The Cross and the Sword:
Marie, Tommy and Charlie Martin
in the First World War
Part 3.

Philip Leocane,
The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association

Tommy, Marie and Charlie were among twelve children born to Tom and Mary Martin of Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire), Co. Dublin. Tommy was the eldest, Marie the second and Charlie the fourth child. The previous parts of this article told of their childhood and how, on the outbreak of war, Marie became a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) i.e. volunteer nurse, Tommy joined the 5th Bn. Connaught Rangers and Charlie the 6th Bn. Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Charlie (Captain Charles Martin) was killed in action in Salonika on 8 December 1915. After serving in Malta, Marie returned to Ireland in May 1916. Like Charlie, Tommy also served in Salonika. The 10th (Irish) Division of which his battalion was a part, began to embark from Salonika on 1 September 1917. On Sunday 7 September 2003 Tom Burke, Nick Broughall, Joe Gallagher and Seamus Greene of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association and Ian McQuigg, Area Representative of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission laid a wreath at the Doiran Memorial in memory of Captain Charles Martin and all his Irish comrades who died in the Salonika campaign.

Part 2 of the article concluded at this point.

After barely a month at home Marie was called up again. Now aged twenty-four, she was on her way to France. She dropped a post card to her mother into the mailbox at London's Charing Cross Station before boarding the early morning boat train. The Mail Boat to Boulogne was very crowded and Marie and the four young women with her sat on their luggage all the way. The ship docked in France in time for them to have lunch at the Boulogne Tower Hotel.

By 5 p.m. the five young women were travelling again. By 7.30 p.m. Marie had arrived at Hardelot, a coastal town.

In 1900 Hardelot, with its long sandy beaches, had been established as a seaside resort by Sir John Whitney, an Englishman who owned the local Chateau. Edwardian families spent their summer holidays in spacious villas in the forests around Hardelot. The Chateau became a clubhouse for golfers. Other holidaymakers enjoyed sailing, tennis and cricket. French families also bought property at the resort. Among them was Louis Blériot, who pioneered sand yachting on the wide flat beach — a sport that remains popular in Hardelot to this day. On 25 July 1909, Blériot became the first man to fly the English Channel, a feat that earned him the Daily Mail prize of £1,000 awarded by the owner, Dublin born Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe.

In Hardelot Marie was assigned to No. 25 General Hospital, located in what had previously been the Aviation Hotel. Marie described the building as "rather quaint." Apart from the wards within the former hotel, the wounded were also treated in several large tents in the grounds. Upon arrival Marie was given a brief visit to the surgical ward where she would take up duty the next day. Then she was shown to a "sweet villa" where she was billeted. She would share a room with "Miss Paul," a VAD with whom she had become friendly while serving in Malta. June 18 was Marie's first day on duty. Despite being tired, she sat up in bed that night writing to her mother. "I'll give you three clues so you can puzzle out where we are: (1) The opposite of soft. (2) The fifth letter of the alphabet. (3) The man in the bible whose wife was turned into a pillar of salt." Either because it was presumed that the Germans couldn't possibly decipher the clues, or because the person censoring Marie's letter was kind-hearted, the letter was allowed through!
On 21 June Marie wrote home again. She asked if there was "any news of poor Charlie", her younger brother serving in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. The family had been told in December 1915 that he was missing. (In fact he had been killed on 8 December.) As Marie wrote home that day, she could distinctly hear the gunfire from the Front, even though it was nearly one hundred kilometres to the east of Hardelot. At the town of Albert, nearer the front line, it was decided which convoy was sent to which of several military hospitals. Sister McKenzie, in charge of Marie's ward, did not like VAD nurses. Fully trained State Registered Nurses (SRNs) tended to look down on VADs with their short emergency training.

