Captain Deane of the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry told his audience that he knew from first-hand experience that “they [Germans] outrage the women, kill the children, put the innocent up against the wall and have them shot”. It was also common at recruiting meetings to have a magic lantern show of scenes of destruction wrought by the Germans. At one such meeting at Moneygall in July 1915 “various pictures of war scenes showing the effects of the bombardment of the churches and homes of Belgium and France were thrown on the screen”.⁵

Many enlisted for the excitement or in the hope of cutting a dash in uniform. Certain local employers, including Tipperary N.R. County Council, Borrisokane Board of Guardians and the *Nenagh Guardian* newspaper, facilitated their employees by publicly promising them their jobs back.⁶ Others joined to follow friends or brothers into the army.

Twenty-six Nenagh families had between them ninety sons fighting at the Front. Four families had five sons each; four more had four sons each; eighteen other families had three each.⁷ The story was often the same in the rural districts. Michael Collins of Urra near Puckaun had four sons at the Front. One of them, Lance-Corporal Tommy Collins of the Second Leinster Regiment, was killed in action in France on 21 March, 1917.⁸

Perhaps the late Jack Moyney, V.C., of Roscrea summed it up best of all some years before his death.⁹ He was working for a local farmer when the war broke out, and he and a friend Mick Tobin decided to go along to the local recruiting office. “I signed up because everyone else was going. I wanted to see a bit of life and I felt sorry for the Belgians to a certain extent”. “But the hours”, Jack added wryly, “they wouldn’t even give us a drink of water afterwards”.

Casualties of War

The first reported casualty of the Great War from the Nenagh district was Private Stephen Coffey of the Leinster Regiment, killed in action on the Western Front on 18 October 1914.¹⁰ The last victim was Private Thomas Houlihan of Lorrha, killed in October 1918, some weeks before the armistice.

Forty-year-old Stephen Coffey, a native of Carneybrack near Borrisokane, had been prominent in local sporting and political circles. He had been a founder-member of the Shannon Rovers G.A.A. club in 1898 and was chief organiser of the Carney and Knight teams which contested the North Tipperary hurling championship in the early years of the new century. He was chairman of the local Land and Labour branch and served for some years on Borrisokane Rural District Council.

By September 1917 a total of 66 soldiers from Nenagh and district had died in the Great War.¹¹ Fifty-eight of them had been killed in action or died subsequently from wounds, while a further 8 had died from disease. Among the latter group were Private Martin Condon of the Royal Engineers, who died in early 1917 from cold contracted in the trenches in France, and Corporal James Moylan of the Connaught Rangers, who died later that year from enteric fever at Salonika.

An additional 110 soldiers had been wounded in action; 45 of them had been discharged as unfit for active service while the rest had recovered and returned to duty. Twenty-one soldiers from the district were either prisoners of war or listed as missing. Perhaps the uncertainty surrounding those missing was most traumatic of all for relatives waiting at home. Mrs. Murphy of Chapel Lane, Nenagh, had to wait until August 1919 before it was finally confirmed that her son Bombardier Denis Murphy had died at Tarans in Turkey on 30 December 1916.

A number of soldiers from the Nenagh district were decorated for gallantry, although some of these failed to survive the conflict.¹² Captain F.R.D. Prittie of the Rifle Brigade, younger son of Lord Dunally, was awarded the French Legion of Honour but lost his young life early in the war. Lieutenant Marshall Webb of Silvermines, Sergeant Albert Somers of Cloughjordan and Sergeant-Major Oscar Hennessy of Nenagh each won the Military Cross, but the first two were killed in action.

Hennessy was decorated for "carrying several of his comrades, including his commanding officer, off the battlefield at the risk of his life". Lance-Corporal Michael Grace of Dromineer and Private Robert Brownlow of Nenagh both won the Military Medal, while Corporal Pat Christie and Private Joe Bolger were each awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Lieutenant Daniel Birmingham of Borrisokane received two citations for conspicuous gallantry on the battlefield with the American army.

Two Victoria Crosses

Private Martin O'Meara, a native of Sharragh in Lorrha parish, was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1916.¹³ O'Meara emigrated to Australia, enlisted in the 16th Battalion Australian Infantry Force in 1915, and was posted to France the following year. He received his award for bravely rescuing wounded comrades under heavy fire during the battle of Pozieres on the night of the 8-9 August 1916.

O'Meara returned home in October "without giving notice to anyone and walked from the station along the disused railway to his home, and it was only when he made his personal appearance that the news spread like wildfire of his return". A local committee raised a testimonial in his honour, which was presented to his sister by Brigadier-General Sir William Hickie as her brother had already returned to the Front.

