

# Irish Soldiers in the First World War

## *Irish Soldiers in the Battle of the Somme*

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The Battle of the Somme, whose 90th anniversary we commemorate this year, started on 1 July 1916 after an eight-day artillery bombardment of the German front lines. Despite 60,000 casualties in one day, no progress was made in the British sector and the battle continued until the following November when the weather intervened. The total number of casualties in the Battle exceeded one million. This included the deaths of some 3,500 Irishmen from all parts of this island. However, to fully understand and do justice to the significance what happened at the Somme, we must look at the overall context of WW1 and its impact on Ireland and on the Irish participants

## *Irish Soldiers in the First World War*

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When the Bosnian Serb Gavrilo Princip fired the shots that killed the heir to the Austrian crown Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife during their state visit to Sarajevo in June 1914, he started a chain of events that would directly affect Irish people in every part of Ireland and some of those living in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. The course of Irish history was greatly altered, leading to the emergence of forces that still influence the politics of today. The increased awareness of the Irish aspects of the War have helped to put those forces to positive use by allowing people from the two major traditions to meet on common ground.

## *Ireland at the Outbreak of the War*

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By 1914, the political efforts to restore some form of self-government to the Ireland appeared to be achieving tangible results with the passing of the Home Rule Bill at Westminster. The prospects of a Dublin parliament had prompted the Unionist opposition to organise the Ulster Volunteer Force and to import 24,600 rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition from Germany on 24-25 April, 1914. In response, the Nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers who also imported arms from Germany at Howth albeit only 900 rifles and 25,000 rounds. These unofficial armies openly exercised in military formations bearing arms and with many volunteers wearing their own uniforms.

Ireland has a strong military tradition. Even before the departure of the "Wild Geese" after the Treaty of Limerick, Irish soldiers had practised their profession abroad. The recent exhibition of prints by Albrecht Durer contained a watercolour of "Irish soldiers" from

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1521. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Army in Ireland provided a convenient outlet for young men interested in soldiering. The country was divided into catchment areas for local regiments which offered regular income, attractive uniforms and the opportunity to travel abroad. Others joined the British navy. Irish emigrants to the United States had won distinction on both sides in the Civil War.

The new volunteer organisations and the Irish Citizen Army drew heavily on army veterans for organisational expertise and training.

### *Ireland goes to war*

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When Great Britain declared war on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1914, there were some 20,000 Irishmen already serving in the regular British Army with another 30,000 in the first line reserve. The total army strength was 247,000 with 145,000 ex-regular reservists. In contrast to the other major European powers, the British Army relied on volunteer soldiers rather than on National Service. Lord Kitchener, a serving officer who was made Secretary for War on August 5<sup>th</sup>, informed the Cabinet that it would be a three-year war requiring at least one million men. Thirty new divisions were formed into what became known as the New Armies or Kitchener's Army. The volunteers were assigned to new battalions of existing regiments of infantry which were given numbers following consecutively on the existing ones. [The word "Service" was added to the battalion number.] Typically, an infantry battalion consisted of 1,000 men. Following huge losses and a decline in volunteers, conscription was eventually introduced in January 1916. It was not applied to Ireland.

The Home Rule Bill was given the Royal Assent on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1914 but its operation was suspended for one year or for the duration of the war when it would be reviewed with a view to securing the general consent of Ireland and the United Kingdom. On the 20<sup>th</sup> September, the leader of the Nationalist Party, John Redmond, who was widely expected to be the first Prime Minister of the new Irish Parliament, called on the Irish Volunteers to enlist. Irish soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force had already been in action in Flanders. The German advance through Belgium, the rumours of atrocities and refugees and the near capture of Paris had created an emotional atmosphere. The organisation split with those who followed Redmond being called the National Volunteers. About 12,000 of the 180,000 retained the Irish Volunteers title and set themselves the objective of gaining full independence for Ireland, by force if necessary. The peaceful achievement of Home Rule was again in doubt due to the failure of the Government to deal with the build-up of arms in Northern Ireland and the public refusal of a cavalry brigade in the Curragh to enforce Home Rule Act if so requested.

About 80,000 enlisted in Ireland in the first 12 months of the war, some half of whom came from Ulster. The First New Army of 100,000 soldiers, K1, contained the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division which was formed in late August, 1914. It had three brigades. One had regiments

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with bases in all four provinces. The second was based in Ulster and the third was based in the other three provinces. The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish ) Division of the Second New Army was formed in September, 1914. One brigade was from the province of Ulster. The 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division was authorised on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1914. It was based on the formation and membership of the Ulster Volunteer Force to which a London based artillery unit was added. It contained men from all nine counties of Ulster. Redmond had sought have all Irish regiments organised into a single fighting unit.

Irishmen also joined Irish regiments such as the Irish Guards, the London (Irish), the Tyneside battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers and the 1<sup>st</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Kings Liverpool Regiment. Many also joined other English, Scottish and Welsh regiments, the Royal, Artillery, the Royal Flying Corps, the Medical Corps, the Army Service Corps, and the Royal Navy. Women served as nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachment in the front line. Emigrants enlisted in the armies of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa and United States.