Casualties were treated in First Aid Dressing stations in farmhouse basements near the front, and then transported by rail and ambulances to the hospitals. At Hardelot on 2 July, the hospital had filled up by 5:00 p.m. Marie spent extra time on duty helping Sister McKenzie who, she could see, was new to military ways. Then came a cruel blow. The post brought confirmation of what Marie had long feared. The War Office had informed her mother that Captain Charles Martin (6th Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers) was dead. Marie's letter home that night tried to comfort her mother, while she tried to cope with her own grief. "It is really impossible to realise that we shall never see his dear face again. How shall we all miss him?" Her friend Miss Paul supported Marie in her grief. In Malta Miss Paul had spent off-duty time accompanying Marie while her aunts made enquiries about Charlie. Now her friend was on hand to support her in France when the dreadful news finally arrived. On 8 July, Marie wrote home saying that it was a relief that Charlie had died without much suffering. The soldiers she was nursing "had such nasty wounds."

Marie was now nursing men who, in addition to their original wounds, had developed gangrene. This is a condition where open wounds are infected by bacteria that cause extremely painful swelling. The condition sometimes requires amputation and, if not treated quickly and carefully, can have fatal consequences. Around this time Marie received another letter from home, telling her that her boyfriend Gerald Garthland had been wounded. A short time later she received a wire telling her that he was alright and was going back to the trenches. He then wrote saying that he had only been slightly wounded, but had had a bad time in France. Her mother sent the requested tobacco, which Marie said she would keep for her "Taddys."

On 24 June, seven days of shelling of German positions began in preparation for an assault at the Somme. The hospital prepared itself for the expected influx of wounded. Marie asked her mother to send some plug tobacco for the men. On 30 June, word spread among the hospital staff that the final bombardment had begun. Little did the staff know that they were about to experience the aftermath of the bloodiest single day in British military history, 1 July 1916.
Convoy after convoy of wounded men were arriving at Hardelet from Albert. Marie was transferred from the surgical ward to the medical section, in the tented wards of the hospital.

She told her mother that the tents were very nice in the sunshine, but were awful when the rains came. On 13 July Marie found herself on a committee of Nursing Staff and VADs who were planning a tea party for the 180 orderlies at Hardelet. She spent her day off buying the necessary provisions. Towards the end of July things slackened off for a short time at Hardelet. The tents were closed for a while, as a recent epidemic of diarrhoea was being investigated. Marie had come to know Dorothy Whitley, whose father had established the resort at Hardelet. Miss Whitley used to come to the hospital with flowers from her garden at Pré Catelan. When off duty Marie sometimes walked through the woods to visit this lovely house that reminded her of home.

By 13 August 1916, the tents were filling up with soldiers suffering from the effects of gas poisoning. For four days Marie nursed fifty-six men on stretchers, with only a single orderly to help. Then Miss Paul was sent to help her. The Medical Officer with whom Marie was working had specialised in the treatment of gas poisoning. So Marie learned a lot from him. At the end of August it began to rain. It was, “beauty in the tents and so nasty for the men.” The nurses got so wet walking between the tents that Marie asked her mother to send her a sou'wester and boots. It was under these conditions that the 16th (Irish) Division went into action. In the first ten days of September the Division lost 240 of its 435 officers, and 4,090 of its 10,410 other ranks in attacks on Guillemont and Ginchy. As winter approached, Marie began to suffer very painful chillblains on her hands, shins and feet. She had bought an oil stove in Boulogne to heat the room she shared with Miss Paul. By boiling two pots of water on the stove, she could manage to get a warm bath. With “terrible gales and raindrops the size of eggs,” everyone wondered if the hospital would be kept open in such an exposed place. On 8 November Marie told the Matron that she would not be renewing her contract when her six-month term was up. She had thirty-nine days left. She began crossing them off on her calendar, looking forward more and more to getting home.

Early in December, the tents were finally closed. On 8 December Marie got the chaplain to say Mass for Charlie on the first anniversary of his death. Hearing that Gerald Garland was expected in Boulogne, Marie set out by tram to find him there, but failed to do so. Disappointed, she returned to Hardelet, telling herself that somehow it was God's will. In early 1917 she returned home. Marie Martin’s war was over. By the time she was twenty-five she had made up her mind that marriage was not for her and she told Gerald of her decision. As Mother Mary Martin, she went on to found the Medical Missioners of Mary nursing order.