O'Meara willed the money to repair the old abbey ruins at Lorrha, but it was subsequently applied to the renovation of the local Catholic church. Private O'Meara was wounded a number of times, most seriously in the back and thighs in 1917. He returned semi-invalided to Australia and died on 20 December 1935 after many years in a military hospital near Perth. He was buried with military honours at Karrakatta cemetery; his Victoria Cross is displayed in a war museum in Western Australia.

Great local interest was aroused by the award of the Victoria Cross in 1915 to twenty-one-year-old Sergeant James Somers for gallantry against the Turks at Gallipoli.¹⁴ Somers was born at Belturbet Co. Cavan and his family had come to live at Cloughjordan some years before the war. He enlisted in the Enniskilling Fusiliers in 1912 and was posted to France in August 1914 as part of the British Expeditionary Force. Wounded at the battle of Mons, he spent the Christmas of 1914 at home in Cloughjordan. In April 1915 the Enniskillings formed part of the assault force on the Turkish occupied Gallipoli peninsula, where together with the Munster Fusiliers they bore the brunt of the fighting and suffered huge casualties.

The official citation of Sergeant Somers's brave deed read: "On the night of the 1-2 July 1915 in the southern zone of the Gallipoli peninsula, where owing to hostile bombing some of our

troops had retired from a sap, Sergeant Somers remained alone on the spot until a party brought up bombs. He then climbed over into the Turkish trench and bombed the Turks with great effect".

"Later he advanced into the open under heavy fire and held back the enemy by throwing bombs into their flanks until a barricade had been established. During this period he frequently ran to and from our trenches to obtain fresh supplies of bombs. By his gallantry and coolness Sergeant Somers was largely instrumental in effecting the recapture of a trench which had been lost".

Somers returned to Cloughjordan to a hero's welcome in August 1915. An immense crowd greeted him at the railway station and he was led in procession by the Volunteer Band to a platform in the centre of the town where congratulatory speeches were showered on him. He left Cloughjordan shortly afterwards but returned for a formal ceremony on 5 October 1915. He was presented with an illuminated address prepared at the Convent of Mercy Borrisokane and a purse of £240 raised from well-wishers in the district.

Lord Dunally presided at the ceremony, and among the other speakers were Major-General Frend, commander of the forces in Ireland, Rev. Mr O'Sullivan, rector of Cloughjordan, and the local curate, Fr Richard Bourke. The band of the Royal Irish Regiment provided music and the town was bedecked with flags and bunting for the occasion. Nine days later Somers was presented with the Victoria Cross by King George V at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

Sergeant James Somers died at Cloughjordan on 11 May 1918, aged 24 years. According to reports in local newspapers, his death was due to "lung trouble contracted in France some months ago". But his family say that prior to his death he had returned to Ireland as a military instructor and suffered severe lung damage from a leaking gas canister while demonstrating its use at the barracks at Tipperary town. Invalided home to his parents at Cloughjordan, he died some months later. He was buried with military honours at Modreeney cemetery, a few miles outside Cloughjordan.

The coffin draped with the Union Jack was borne on a gun carriage, led by the pipe band of the Cameron Highlanders and a firing party from that same regiment. The business premises closed and blinds were drawn as the funeral passed through the town. The *Nenagh News* noted that there was an immense attendance of all classes and creeds at the funeral. Sergeant Somers's gravestone at Modreeney carries an inscription from the Second Book of Samuel:

He stood and defended. The Lord wrought a great wonder.



A family portrait of Sergt. James Somers, Nenagh – restored by Frank Burgess.

Letters from the Front

Soldiers wrote home to family and friends, and sometimes their letters were passed to the local press for publication. The following short selection is drawn from the many letters published in the *Nenagh News* during the years 1914 and 1915. John F. Power, the proprietor-

editor of that newspaper, had both a professional and personal reason for reporting extensively on the war. It was a subject of great interest to local readers prior to the 1916 Rising and five of his own sons were fighting in the war.

Since the letters were censored by the authorities one can hardly expect to find remarks critical of the conduct of the war in them. But notwithstanding that limitation the letters offer a valuable insight into the lives and emotions of ordinary Irish soldiers in France some 80 years ago.¹⁵

Private Hugh Donnelly of the Connaught Rangers, in a letter of 26 August 1914 to his mother at Nash's Road, Borrisokane, described his experiences with the British Expeditionary Force in France. Private Donnelly was a married man and an experienced soldier who had already seen service in the Boer War in South Africa.

I received your letter this morning and was glad to hear from you. I am in good health but I am getting it very hard at present. However, I am strong and able to bear it. We landed in France on the 15th August and marched through France into Belgium and got into the firing line on the 24th. We were beaten back into France on the 25th and were for three days and nights without food or sleep. We are in France as I write and are continually fighting the enemy, who are only about three miles from us. There were a number of our men killed on yesterday. Our regiment had a narrow escape but only one man in my company was hit so far. Don't mind what you see in the papers about the Germans being no good, they are great fighting men. They lost 8,000 men and we lost 300.