Those who went to fight could not have envisaged the changed world that would exist at the end of the War. The reasons for enlisting were as varied as the individuals. Some joined out of economic necessity. Others had the hope that the experience of serving side by side against a common enemy would forge friendships that would transcend the historic differences. Thomas Kettle, the former Nationalist MP for East Tyrone who served and was killed as a Lieutenant in the 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers, believed that:

“Used with the wisdom which is sown in tears and blood, this tragedy of Europe may be and must be the prologue to the two reconciliations of which all statesmen have dreamed, the reconciliation of Protestant Ulster with Ireland, and the reconciliation of Ireland with Great Britain.”

### ***Important Irish Episodes in the First World War***

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The virtual disappearance of the First World War from the version of Irish history taught to the first few generations of the new independent Irish state had the result that few are aware of the extent of the Irish participation in the actual fighting. The concentration on the experience of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division at the Battle of the Somme in Northern Ireland overshadowed the sacrifice of the Nationalist community.

The following are some episodes that have particular significance for Ireland and form the background discussions about the relevance of the First World War to modern politics.

## 1914 The First Battles

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The British Expeditionary Force entered France in August 1914 and advanced to stop the German advance through Belgium and Northern France. The Irish regiments in the BEF were:

*Infantry:*

1<sup>st</sup> Irish Guards  
2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers  
2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers  
2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Rifles  
2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers  
1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers  
2<sup>nd</sup> Connaught Rangers  
2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment  
2<sup>nd</sup> Leinster Regiment

*Cavalry:*

4<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Dragoon Guards  
South Irish Horse  
8<sup>th</sup> King's Royal Irish Hussars  
5<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Lancers  
North Irish Horse

Many Irish men were serving in British regiments and there were some English, Scots and Welsh in the Irish regiments who had been so assigned because of their Catholic faith.

The first shot fired by the British Army in the War was discharged by Corporal E. Thomas of the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Dragoon Guards just north of Mons on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. On the following day, Lt Maurice Dease from Mullingar, who was serving with the Royal Fusiliers, attempted to stop the German advance into the city with his machine gun unit. He died fighting and was awarded the first posthumous Victoria Cross of the War.

The well-trained regular soldiers fought a number of battles but had to retreat in the face of the German thrust. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Dublins had their first casualties near Le Cateau and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Munsters delayed the German advance for a day with a costly rearguard action at Etreux.

The Irish prisoners of war were eventually taken to a camp at Limburg where they were visited by Sir Roger Casement in his attempts to raise an "Irish Brigade" which would not

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be part of the German forces. Less than 60 of the 2000 Irish prisoners in the camp took up the offer.

The German advance on Paris was halted in the Battle of the Marne. The Allied Armies pursued the Germans until both sides took up positions in opposing trenches which eventually stretched for 350 miles from the English Channel to Switzerland.

The Irish regiments were distributed throughout the British sector and began a routine of alternating periods of days in the front line, days in reserve and days in the rear resting. The routine was broken by the major set piece battles in many of which large numbers of Irish soldiers died.

Some Irish soldiers took part in the Christmas Truce of 1914 when there was a spontaneous cessation in the killing for a short period.

## 1915

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### GALLIPOLI

The stalemate on the Western Front prompted an alternative approach to defeating Germany. The capture of Constantinople, now Istanbul, would give a direct link to the Russian ally and a successful eastern front campaign could be undertaken. A British Navy attempt to sail up the Dardanelles on March 18 failed with the loss of several ships. Despite the advanced warning that this gave the Turks, the British and French attempted a land invasion on the 25<sup>th</sup> April. They went ashore at six locations but the Turkish defence held them close to the beaches. A second attempt was made on the 6<sup>th</sup> August at Suvla Bay but this also ground to a halt. The campaign was abandoned and last of the troops were withdrawn in January 1916. Churchill, who had proposed the campaign, had to resign from the Cabinet. He subsequently lost his seat in the House of Commons and had to wait until outbreak of the Second World War to return to a position of power.

The 1st Battalions of the Royal Dublin, Munster and Inniskilling Fusiliers took part in the landing on April 25<sup>th</sup> at Cape Helles which was a perfect defensive location with gun emplacements housed on steep slopes. The naval bombardment failed to neutralize the Turkish defences. The Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the Royal Munster Fusiliers were the first to disembark from the *S.S. River Clyde* and of the first 200 men to leave the ship, 149 were killed and 30 wounded immediately. The Dublins had 25 officers and 987 other ranks but only, one officer and 374 other ranks made it ashore. There were 637 casualties in the first 36 hours.

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The Allies decided to launch a fresh attack against the Turks and chose Suvla Bay, 25 miles north of Cape Helles. The first Irish volunteer unit to go into battle was the 10th (Irish) Division which contained the new service battalions of the Irish regiments. As a result of administrative incompetence, the Division's artillery had been sent to France and the men arrived without either maps or orders. The Division did not fight as a unit. There was a chronic water shortage and the soldiers ran out of ammunition and had to resort to throwing stones at the enemy. At least 3,411 serving with Irish battalions were killed or missing, 569 from the 1st Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers alone.