************

The British and Imperial troops had twice tried to cross from the Sinai into Palestine. On both occasions the Turks had defeated them outside Gaza. At the end of June 1917, General Sir Edmund Allenby was given command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, with the instruction from Lloyd George: “Jerusalem by Christmas.” The 10th (Irish) and 60th (London) Divisions were withdrawn from Salonika to augment Allenby’s force. The 10th (Irish) Division embarked on a fleet of hired transports between the first and third weeks of September. On 15 September 1917, Captain Tom Martin arrived in Egypt with 5th Battalion Connaught Rangers. By the end of the third week of September the entire division was concentrated in the area of Ismailia on the edge of the Suez Canal by Lake Timsah. The officers, including Tommy Martin, were offered the hospitality of the French Club and enjoyed cuisine the like of which they had not enjoyed for several years. Training and re-equipment began on 17 September and continued until 27 September. During this time, a major boxing tournament was held within the division. On 29 September, the division marched to El Kantara, the railhead of the Trans-Sina railway, which they reached the following day.

The Turkish army held a line extending from the sea at Gaza to east of Beersheba. Having convinced the enemy that he would concentrate his attack on their right, sea-based flank; Allenby planned to strike their left, inland flank. The 10th (Irish) Division were placed in reserve on Allenby's right, opposite Beersheba.
The Third Battle of Gaza opened with a three day naval and land artillery bombardment of Gaza to convince the Turks that this was the Allied objective. On the fourth day a direct assault was made on Beersheba, combined with a wide flanking movement by the Desert Mounted Corps. Two days later the greater part of Gaza was captured by XXI Corps, commanded by General Sir Edward Bullin, who was born at Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin and educated at Stonyhurst and Trinity College, Dublin. Allenby's victory and its aftermath brought his army to the gates of Jerusalem.

![Officers of the 5th (Service) Battalion Connaught Rangers. Lieut. Tommy Martin is in the middle row and the fifth man in from the right.](image)

Allenby was concerned to avoid fighting around the Holy City. The Turks appear to have shared the same concerns. On 8 December, the 60th and 74th Divisions advanced from the west and the 53rd (Welsh) Division from Hebron in the south. The divisions passed through Bethlehem and formed a line two and a half miles south of Jerusalem. During the night the Turks retired north and northeast from Jerusalem. Early on the morning of Sunday 9 December, two British soldiers foraging for eggs met a group of Jerusalem dignitaries carrying a white flag. Among them was the Mayor with the keys of the city. The dignitaries were looking for someone to whom they could surrender the city. The two soldiers took the dignitaries to a sergeant. He in turn took them to Irishman Major-General John Shea, who accepted the city's surrender. On 11 December, following instructions from London, Allenby entered the city on foot, to avoid emulating the Kaiser's triumphal entry on horseback in 1898. No Allied flags were flown over the city, and to avoid offending Muslim tradition, Indian Muslim troops were sent to guard the Dome of the Rock.

Christmas 1917 in the Holy Land was the most bleak the men of the 10th (Irish) Division ever had. They were based near Beit Sira, a village twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. Poor roads and bad weather delayed supplies and there were on half rations. One officer wrote: "Terrible rain on Christmas day; bully beef and a cup of tea." On Stephens Day (Boxing Day) the 10th (Irish) Division attacked Zeitun Ridge. For the first time in its three-year history the division was fighting as a complete formation under a divisional commander. Tommy Martin's 5th Connaught Rangers were on the left of the attack. They were held up by machine-gun fire. Signals had run out of telephone cable for a telephone link between the artillery observation officer and the gun-battery positions. Half an hour later, with communications connected, the divisional artillery put the machine-guns out of action. Under covering fire from the rest of the battalion, two companies of Rangers stormed the ridge. Meanwhile, to the right of the Rangers, the 1st Battalion Leinster Regiment gained another part of the ridge. The Rangers and the Leinsters then poured enfilading fire into the Turkish positions that were between the two battalions. When 6th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, to the left of the Rangers, were held up by machine-gun fire, the Connaught regiment attacked the Turkish flank, forcing the machine-guns to withdraw.

