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Limerick Somme Tour, 25-28 August 2014

Our trip's focus is on the activities of the battalions of The Royal Munster Fusiliers and other Irish regiments in Northern France and Belgium between 1914 and 1918. The following remarks are given according to the chronology of our visit.

Peronne World War I Museum, sited in a castle, is a good place to start, an excellent collection. One of its major strong points is the depiction of the Battle of The Somme, 1 July-15 November 1916. The battle, like many British offensives, such as at Ypres one year later, should have been called off much earlier for advances were miniscule when compared to the loss of life: 432,000 British and 335,000 German casualties (killed, wounded, missing, taken prisoner). On the very first day, 1 July, the British Army suffered 57,500 casualties, including over 19,000 fatalities. This is the highest death rate in a single day in British military history. Most of the men were killed right at the beginning, between 8 and 9am, advancing towards undestroyed German machine-gun positions. One in two of all British soldiers who fought in the Somme onslaught never fought again. The irony was, as you shall see, that the Germans vacated the general area in February-March 1917, destroying everything and leaving a lunar landscape in their wake. They then ensconced themselves behind the new fortifications of the Hindenburg Line further to the east. The broken landscape of the Somme proved a major hindrance for the German army when it broke through the British lines on 21 March 1918 - destroying Irish units of the 16th (nationalist) and 36th (loyalist) divisions in the process. But the German "Michael" offensive of 1918 ran out of steam pretty quickly, and the Allies, now including the Americans, resumed their offensive at Amiens in August 1918, a steamroller series of attacks which broke the back of the German army and ended the war in November.

Devonshire Trench Cemetery, 163 burials, is an unusual military graveyard since it contains the remains of men from one regiment - 8th and 9th battalions of the Devonshires killed in the Battle of the Somme. They had cleared **Mametz Wood** to the north and returned here to bury their dead on 4 July.

On to **Guillemont** where Irish troops of 47th Brigade in the 16th Division attacked at noon on 3 September 1916. The village was honeycombed with subterranean German defensive divisions and the Irishmen were caught in a double artillery bombardment – from the Germans, and from their own gunners whose shells fell short. The 6th Connaughts stormed through the village's main street, and the 7th Leinsters followed suit in hand-to-hand combat with German defenders. The attack was a major success (two VCs), 300 Germans were taken prisoner, but losses were heavy: 1,147 of 2,400 attackers.

The next target was the village of **Ginchy** one mile to the north-east, the road now joining the hamlets is called after the 16th Division. Previous British assaults had come to nothing. By the time of the attack, in the afternoon of 9th September, all the Irish battalions were exhausted and under-strength. The Irish were held up by their own artillery shelling them

and by 30 Germans with five Maxim machine-guns. Again, half of the attacking force were casualties before the village fell, the 8th and 9th battalions of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers being in the first waves of attack. It was here that 2nd Lieut. (later Major) James Emmet Dalton, the later IRA staff officer and friend of Michael Collins (he was in the touring car at Beal na mBlath), won his Military Cross.

Thiepval Wood and memorial to the Ulstermen is where the men of 36th Division fought courageously on the morning of 1 July, fighting uphill to enter the German trenches. Their efforts looked to be crowned by success for the fortress-like **Schwaben Redoubt** fortress had been smashed by British artillery. But the Ulstermen could only advance on a very narrow front – 1,000 soldiers holding a salient 1,000 yards deep, 200 yards wide and under constant enfilading fire. It was impossible to bring up reinforcements, water or ammunition. The survivors were withdrawn on 3 July.

Our second day is devoted to the last stand defence of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers at **Etreux** on 27 August 1914. Guise Communal Cemetery is where 11 British Army soldiers (including five Munsters) and a French civilian are buried. They were victims of barbaric German military justice because they had not handed themselves in at the end of the Etreux battle but were hidden by patriotic French families.

(See: <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/news/newsflash/1050-behind-the-lines-the-story-of-the-iron-twelve.html>).

They were kept prisoner in Guise Chateau before their execution. We also visit the memorial to them at the mill in Iron.

The 2nd Munsters in 1914 were all professional soldiers, landing in France (998 officers and men) as part of the 1st Infantry Brigade of the BEF on 13 August 1914. Three companies of the Munsters were to hold up the entire 10th Reserve German army corps for two days. It was a time of general retreats before the German juggernaut and followed the general route of fighting withdrawal on the line Fesmy-Oisy-Etreux. The CO was Paul Charrier, a very tall officer who lived in Limerick. The Munsters had two machine-guns (!) and two pieces of artillery and managed to drive the Germans out of Fesmy. Retreating before superior numbers and out of touch with its Brigade and French allies, the Munsters fell back on Oisy, where Carrier was killed by Germans firing from a loop-lined house. The 240 survivors gathered in an orchard on the northern outskirts of Etreux and, out of ammunition, surrendered at 9.15pm on 27 August. It has been estimated that at least 1,500 German soldiers had been wounded. At the end, three companies had been facing six German infantry battalions, holding up their general advance for fourteen hours. Over 100 Munsters are buried in the orchard, which was bought by a brother of one of the fallen officers in 1921 and donated to the Commonwealth War Graves' Commission. The cemetery, and its Celtic cross, was consecrated on 5 October 1921.

On our last full day we visit **Epehy**, showplace of the second “wipe-out” of the 2nd Munsters. After the Battle of Third Ypres (July-November 1917) the British 5th Army was seriously under-strength, demoralized and expecting a huge German assault north and south of Peronne in the Somme area. Defences were not yet complete and the Germans used the cover of dense fog to attack along the line on 21 March. All the southern Irish battalions were now grouped together in the 16th Division and held a frontage of 7,000 yards with inadequate numbers. Five of six battalions were held in the advanced front zone. Some of them had spent over 40 days in the front trenches without relief. They were attacked by six German divisions on the morning of 21 March. The 2nd Munsters put up a spirited fight in Room Trench, lost Malassise Farm but re-took it in a charge led by Lieut. Cahill who was killed shortly afterwards. The CO Major Hartigan was captured, but most of the survivors, led by Sergeant-Major Ring managed to escape. 50 members of the 2nd Battalion had been killed on 21 March, including 6 officers. The trench strength of 2nd Munsters of 629 had been reduced to 290 within 24 hours. When the retreat stopped around 1 April, the 2nd Munsters could barely muster 100 men. The total numbers in the 16th Division killed on 21 March was 563. Shortly afterwards the 16th Division was disbanded. The 1st Munsters fought in the same area, at Ronssay and St. Emilie, and managed to fight off the initial German attacks on 21 March. By the evening of 22 March, the 1st Munsters strength was down to 457 from full strength of 974. When the battalion at last “found” the 16th Division during the retreats one week later it numbered just 230 officers and men.