### **ST JULIAN, Flanders, May 1915**

Near St. Julien, during the second battle of Ypres, the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers suffered near annihilation just one month after the Helles Landings. On May 24th, 1915, around 2.45am, the Germans launched a poison gas attack. The Battalion strength was 666 men. By 9.30 pm, only one officer and 20 other ranks remained.

### **SALONIKA, October, 1915**

On September 29, 1915, the 2,454 strong 10th (Irish) Division set sail from Gallipoli for Salonika to fight on the Bulgarian front. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, the Royal Dublin and Munster Fusiliers were at the front line and were ordered to take the village of Jenikoj which is now in Macedonia. In the attack, they lost 385 men killed, wounded or missing. There is a granite Celtic cross to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division near the village of Robrovo in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This complements the ones at Wijtschate in Flanders and Guillemont in France.

## **1916**

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### **HULLUCH, April, 1916**

The 16th (Irish) Division arrived in France in December 1915 and was assigned to the Loos sector. The soldiers experienced trench warfare and suffered casualties during each 8-day period in the front line. They were in the trenches at Hulluch when the Germans launched a gas attack on April 27th, 1916. Of the 1980 casualties, 570 were killed and many of the wounded died later from respiratory diseases. The Germans had put up placards opposite the Irish trenches to bring news of the Easter Rising which had begun in Dublin. The Division remained at Loos until August when it moved to the Somme area. The Division had suffered 6,000 casualties (1,496 killed).

### **THE RISING IN DUBLIN, April, 1916**

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As the number of casualties continued to rise with little prospect of early victory, the Irish Volunteers continued to train and prepare to resist any attempt to disarm them. The reality of war was brought home in the long lists of dead and wounded which also increased the likelihood of conscription.

When the Rising began on the 24<sup>th</sup> April, there were about 5,000 soldiers deployed in the Dublin area. An additional 1000 were immediately sent from Belfast and further thousands were dispatched from England. The 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers took part in the fighting as did a number of officers and soldiers who were on leave in Dublin at the time.

It was generally accepted that the Irish Volunteers fought bravely and honourably. Prime Minister Asquith told the House of Commons that “they fought bravely and did not resort to outrage.” The series of executions helped to swing Nationalist support away from the Parliamentary Party and behind Sinn Fein.

### **THE SOMME, July –November 1916**

In an attempt to break the deadlock of trench warfare and to relieve the pressure on Verdun, the British and French launched a major offensive on July 1. The German positions opposite the 14 miles of the British sector had been bombarded with 1.7 million shells since June 24. No resistance was expected when over 100,000 soldiers left their trenches and went forward into no man’s land at 7.30 am. In clear daylight, they advanced at a walking pace in straight lines with 100 yards between each assault wave. They were met with a hail of gunfire which caused 60,000 casualties on that day, of whom almost 20,000 were killed.

The 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division’s was assigned a target that included a huge concrete bunker where German troops sheltered, the Schwaben Redoubt. The Division was one of the few that succeeded in gaining its objectives but the soldiers could not hold them due the failures of the other divisions. The losses amounted to 5,500 of whom almost 2,000 were killed. Almost every community in Ulster was affected. Four Victoria Crosses were awarded to the Division.

Irish battalions serving in other divisions took part in the attack on July 1. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers, veterans of Gallipoli, went into action in a sector neighbouring the 36<sup>th</sup>. They had 147 casualties (22 killed) and 64 missing. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers were in the second wave of the attack, going into battle with 23 officers and 480 other ranks: 14 officers and 311 other ranks were casualties. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment and the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers fought on that day.

The Battle of the Somme continued throughout the Summer with little progress. The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division captured Guillemont on September 2<sup>nd</sup> and Ginchy on September 9<sup>th</sup>. Lt

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Tom Kettle, MP, was killed while leading a company of the 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Lt John Holland of the Leinsters won a Victoria Cross. The Division had 4,314 casualties (1167 killed).

The Battle petered out in November when 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers, attached to the 63<sup>rd</sup> Naval Division, helped to capture Beaumont Hamel, one of the objectives for the first day. It had 50% casualties.

## **1917**

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### **MESSINES RIDGE, June 1917**

The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) and 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Divisions went into battle together to take the Belgian village of Wijtschate in the well-planned attack on the Messines Ridge. General Plumer had a scaled model of the Ridge made so troops could see what lay ahead. He had mines dug for explosives beneath German defences. About 3 million shells bombarded Messines for over a week. The barrage eased just before Plumer detonated 9,500 tons of explosives under the Germans in 19 mines. Willie Redmond, M.P. and brother of John, leader of the Irish Party, died of wounds received in the attack.

### **PASSCHENDAELE, THE 3RD BATTLE OF YPRES, July 1917**

The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) and 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Divisions were transferred to General Gough's 5th Army in July 1917. On 31 July, the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division took part in the opening attack on the strong German positions to the east of Ypres. The heavy rain, which continued for a month, made conditions for an attack impossible. Never-the less, both Irish divisions moved forward at Langemarck on August 16<sup>th</sup>. 65% of the leading units were lost before the attack due to heavy German shelling. The 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) had 3,585 casualties and the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) 4,231. Fr Willie Doyle, MC, chaplain to the 8<sup>th</sup> Dublins, was killed.