In the latter part of February 1918, the British advanced eastwards, capturing Jericho and driving the Turks across the Jordan. On 9 March a general offensive began in which the 10th (Irish) Division gained the battle honour Bell'Assar for breaking the Turkish line at that place. The 29th Brigade, to which 5th Connaught Rangers were attached, were on the left of the attack. The Rangers took the village of Nebi Salih, with only three men being wounded. While attacking Arab Ridge, the 6th Royal Irish Rifles suffered heavy casualties from machine-gun menaced by German soldiers. Tommy Martin's Rifles suffered heavy casualties from the Turks. The Connaughts drove off a frontal assault. The enemy then attempted to push back each flank in turn, but the Rangers again drove them off.
On 20 March 1918, the Duke of Connaught visited the 10th (Irish) Division. Detachments from all battalions attended a parade at which many officers were decorated. At the end of April most battalions were down to an average fighting strength of about twenty officers and 480 men of other ranks. In the aftermath of the German offensive of March 1918 on the Western Front, Allenby was forced to despatch to France two complete infantry divisions and the infantry strength of two more. Among those sent to France from the 10th (Irish) Division were the 5th Connaught Rangers, the 5th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the 6th Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the 6th Leinster Regiment. Also sent were the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers, who were absorbed by the regiment's second battalion and 6th Royal Munster Fusiliers, who were absorbed by their regiment's 2nd Battalion.

Tommy Martin and his men arrived in Marseilles on 1 June 1918. Attached to the 14th Division from 7 to 28 June, the battalion was then attached to 197th Brigade, 66th Division at Serqueux. Later on 25 August, they were moved to 66th Division's 199th Brigade. In an attack at Le Catelet on 4 October the 66th Division were in reserve during an attack on part of the Hindenburg Line. On 8 October, Tommy Martin's battalion and the 9th Manchesters captured the village of Serain, attacking it from north and south. An assault on Le Cateau was planned for 17 October. The evening before, 5th Bn. Connaught Rangers forced an entry into the town. Outside the Military Cemetery at Le Cateau, there is a memorial plaque that refers to the 5th Connaught Rangers attack on the town in October 1918. Because of their exposed position they were ordered to withdraw. They did so, but not before causing great consternation to the Germans in the town. On 11 November 1918 German machine-gun fire continued up to the ceasefire on the front held by 66th Division. On 15 December Tommy Martin was promoted to Major.

On 5 December 1914, following heavy losses sustained by the regular 1st and 2nd Connaught Rangers Battalions at First Ieper, the latter battalion was absorbed by the former. For the rest of the war the Rangers had no 2nd Battalion. After the armistice Tommy Martin's service battalion were based at Huy in Belgium. There, news reached them that they were to receive the singular honour of becoming a regular battalion.

On 11 February 1919 a parade took place which had only once before been enacted in British Army history when, in 1660, Monk's Regiment of Foot became the Coldstream Guards after the Restoration of Charles II. Tommy Martin's battalion received the order: "5th Connaught Rangers, ground arms." Then, "2nd Connaught Rangers, take up arms." Unfortunately, along with five other Irish Regiments, the Connaught Rangers were disbanded in June 1922.

Sources:


My thanks to Sister Isabelle Smyth of the Medical Missionaries of Mary for information on Marie Martin and for giving her copies of her articles on Marie’s wartime service. The photograph of Marie comes from one of the articles. My thanks to Oliver Fallon of the Connaught Rangers Association for the information on Tommy Martin that he discovered in his own research. I am also grateful to him for the photograph of Tommy with officers from the 5th Connaught Rangers.

It has been a privilege to write the story of the Martins for The Blue Cup, as I believe that it is the first time ever that the story of the First World War service of an Irish woman and her two brothers has been told. I would be very grateful to readers who might help add to the story in any way. For instance: What was Miss Paul’s first name? In what Regiment did Gerald Garland serve? I would also be very grateful for any further information on Miss Paul, Gerald Garland and any information on Tommy Martin’s life after the First World War. I can be contacted through The Blue Cup.