

The 1st Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War

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with a foreword by
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afterwards, and it was at Contescourt that the enemy made the only serious hole in the Division's Battle Zone. The counter-attack company made later in the morning an attempt to regain the village, but was held up by very heavy machine gun fire.

Intense shelling of the Battle Zone developed about 9 a.m., particularly on B and C Coy's trenches. The attack here was intensifying by 12.30 p.m. and the redoubt was reinforced by one company and the remainder were withdrawn to the rear of the dug-outs. The fog was only starting to clear by this time. At 12.50 p.m. the Counter-Attack Company (C) moved forward to meet the enemy who had just entered the front line of the zone. At 3.15 p.m. C was reported to be hanging on at the crossroad. An hour later a reserve company was brought forward to reinforce Quarry Redoubt. By 7 p.m. the enemy was trying to advance towards the redoubt on the west side of the Grugies-Grand S racourt Road. The situation at 8.05 p.m. was that the Right Company Keep was held by one officer and 34 men; the redoubt by one and a half companies that were weak in strength, and the remainder of the unit was in front of Battalion HQ, with a strength of only about 70 of all ranks. Being almost surrounded, the Right Company Keep was abandoned at 8.15 p.m.; its strength was 23 men. The remnants of 1st RIR were ordered to retire on Hamel at 11 p.m. Capt. J. Brown was wounded and missing; Lts B.J. Hodson, J. Kerr, P. O'Kane, 2/Lts J. Kennedy, and J.C. Thompson were killed; 2/Lts J. Aiken, H. Oliver, and T.A. Valentine were wounded. General Gough had decided that it was more important to keep together the remains of Fifth Army rather than hold ground.

Positions were taken up at Hamel on 22 March. By 3 a.m. their strength was 5 officers, 180 men, and 2 machine guns. At 11 a.m. Capt. Tayler brought up reinforcements for both 1st and 2nd RIR. These were, however, kept at Brigade HQ. The right flank was on scrub and a copse on Sommebank. Large bodies of the enemy and transport were seen moving south along the St Quentin-St Simon Road. The battalion engaged them until it was ordered to fall back to a position 600 yards west of Happencourt at 12.45 p.m., where it hung on till dusk, when the right flank was seriously threatened and orders were received to retire on the line Sommette-Eaucourt-Cugny behind the canal. Capt. Tayler's party covered the withdrawal. At 11 p.m., 1st RIR moved across country, crossing the canal at Pithon by the light railway bridge, and proceeded to billets at Eaucourt, arriving at 3 a.m. on the 23rd. 2nd RIR were also in the vicinity.

At 5 a.m., amid heavy ground mist, picquets were put out around the village. Five hours later the village was shelled with 5.9 guns and the battalion moved out north-west and west and dug in. Falls described the general situation:

The great breakthrough had begun, and was to be completed the moment the Germans forced the line of the Somme and the Crozet Canal, as they did early on the 23rd ... Owing to an error on the part of a brigade on the left of the 36th Division and of some engineers, not only was the main bridge at Ham not properly demolished, but the crossing of the river at this point was not guarded. The enemy speedily crossed here, and was also across the Crozet Canal at several points at 11.30 a.m.

Keane 2/Lt. Edmond Patrick. Born 16.2.1893 at Charleville, Co. Cork, the son of Thomas Keane, National Bank, Ballygar, Co. Galway. Educated at St Munchin's College, Limerick, and Albert College, Dublin. Enlisted as Pte 9007 in Inns of Court OTC, 19.1.1916. Signed Army Form E624 that day. Height 5 foot 9¼ inches, weight 130 pounds, chest 32–36 inches, farmer, single. Father's occupation given as gentleman farmer. Applied for a commission, 31.5.1916, asking for infantry, 3rd RMF. To No. 5 Officer Cadet Battalion at Cambridge, 14.8.1916 to 21.11.1916. Discharged to a commission in 3rd RMF.