The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division was in action near Arras and the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division near Cambrai in November. The 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division went to Egypt in September.

## 1918

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### THE SOMME 1918 - THE LAST 100 DAYS

The long-expected German offensive began on March 21<sup>st</sup> and succeeded in driving the British lines back almost to Amiens. The 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions received the full weight of the attack and were effectively destroyed as fighting units. The 16<sup>th</sup> had 6,435 casualties and the 36<sup>th</sup> had 6,109. A third were killed.

The battalions of 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Divisions were amalgamated and distributed to other divisions on the Western Front. For example, the 1st Dublins went to the 29th Division and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7th joined the 31st Division. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division remained Ulster in name only as replacements were English conscripts. The Irish battalions took part in the advances which drove the Germans back over all of the territory gained during the four years of war. The 2nd Dublins went into battle near Le Cateau on October 16<sup>th</sup>, suffering 44% casualties within two days. This was where they had first gone into action in August 1914. The First World War ended within a month.

### AFTERMATH

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When the soldiers returned to Ireland, they found a changed political climate. The election in December 1918 was a clear endorsement of Sinn Fein outside of the traditional Unionist areas. The sacrifices made in the war were sidelined in the southern provinces whereas the losses at the Somme became part of the heritage of the new Northern Ireland.

Some ex-soldiers joined the IRA, notably Emmet Dalton who had served with Tom Kettle. He is on record as having no difficulty in fighting for Ireland with the British and fighting for Ireland against the British. Others joined the new Irish army.

On June 12th, 1922, the regiments which had been recruited in the new independent Ireland were disbanded. They were:

- The Royal Irish Regiment
- The Connaught Rangers
- The Prince of Wales Leinster Regiment
- The Royal Munster Fusiliers
- The Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

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The Colours were received by the King and were laid up in Windsor Castle where they remain

### STATISTICS

There is no agreement on the total number of Irish soldiers who served in the British Army and Navy in the First World War. Professor Keith Jeffery gives a figure of 210,000. There appears to be a consensus that at least 35,000 died though the figure on the National War Memorial is 49,400.

About 140,000 enlisted in Ireland during the war. The increase in 1918 is worth noting.

<b>Period</b>	<b>Recruits</b>
Aug 1914 –Feb 1915	50,107
Feb 1915- Aug 1915	25,235
Aug 1915 –Feb 1916	19,801
Feb 1916- Aug 1916	9,323
Aug 1916 –Feb 1917	8,178
Feb 1917- Aug 1917	5,607
Aug 1917 –Feb 1918	6,550
Feb 1918- Aug 1918	5,812
Aug 1918 –Nov 1918 [3 Months]	9,843

The first year total of Irish recruits exceeded the total of the remaining three years of the War. As the War progressed, Irish losses were replaced by UK conscripts. For example, the percentage of non-Irish soldiers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, which was based in Antrim and Down, was 23% in 1916. One year later it was 52%.

As mentioned earlier, Irish soldiers served in other forces.

## Recruiting areas for the Irish Infantry and Cavalry Regiments 1914

<b>Regiment Name:</b>	<b>Recruiting area:</b>	<b>Depot:</b>
The (18th Foot) Royal Irish Regiment	Tipperary, Wexford Waterford, Kilkenny	Clonmel
The Royal Munster Fusiliers	Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare	Tralee
The Connaught Rangers	Galway, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim	Renmore
The Inniskilling Fusiliers	Omagh, Fermanagh, Donegal, Derry	
The Royal Irish Rifles	Belfast, Down, Antrim, Tyrone	Belfast
The Royal Irish Fusiliers	Monaghan, Armagh, Cavan	Armagh
The Leinster Regiment	Offaly, Meath, Louth, Laois	Birr
The Royal Dublin Fusiliers	Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow, Carlow	Naas
The Irish Guards	All over Ireland	Chelsea Barracks London.
The Tyneside Irish 24th, 25th, 26th, 27th Battalions of Northumberland Fusiliers	Newcastle	Alnwick Camp
The London Irish Rifles	London, Chelsea	Duke of York Barracks
The Kings Liverpool Regiment	Liverpool	Seaforth Barracks
Mainly only Irish in name The 4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards The 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers The 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons The 8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars		
The South Irish Horse	Southern Ireland	Clonmel
The North Irish Horse	Belfast, Down, Antrim, Tyrone, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Armagh, Monaghan	Belfast

## Irish Soldiers in the Battle of the Somme

The Battle of the Somme, whose 90th anniversary we commemorate this year, began on 1 July 1916 in the high expectation of a major victory that would bring the carnage of the First World War to an end. By the time it petered out in the rain and snow of the following November, more than one million soldiers from both sides had died without making any appreciable alteration in the opening position. Among the dead were over 3,500 Irish soldiers, with many more wounded. This large loss of life was made even more horrendous by its occurrence within the short space of the first day of the Battle and two days in the following September. In particular, the 5,500 casualties of the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division on 1 July were men drawn almost entirely from one community in the province of Ulster. Nearly 2,000 soldiers from cities, towns, villages and town lands of the North were killed in the first few hours of fighting, an event which seared itself into the folk memory of their community. In a continuation of the same battle, the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division had 4,330 casualties in September, of whom 1,200 were killed. These came mainly from the other three provinces. Added to these were the Irish soldiers who fought in other divisions as part of the regular army or in the newly raised battalions. The total number of Irish casualties cannot be calculated with certainty but they affected every part of the island and continue to have an influence on the evolution of Irish politics.

