

A military tale

The story of Grandfather Edward's family included three uncles – Peter (born 1867) and Edward (born 1869) and Francis (born about 1870) who served in the Monaghan militia (the 5th battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers). Thanks to some new records we can fill in a bit more information about these men. We now know that Peter and Edward joined the militia at the same time on 14th March 1886, Francis probably did to, but I haven't found those records.

Edward was 16 when he joined. The militia had a base in the Shambles, and the regular soldiers were poor Roman Catholics who needed the money. The officers were generally from well to do Monaghan Protestant families. Edward was involved in a fracas in June 1886, which was reported in the local newspapers. Tensions were high during this period of the 1880's in relation to Home Rule and he was shot in a confrontation between the militia and a protestant group. Edward was shot in the head and died in hospital on 11th June 1886. The details of the inquest report were reported in the People's Advocate (a catholic newspaper) which blamed the protestants and the Protestant newspaper (The Northern Standard) placed the blame on the militia men. That was just 3 months after he joined the Militia, so an untimely end!

Peter remained in the militia right up to 1908. Peter had a family in Dublin St, but on the birth of his daughter Elizabeth in 1900, his location was recorded as the Transvaal in South Africa, which was curious as the Monaghan Militia was not officially assigned to South Africa at that time. However, on further research I found that 86 members of the Monaghan Militia were reassigned to the 2nd battalion of the RIF and did active duty in South Africa. Peter's service record (attached) confirms that he was one of the 86 assigned to the 2nd battalion. He embarked for South Africa on 28th February 1900 and disembarked home on 4th March 1901.

He was awarded a medal and clasps to record his participation. A medal clasp is a thin metal bar attached to the ribbon of a military decoration indicating the campaign or operation the recipient received the award for, and multiple bars on the same medal are used to indicate that the recipient has met the criteria for receiving the medal in multiple theatres. Peter received the medal with clasps for the Transvaal, Orange Free State and Natal. and a gratuity of £5 when he was reposted to the Monaghan Militia on 8th March 1901. Here is a picture of the South Africa medal, which includes the Transvaal and Orange Free state clasps.



The Boer War was tough – a potted history from Wikipedia has this to say...
“Poor logistics and disease, combined with having to fight against a disciplined and capable enemy of excellent horsemen and marksmen who perfected guerrilla warfare, made this a hard-won medal. In addition to men often having to go without basics such as food and water, enteric fever killed several thousand and was a constant drain on manpower. The published casualty rolls run to over 50,000 names, while studies of contemporary publications and reports put the actual figure for all casualties, including caused by disease, at 97,000”.

The 2nd battalion initially supported British troops in Natal (A British colony at that time), then moved to the Transvaal where they were mainly located at Machadodorp close to the main railway line linking Pretoria to the coast.

He was discharged from the militia in March 1904 but signed up again in May and stayed until May 1908. Peter's wife Anne died of TB in the workhouse in Monaghan on 5th March 1908. Peter remarried – Ellen Rushe - on 14th January 1909. Peter is listed as one of the mourners at his nephew James' funeral in 1935. He died on 26th June 1943 of “senile decay”.

Francis is harder to track down. Helen remembers meeting him in the early 1930s as an old man, who taught her to count to 10 in Hindustani. I have found pension records for a Francis Murphy who was discharged in 1917 with an address in Old Cross Square Monaghan. He served in the Royal Irish Fusiliers (briefly) and in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers who were in India in the 1890s. He also served as a Pioneer in the Royal Engineers. Pioneer battalions, created as an expedient in 1914, were intended to provide the Royal Engineers with skilled labour and to relieve the infantry from some of its non-combatant duties. Pioneers became the work horses of the Expeditionary Forces. Several new army battalions were raised specifically as Pioneers, while others were converted Territorials (Militias) or Kitchener units formed originally as conventional infantry. Adopting a badge of a cross rifle and pick, these battalions wired, dug and reverted in all weathers and in all terrain. I haven't been able to find his full service records yet, but will keep looking, as I think this is more than likely Edward's great uncle Francis.