The Irish Guards got it hot. MB's regiment is here and there is a number of them killed. Some regiments got killed right out. I am not thinking of home, wife or children, my rifle and God is all I have to think of now. Don't think I am afraid, there is no fear in a soldier. I feel as if I was going to a hurling match. Shot and shell bursting over our heads every day. The Boer War was only child's play to this. Don't send any stamps when writing, but send some note-paper, as we can't get any to buy here.

At the end of September 1914 Mrs McGrath of Falvey's Lane, Nenagh, received a letter from her son, Patrick, who had been at the Front with the 18th Royal Irish but now lay wounded at Plymouth Hospital in England.

Just a few lines to let you know I am back in England in good health, but wounded. I suppose you read about our "trying times" in different battles. Well, I was in every one of them. The place where the big battle is going on now is where I got hit after escaping Mons. I hope to be allright soon and out again to see the last of the Germans.

Up in Belgium it was awful to see the poor people leaving their homes. Old women, men, children, and little babies, trodding along the roads and their homes levelled to the ground. When we copped the German infantry without their artillery we gave them "what-ho". Our boys were fine, marching on or in the firing line, always happy. One night in the trenches, waiting for the Germans, they were singing "It's a long way to Tipperary" and "Sing Something Irish to Me", but it was not long when the German artillery sang "Get Out and Get Under". They sent us some "humming birds" – I mean shells – over to us and spoiled our concert.

One day (a Tuesday, I think) we had a lovely fight which lasted eight hours. We killed about 1,000 and captured 5,514 machine guns and a wagon of ammunition. We had 3 killed and 10

wounded, so we did not do bad. They do mean tricks by carrying their machine guns on stretchers, showing the white flag, and when we get near they fire on us. I have seen all their dirty work, but to tell the truth I never saw them kill women or children in front; but of course we cannot see everything and would not like to. Our poor old regiment, with the 4th Middlesex and the Gordons, are all gone.

I must conclude as I am in pain trying to write. I have several things given me by German prisoners for some of my rations. I also have medals and a rosary beads which I got from a French woman.

Private Michael O'Toole of the 2nd Connaught Rangers described to his father who lived at Silver Street, Nenagh how he had been wounded at the Front towards the end of August 1914.

It was Sunday, 24th or 25th August, when we arrived at a village outside of which the battle of Mons was fought the following day (Monday). There were about one hundred cyclists and three squadrons of cavalry (15th Hussars). We went about a mile further up the country, halted on the roadside and were enjoying a Fleur-de-Woodbine when a volley rang out, and some time later one of the Hussars was brought in badly wounded. I was talking to young Taylor of Dublin Road. We were trying to come to a conclusion as to whether John Dooley or John Lee kept the best beer when the order rang out: "Cavalry, left, seventeen hundred yards". We put about two rounds per man into them and they retired. I only saw horses go as quick once before and that was when Jack Hogan's "Sundance" led his field over Lisboney Course.

Next came their infantry scouts in extended order. We let them advance to within five hundred yards range and then put a burst of rapid fire into them. They dropped (some never to get up) and returned our fire. The firing went on for a few hours, fortunately without any one being hit on our side, except for one chap who was hit through the nose. We were forced to retire as their cavalry was trying to outflank us on the left. Down along one of the famous Belgium cobbled roads we flew with bullets whistling around us, again without losing anyone. My byke, a beautiful little B.S.A., was punctured, I was riding on the rim. I would have given a lot for a B 90 saddle just then.

We again took up position and prepared to hold it when a shell dropped some distance in front, then another. We got the order to retire. I was knocked, I thought a full house fell on me, I thought my right leg was off. I crawled down in the dyke to safety. All the lads had been by this time nipped. I looked up only to see Mr. Brackes, an officer of ours, trying to scramble off. He could give me no help so I shifted for myself. After some falls I got on my byke. I did not know I was hit in the left leg until after. I got about eight pieces of shrapnel. I went so quick into the village that Jim Corrigan could have given me seventeen hundred yards of a start and catch me in the last sixty.

I was one of the first to be hit on the British side. I was dressed by a Belgian doctor. I was taken to a farmhouse where I slept until we were shifted next morning. We were not a mile outside it when the Germans shelled it, and it was then the battle of Mons started. I was in Amiens hospital for some time, then to England. I cannot put my right leg under me yet. The regiment suffered badly, as also did the Munsters.

Private Joe Bolger of the Royal Army Medical Corps wrote to his pal James Mackey of Dublin Road, Nenagh, early in November 1914.