### *Prior to the Battle*

The line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coastal town of Nieuport to the French/Swiss border was visible evidence of the stalemate that had existed on the Western Front since the autumn of 1914. In February, 1916, the British and French commanders-in-chief agreed to launch a joint offensive astride the river Somme at the start of July. The German attack on Verdun in February forced the French to divert troops intended for the Somme to prevent the loss of the historic town. The need to relieve the pressure on Verdun grew but the French could only now provide five of the twenty-seven divisions which were to take part in the offensive. The objective was to pierce the German front line system at a known strong sector and to allow two cavalry divisions to push through the gap opened by the infantry to create havoc in the German rear. As

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part of the preparation, the British had placed 17 mines under major German fortifications, to be exploded at the start of the attack.

During 1915, the Germans had constructed a defensive line of barbed wire systems, deep underground concrete dugouts and strong points, known as redoubts, along their front line north of the Somme. In order to remove these obstacles, the British and French began an intensive artillery barrage on 24 June 1916. Over the following eight days, approximately 1.7 million shells were fired at the German positions opposite the British front line. About one-third of the shells failed to explode due to faulty fuses and consequently the bombardment failed to achieve its objective. This failure enabled the German defenders to take full advantage of excellent positions on higher ground when the British infantry attacked.

The plan envisaged the major objectives being achieved in hours. There were no alternative arrangements if the attack did not succeed.

### ***The First Day***

No opposition was expected when 100,000 soldiers emerged from their trenches at 7.30 am to walk across No Man's Land. Along 23 km stretch of front line, they advanced in the bright daylight of a midsummer morning at a walking pace, as instructed, in straight lines with 90metres between each assault wave. They were met with a hail of machine-gun fire and most did not reach the German line. There were 60,000 casualties, of whom almost 20,000 were killed, before the attack was halted around noon.

One of the outstanding feats on that day of failure, carnage and death, was the success of the 36th (Ulster) Division in capturing their German front line objectives, including the supposedly impregnable Schwaben Redoubt opposite Thiepval Wood. Raised from the Ulster Volunteers, this was the largest unit of Irish soldiers to fight on that day, consisting of nine battalions of the Royal Irish Rifles, three of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and one of the Royal Irish Fusiliers. With conspicuous bravery and disregard for personal safety, the Ulstermen broke through the strongest German defences and penetrated deep into the rear positions, taking 500 German prisoners. But due to the failure of the flanking divisions to make progress, the sacrifices of the Ulstermen were in vain and they had to abandon their hard-won positions and return to their starting positions. The losses amounted to 5,500 of whom almost 2,000 were killed. Nearly every

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community in Ulster had cause to mourn. Four Victoria Crosses were awarded to the Division in one day.

Large numbers of Irish soldiers serving in other divisions had their first and last experience of “going over the top” on that morning. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers suffered heavily in an attempt by the 29<sup>th</sup> Division to capture another German strongpoint at Beaumont Hamel which was in a sector neighbouring that of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division. A tunnel had been dug under the Hawthorne Redoubt but the decision to fire the large store of explosives it contained at 7.20 am gave ample warning to the Germans of the impending attack and allowed them to occupy strong positions around the mine crater before the soldiers came forward. The 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers were in the second wave of the attack, going into battle with 503 men of whom 325 became casualties. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers captured the position known as the Quadrilateral but they also had to withdraw due to the isolation of their position.

Of the twelve British infantry divisions that took part in the attack on that day, three had a single Irish Battalion among their ranks. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles crossed No Man’s Land with the 8<sup>th</sup> Division in the second wave but had its Commanding Officer killed and could go no further. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division helped to capture three miles of the German frontline trenches near the village of Mametz. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskillings Fusiliers were in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division which was repulsed at Thiepval village suffering 4,000 casualties. This allowed the Germans to concentrate their fire on the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division and force them to withdraw.

The 3,000 men of the Tyneside Irish Brigade who were in the second wave had to advance over one mile of open ground before reaching the front line. They then crossed the 500 yards of No Man’s Land and continued until there were only 50 soldiers left, deep in the German trench system. The valiant effort had cost 2,139 casualties, 620 of whom were in the 1st Battalion.

The final official British casualty list for the 1<sup>st</sup> of July was 57,470 soldiers killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner which is about half of those who went into battle. 19,240 were killed or died of wounds. There were two casualties for every yard of the front. The German losses were estimated to be 8,000.