Joined 1st RIR, 20.1.1917, and left 16.2.1917. Embarked Calais–Dover, 6.4.1917, suffering from bronco pneumonia. At that time his address was Milltown Castle, Charleville, Co. Cork. The MB at Caxton Hall, 9 May, noted that he was improving but still weak – unfit for general service for three months and home service two months. MB at Caxton Hall, 20 June: unfit for general service for two months and home service six weeks. MB at King's Lancashire Military Convalescent Hospital, Blackpool, 19 July: unfit for general service, unspecified period, and unfit for home service for three months. MBs at Blackpool, 17 August and 17 September: unfit for general service, unspecified, unfit home service for three months. MB at Cork Military Hospital, 17 November: had also suffered from measles, from which he was recovered – unfit for general service for two months and home service for six weeks.

MB at Devonport Military Hospital: 15.1.1918 passed him fit for home service for two months; 18.3.1918 unfit for general service for three months; 22.11.1918 had made good progress, fit for general service. Attached No. 512 POW Coy, 89th Labour Group early 1919. To the UK on leave 19.6.1919. To No. 511 POW Coy, 89th Labour Group, Rivalla, Italy, 13.8.1919. Left for 14 days leave to the UK 13.9.1919. Demobilized 25.10.1919. Medical status A1. Single. File ref: WO339/62865 137151.

Kearns Capt. Michael Christopher. Served in the South African War 1899 during operations in Natal, receiving the Queen's Medal with clasps. He later served with 2nd RIR as CSM. Wounded in France and was promoted to 2/Lt. Rejoined from leave, 11.12.1914, and was attached to D Coy. Height 6 foot 4 inches.

The Burgoyne Diaries: '20.12.1914: Kearns is a very fine shot, and has done splendid work in the field. At Ypres, in November, during the attack by the Prussian Guards, he bowled over fourteen of them himself. A very cool man, a most trustworthy soldier and a fine officer ... He was recommended for the DSO for taking up some men and holding a trench out of which the Gordons had bolted, but his name was not forwarded, to save the reputation of the "Jocks" ... 7.1.1915: Damn! No officer at all now, to help me. Kearns's fool of a servant had made him tea from some foul water and given him bread on which some paraffin had soaked. Told him to go to Kemmel and report sick.'

Mentioned in Despatches 17.2.1915, and promoted to Lt., 15.3.1915, and Capt., 1.1.1917. Served with 7th RIR. Joined 1st RIR 16.2.1918 and was struck off the strength of the battalion 9.8.1918, no reason being stated. Died in hospital at Bath 21.12.1947. Closed file, ref: 2/83 (29457).

Keating Capt. Patrick William. Commissioned a 2/Lt. in 4th Connaught Rangers, 26.4.1913, and promoted to Lt., 1.5.1914. Attached to the RMF. Promoted to Capt. 10.7.1915. Appointed a Regular Capt. in the RIR 29.8.1916, and attached 7th RIR. Attached Tank Corps, 8.1.1917, as an Acting Major. Joined 2nd RIR 3.2.1918, and 1st RIR 21.10.1918. Went to the UK 14.2.1919 prior to going overseas with 2nd RIR. Mentioned in Despatches 3.2.1920. The regimental history of the Connaught Rangers incorrectly lists him as having 'Drowned in the wreck of the *Egypt*'. Employed at the Depot according to the Army List for 1923. Closed file, ref: (19537).

Kennedy 2/Lt. James. Born at Shankill, Belfast, 17.7.1896, the son of the Revd Professor Samuel Giuler Kennedy LL.D, minister of Grosvenor Road Reformed Presbyterian Church, and Christine

Kennedy of Cromwell House, Cromwell Road, Belfast. Educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, and apprenticed to a stationery business. Enlisted as Rfn 17/1793 in the Cadet Company of 17th RIR, 8.11.1915. His address at 31.7.1916, when he applied for a commission, was Ballykinlar, Co. Down. Height 5 foot 10 inches, weight 147 pounds, and 6/6 vision in both eyes. Moved to No. 7 Officer Cadet Battalion, 5.10.1916, and was discharged to a commission with 19th RIR, 28.2.1917. He may also have served with 8th RIR.