Just a few lines hoping to find you in the pink, as I am myself. I wonder if you heard the

rumour that I was wounded? Well I am not, but instead I am bursting begob, as J. Flaherty would say. Well I had a bit of a surprise the other day. A chap rode in to where I was billeted and gave me a note from G. West. You can picture my surprise. He wanted to know if I could arrange to go see him, a distance of two miles but, unfortunately, I could not go. However, he managed to come at considerable risk. We had a good chat about old times, your name being mentioned several times. I cannot tell you much about the war. Our troops and the French are giving them "what-ho" all along the line and it is evident Johnny Germon is done

I suppose you do have a hunt now and again as usual. It fairly makes me wild to see the hares here scuttling along the fields and no dog to warm them up. I know Bob told you of my exploit with the rabbit (R.I.P.) I fairly spoiled his health, poor thing. I want you to remember me to all the "nuts", not forgetting J. Kearns. Roll on, when this struggle is over we will have a rare old burst-up. I heard M. Morgan has joined once again, what a fine fat recruit he will make! Well, it is about time I would close. Hoping this will find yourself and Alice in the best of health and spirits.

Corporal Pat Christie wrote from Highfield Military Hospital, Liverpool, to his mother at Dublin Road, Nenagh, on 27 May 1915 explaining how he was gassed.

Just a few lines to let you know how I got gassed. I was in a trench with my regiment (Royal Irish). About four o'clock on the 10th May the Germans started using this poisonous gas. They pump it out of cylinders from their trenches and it comes across, of course, carried gently by the wind. When it comes to the trench which you are in, it hangs like a thick volume of smoke, then you feel it getting into your eyes and you cannot open them. It gets down your throat and you feel a lump rising there, so you collapse. I was carried away on a stretcher. I was unconscious for seven hours and when I woke up I was in hospital. I felt sick, my eyes were sore and I had a headache. Dear mother, I will be very thankful for anything you send me. I do not want any food, clothes, cigarettes, matches, money, or anything of that kind.

Private Edward Gleeson of Ballinamurragh near Nenagh served with the Irish Guards in the war. He found conditions difficult at the Front in early 1916 but at least he was still alive and looking forward to the end of hostilities.

The winter out here was very bad but the worst of it is over now. We had some snow a few days ago. Trench life is pretty hard indeed, for you are nearly always on the watch for the enemy. You do not know when he will take you by surprise, but we are always well prepared for him. I am nine months in the firing line now, which I consider to be a good while without a German getting a chance at me. I know several of the Nenagh boys out here in the different regiments and all are in the best of form. I received a couple of light scratches during the heavy fighting around Loos last September but, thank God, I came out of it all very safe. I hope it will be soon all over and we be all back around dear old Nenagh once more.

FOOTNOTES

Abbreviations: NN=Nenagh News; NG=Nenagh Guardian

1. NN 24 July 1915 reported that 1,400 recruits had left Nenagh since the outbreak of war. When Captain Lefroy, the local recruiting officer, left on promotion at end of January 1916, NN 5 Feb 1916

reported that he had recruited 1,200 since the commencement of hostilities. A list of Nenagh soldiers and their regiments in NN 10 October 1914 suggests that they predominantly belonged to the Royal Irish Regiment.

2. NN 13 Nov 1915.
3. NN 13 Nov 1915.
4. See especially, NN 24 Oct 1914 and 9 Jan 1915.
5. NN 15 May and 31 July 1915.
6. See, for instance, NN 2 Oct 1915.
7. NN 15 Sept 1917.
8. NG 28 Mar 1917
9. Quoted in Liam Doran, "Sergeant Moyney V.C.", NG 31 Dec 1994.
10. For Coffey, see Daniel Grace, *Portrait of a Parish: Monsea & Killodiernan, Co. Tipperary* (1996) p. 217. For Houlihan, see NN 2 Nov 1918.
11. NN 15 Sept 1917; NG 27 Jan 1917 (Private Condon); NN 9 Aug 1919 (Bombadier Murphy).
12. NN 3 July 1915 (Prittie and Webb); NG 19 Nov 1918 (Somers); NN 9 Sept 1916 (Hennessy); NN 15 Sept and 15 Dec 1917 (Brownlow and Grace); NN 6 May 1916 (Christie); NN 29 Jan 1916 (Bolger); NG 15 Feb 1919 (Birmingham)
13. This account of Martin O'Meara is based largely on an unpublished memorandum of his career in private hands. See also NN 16 Sept and 28 Oct 1916.
14. For the career of James Somers see: NN 4 Sept 1915; NN 9 and 16 Oct 1915; NN and NG 11 May 1918. Also information to author from his sister, the late Mrs Williams, Cloughjordan.
15. NN 19 Sept 1914 (Donnelley letter); NN 3 Oct 1914 (McGrath letter); NN 28 Nov 1914 (O'Toole letter); NN 14 Nov 1914 (Bolger letter); NN 5 June 1915 (Christie letter); NN 19 Feb 1916 (Gleeson letter).