### *Guillemont and Ginchy*

The attempts to drive the German line back continued throughout the summer in a war of attrition. The British frontline was slowly pushed forward but at a great cost. The 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division was transferred from the Loos sector in August, having suffered 6,000 casualties of whom 1,496 had been killed.

The Division was composed of seven battalions from Leinster, Munster and Connaught, five from Ulster and the 11<sup>th</sup> Royal Hampshire Regiment. The 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade was assigned the task of capturing the German strongpoint at the village of Guillemont. This had withstood repeated attacks since July. On 3 September, the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers, 7<sup>th</sup> Leinsters and the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers took the position in a feat of outstanding bravery. Lt. John Holland of the Leinsters was awarded the Victoria Cross. On 9 September, the 48<sup>th</sup> Brigade, consisting of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers, the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles and the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers succeeded in taking another heavily fortified German position at Ginchy which is about 1 km from Guillemont. This was the only success of the British attack on that day which cost 4,330 casualties, including 50% of the officers. Among those killed was the Irish Nationalist MP Tom Kettle, MP, who went into battle leading a company of the 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Later in the month the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Irish Guards had very heavy losses in the same area.

The Battle of the Somme finally came to an end in November 1916. During the final attack on the 13<sup>th</sup>, the 10th Royal Dublin Fusiliers helped to capture Beaumont Hamel, one of the objectives for the first day. It had 50% casualties.

The final figures came to 420,000 British, 200,000 French and 660,000 German casualties. Verdun was saved but the Battle of the Somme resulted in negligible gains of German occupied land and offered little or no strategic value to the progress of the Allied campaign.

### *Aftermath*

The news of the large numbers of Irish casualties on the Somme reached an Ireland already in turmoil following the Easter Rising and its aftermath.

Early in 1917, the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg Line thus negating the sacrifices made on the Somme. In March 1918, the Germans swept through all of the gains since July 1916 in their final attempt at victory before the American forces could intervene.

## 1916 COMMEMORATIONS – BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The total number of casualties on the Western Front continued to rise with little prospect of early victory. The reality of war was brought home in the long lists of dead and wounded. The introduction of conscription in Ireland to fill the gaps grew ever more likely. It seemed that the hopes of Tom Kettle would not be realised:

“Used with the wisdom which is sown in tears and blood, this tragedy of Europe may be and must be the prologue to the two reconciliations of which all statesmen have dreamed, the reconciliation of Protestant Ulster with Ireland, and the reconciliation of Ireland with Great Britain.”

### *Irish Regiments in the Battle of the Somme*

<b>Regiment Name:</b>	<b>Recruiting area:</b>	<b>Battalions</b>
The Royal Irish Regiment	Tipperary, Wexford Waterford, Kilkenny	July: 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion  Sept: 6 <sup>th</sup> Battalion
The Royal Munster Fusiliers	Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare	Sept: 1 <sup>st</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> Battalions
The Connaught Rangers	Galway, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim	Sept: 6 <sup>th</sup> Battalion
The Inniskilling Fusiliers	Omagh, Fermanagh, Donegal, Derry	July: 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalions  Sept: 9 <sup>th</sup> , 10 <sup>th</sup> and 11 <sup>th</sup> Battalions
The Royal Irish Rifles	Belfast, Down, Antrim, Tyrone	July: 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 8 <sup>th</sup> , 9 <sup>th</sup> , 10 <sup>th</sup> , 11 <sup>th</sup> , 12 <sup>th</sup> , 13 <sup>th</sup> , 14 <sup>th</sup> , 15 <sup>th</sup> and 16 <sup>th</sup> Battalions  Sept: 7 <sup>th</sup> Battalion
The Royal Irish Fusiliers	Monaghan, Armagh, Cavan	July: 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion  Sept: 9 <sup>th</sup> Battalion
The Leinster Regiment	Offaly, Meath, Louth, Laois	Sept: 7 <sup>th</sup> Battalion
The Royal Dublin Fusiliers	Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow, Carlow	July: 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalions  Sept: 8 <sup>th</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> Battalions  Nov: 10 <sup>th</sup> Battalion
The Irish Guards	All Ireland	Sept: 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalions
The Tyneside Irish/ Northumberland Fusiliers	Newcastle	July: 1/24 <sup>th</sup> , 2/25 <sup>th</sup> , 3/26 <sup>th</sup> , 4/27 <sup>th</sup> Battalions