Killed in action while attached to 1st RIR 21.3.1918. The WO sent a telegram to his father, 18 April, advising of his son's death. A second telegram, 25 April, revised this to missing. The WO wrote to his mother, 20 June, advising that the second telegram should never have been sent as the information it contained 'does not refer to your son Second Lieutenant J. Kennedy, but to his brother Second Lieutenant J.A.C. Kennedy' who was serving with 12th RIR (J.A. Chancellor Kennedy was a past pupil of Methodist College, Belfast.) It seems that the other brother had firstly been reported a POW and that the revised status of missing had been for him, but the notification from France had only used the first initial and the WO clerk had assumed that (following so soon after the notification of James' death) that it was James who was being discussed. The matter was only clarified when notification was received that J.A.C. Kennedy was, in fact, a POW and the notification for him reverted to its original status. The WO letter expressed 'sincerest apologies' for the error. A WO letter to Revd Kennedy, 27.11.1918, said that a Red Cross list from the Germans showed Kennedy as 'Fallen and buried in the Castres Sector. Disc sent in 19.8.1918'. Grand-Séracourt British Cemetery, Aisne, II.F.13.

Kerr Lt. James. Born 2.7.1893. His father, Francis Kerr, was a solicitor with offices at Wellington Place, Belfast, and 13 Bachelor's Walk, Dublin. Attended Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare, 1908–10. Applied for a commission, 16.6.1915. Single. Permanent address *Altafort*, Myrtlefield Park, Malone Road, Belfast. Cadet at Queen's University OTC since January 1915. Applied for ASC but this was crossed out and infantry substituted in another hand. Posted to 7th RIR.

Irish Life 1.6.1917: '... has been awarded the parchment certificate of the Irish Division by Major-General W.B. Hickie CB, for gallant conduct and devotion to duty in the field. Lieutenant Kerr is the third son of Mr Frank Kerr ... He has been in France since the Irish Division went overseas and has seen a good deal of fighting.'

The Clongowinian, 1917: 'He was at the taking of Guillemont and Ginchy in September last, and had previously been in several engagements north of the Somme.'

Left unit 20.7.1917. Embarked Boulogne–Dover, 24 July, on the *St Dennis*. Sprained right ankle. The MB at 2nd Western General Hospital, 15 August, noted that he sprained his ankle during an inter-regimental football match near St Omer, 19 July; now recovered, but marked unfit for general service and recommended three weeks leave. A statement from Major H.S. Allison, 7th RIR, noted that Kerr was knocked over and the other man fell on his ankle, 'I was present at the time'. There is an Army Form W.3428 on file, 'Report on accidental or self-inflicted injuries'. This showed Kerr was not to blame and the matter was accidental. MB at Belfast, 26.9.1917, declared him fit for general service and ordered him to return to Carrickfergus.

Joined 1st RIR from 5th RIR, 18.12.1917, and posted to C Coy. Played as a forward in the battalion soccer team, 17.3.1918, when they beat 2nd RIR by 2–1. He was in command of the Counter-Attack Trenches, C Coy, 21.3.1918, and was killed in action that day.

Irish Times 10.4.1918: 'He was in the service of Messrs. Thomas Somerset & Co. when he accepted a commission in the Rifles. He went overseas in 1916 and had service in the Irish Brigade. He was wounded, and was mentioned in despatches by Sir Douglas Haig in May, 1917.'

The Clongowinian 1919: 'Jim Kerr ... was killed in action in France ... Only just a year ago his brother Jack was killed. Surely this cruel war has borne hard on this afflicted family.'

A letter from his father to the WO, 24 April, stated that he had received a telegram telling him that Pte J. Kerr, RIR, has been killed in action 21 March: 'I had a son J. Kerr in the Royal Irish