**1916 COMMEMORATIONS – BATTLE OF THE SOMME**

*Recruiting areas for the Irish Infantry and Cavalry Regiments 1914*

<b>Regiment Name:</b>	<b>Recruiting area:</b>	<b>Depot:</b>
The (18th Foot) Royal Irish Regiment	Tipperary, Wexford Waterford, Kilkenny	Clonmel
The Royal Munster Fusiliers	Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare	Tralee
The Connaught Rangers	Galway, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim	Renmore
The Inniskilling Fusiliers	Omagh, Fermanagh, Donegal, Derry	
The Royal Irish Rifles	Belfast, Down, Antrim, Tyrone	Belfast
The Royal Irish Fusiliers	Monaghan, Armagh, Cavan	Armagh
The Leinster Regiment	Offaly, Meath, Louth, Laois	Birr
The Royal Dublin Fusiliers	Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow, Carlow	Naas
The Irish Guards	All over Ireland	Chelsea Barracks London.
The Tyneside Irish 24th, 25th, 26th, 27th Battalions of Northumberland Fusiliers	Newcastle	Alnwick Camp
The London Irish Rifles	London, Chelsea	Duke of York Barracks
The Kings Liverpool Regiment	Liverpool	Seaforth Barracks
Mainly only Irish in name The 4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards The 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers The 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons The 8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars		
The South Irish Horse	Southern Ireland	Clonmel
The North Irish Horse	Belfast, Down, Antrim, Tyrone, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Armagh, Monaghan	Belfast

**Commemorations on 1st July**

*90th Anniversary Commemoration of the  
Battle of the Somme*

*Saturday, 1 July 2006 at 12.00 noon in the  
Irish National War Memorial Park, Islandbridge*

To commemorate the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, the Government will hold an official Commemoration at the Irish National War Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge on July 1st 2006.

The ceremony will be attended by the President, the Lord Mayor and the Taoiseach. Representatives of the following are also expected to attend.

- Government
- Council of State
- Diplomatic Corps
- Dáil and Seanad
- Judiciary
- Social Partners
- National Organisations

Members of the public are also expected to attend.

Following consultations with the Royal British Legion, invitations were also extended to Military History Societies, and organisations established to honour the memory of those who served in disbanded Irish Regiments such as the Dublin Fusiliers, Prince of Wales Leinster Regiment, and the Combined Irish Regiments Association. In addition representatives of veteran organisations such as the Naval Association, the Irish United Nations Veterans Association and the American Legion were invited.

The Commemoration is part of an overall programme that reflects the shared history and shared experience of the people of this island, from all traditions.

The ceremony will include a wreath laying by the President and by Ambassadors from those countries who participated in the battle - the UK, France, Germany, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, India, Australia - will also lay wreaths. Mr Nigel Hamilton, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service will lay a wreath as will a representative of the Royal British Legion.

## **1916 COMMEMORATIONS – BATTLE OF THE SOMME**

The ceremony will be open to the public and persons wishing to attend should arrive at the Irish National War Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge before 11.00 a.m. Access for the public is via the St John of God Centre Entrance, ie the entrance closest to the South Circular Road/Con Colbert Road roundabout. Limited seating is available for the public, and the disabled. Because of the confines of space, on-street car parking for the general public will be possible on Chapelizod Road and in nearby Clancy Barrack. Very limited car parking will be available in the grounds.

The draft running order for the Ceremony is as follows:

- 11.45 a.m.** The Taoiseach will arrive.
- 11.49 a.m.** The Lord Mayor will arrive.
- 11.55 a.m.** The President will arrive.  
Inspection of the Guard of Honor.

Representatives of Royal British Legion will place four Books of the Dead on the Cenotaph - each representing a Province.

A Defence Force Officer will recite a poem (On Flanders Fields)

A Children's Choir will sing (Oft in the Stilly Night)

A DF Officer will read from a tribute - Marshal Foch.

A DF Piper will play lament. [ Battle of the Somme].

A DF Chaplain will recite a prayer.

A DF Colour Guard carrying 11 flags will enters from the back of the Cross take up position at front of Cross.

A Cadet Guard of Honour will enter from left to take up position between Cenotaph and Cross

The President will lay a wreath

Ambassadors will lay wreaths on either side of the President's wreath followed by a wreath laying by Mr. Nigel Hamilton Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and by a representative of the Royal British Legion.

- Minute's silence.
- Last Post.
- Raising of the National Flag.
- Reveille
- National Anthem.

## **Irish National War Memorial Gardens**

**The Irish National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge are dedicated to the memory of the 49,400 Irish soldiers who died between 1914-1918 in the First World War**

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### *The Gardens*

The Gardens were designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and are characteristic of his style of simple dignity. They occupy an area of about eight hectares on the southern banks of the River Liffey, almost opposite the Magazine Fort in the Phoenix Park, and about three kilometres from the centre of Dublin.

Following a meeting of over one hundred representatives from all parts of Ireland, held in Dublin on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1919, it was agreed that there should be a permanent Memorial to commemorate all those Irish men and women killed in the First World War and a Memorial Committee was appointed to raise funds to further this aim. A number of schemes were suggested including a Memorial centre-piece in Merrion Square but all were found to be impractical or inconsistent with legal obligations. The matter had arrived at an impasse, until, in 1929, the Irish Government suggested that a memorial Park be laid out on a site known as Longmeadows on the banks of the Liffey. The scheme embodied the idea of a public park, to be laid out at Government expense, which would include a Garden of Remembrance and War Memorial to be paid for from the funds of the Memorial Committee. Construction of the linear parkway, about 60 hectares in extent stretching from Islandbridge to Chapelizod, began in 1931 and took about two years to complete. The Memorial Gardens were laid out between 1933 and 1939. The workforce for the project was formed of fifty percent of ex-British Army servicemen and fifty percent of ex-servicemen from the Irish National Army.

### *The Landscape Designer*

Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), the distinguished British architect and landscape designer, was commissioned to prepare the design. Lutyens was no stranger to Ireland having previously worked on Lambay Island, Co. Dublin, for Lord Revelstoke, at Howth Castle for T.J. Gainsford-St Lawrence and at Heywood, Co. Laois, for Colonel and Mrs Hutcheson Poe. Heywood is now managed by the Office of Public Works. The gardens as a whole are a lesson in classical symmetry and formality and it is generally acknowledged that his concept for the Islandbridge site is outstanding among the many war memorials he created throughout the world. His love of local material and the contrasting moods of the various 'compartments' of the gardens, all testify to his artistic genius.

## **The Irish in Gallipoli by Francis Ledwidge**

Where Aegean cliffs with bristling menace front  
The Threatening splendour of that isley sea  
Lighted by Troy's last shadow, where the first  
Hero kept watch and the last Mystery  
Shook with dark thunder, hark the battle brunt!  
A nation speaks, old Silences are burst.

Neither for lust of glory nor new throne  
This thunder and this lightning of our wrath  
Waken these frantic echoes, not for these  
Our cross with England's mingle, to be blown  
On Mammon's threshold; we but war when war  
Serves Liberty and Justice, Love and Peace.

Who said that such an emprise could be vain?  
Were they not one with Christ Who strove and died?  
Let Ireland weep but not for sorrow. Weep  
That by her sons a land is sanctified  
For Christ Arisen, and angels once again  
Come back like exile birds to guard their sleep.

**"In Flanders Fields"**

**by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae**

In Flanders Fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead.  
Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch, be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

Retrieved from "[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/In\\_Flanders\\_Fields](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/In_Flanders_Fields)"

## **Marshal Foch's Tribute to the Irish Soldiers who died in the First World War**

*PARIS, FRIDAY, Nov. 9th, 1928*

THE Heroic Dead of Ireland have every right to the homage of the living for they proved in some of the heaviest fighting of the world war that the unconquerable spirit of the Irish race— the spirit that has placed them among the world's greatest soldiers—still lives and is stronger than ever it was.

I had occasions to put to the test the valour of the Irishmen serving in France, and, whether they were Irishmen from the North or the South, or from one party or another, they did not fail me.

Some of the hardest fighting in the terrible days that followed the last offensive of the Germans fell to the Irishmen, and some of their splendid regiments had to endure ordeals that might justly have taxed to breaking-point the capacity of the finest troops in the world.

### *ON THE SOMME*

Never once did the Irish fail me in those terrible days. On the Somme, in 1916, I saw the heroism of the Irishmen of the North and South, I arrived on the scene shortly after the death of that very gallant Irish gentleman, Major William Redmond. I saw Irishmen of the North and the South forget their age-long differences, and fight side by side, giving their lives freely for the common cause.

In war there are times when the necessity for yielding up one's life is the most urgent duty of the moment, and there were many such moments in our long drawn-out struggle. Those Irish heroes gave their lives freely, and, in honouring them I hope we shall not allow our grief to let us forget our pride in the glorious heroism of these men.

They have left to those who come after a glorious heritage and an inspiration to duty that will live long after their names are forgotten. France will never forget her debt to the heroic Irish dead, and in the hearts of the French people to-day their memory lives as that of the memory of the heroes of old, preserved in the tales that the old people tell to their children and their children's children.

### *A GERMAN TRIBUTE*

I know of no better tribute to Irish valour than that paid after the armistice by one of the German High Command, whom I had known in happier days. I asked him if he could tell

## ***1916 COMMEMORATIONS – BATTLE OF THE SOMME***

me when he had first noted the declining moral of his own troops, and he replied that it was after the picked troops under his command had had repeated experience of meeting the dauntless Irish troops who opposed them in the last great push that was expected to separate the British and French armies, and give the enemy their long-sought victory.

The Irishmen had endured such constant attacks that it was thought that they must be utterly demoralised, but always they seemed to find new energy with which to attack their assailants, and in the end the flower of the German Army withered and faded away as an effective force.

### ***“THEY NEVER FAILED”***

When the moment came for taking the offensive all along our line, it was these same worn Irish troops that we placed in the van, making call after call on their devotion, but never finding them fail us. In the critical days of the German offensive, when it was necessary that lives should be sacrificed by the thousand to slow down the rush of the enemy, in order that our harassed forces should have time to reform, it was on the Irish that we relied repeatedly to make these desperate stands, and we found them responding always.

Again and again, when the bravest were necessary to delay the enemy's advance, it was the Irish who were ready and at all times the soldiers of Ireland fought with the rare courage and determination that has always characterised the race on the battlefield.

### ***“WE SHALL NEVER FORGET”***

Some of the flower of Irish chivalry rests in the cemeteries that have been reserved in France, and the French people will always have these reminders of the debt that France owes to Irish valour. We shall always see that the graves of these heroes from across the sea are lovingly tended, and we shall try to ensure that the generations that come after us shall never forget the heroic dead of Ireland.

## Divisional Banners

Size; 3x4ft

