



GUNNER MAGEE

DEFENDER OF VALUES - THE ARTILLERY CORPS

This is an abstract of a paper, prepared by the Artillery Club, commemorating and honouring the 220th Anniversary of Gunner Magee's death on 08 September 1798. The paper provides a basis on which presentations, articles, commentaries, and further studies, associated with Gunner Magee, can be advanced.

The paper is based on research carried out by the Artillery Club in August 2018, which derived from existing narratives on Gunner Magee, information from publications and in the print media, and in particular, specific information arising from historical sources, popular culture, folklore, and social memory.

Information on issues relating to Gunner Magee is also provided: Magee Barracks Kildare, the Magee Gun Trophy, the Battle of Ballinamuck Painting, the Magee March, and the Ballad of Gunner Magee.

The complete paper can be viewed on the Artillery Club's Website: www.artilleryclub.ie



Introduction

In addition to paying homage to Saint Barbara, its patron saint, the Artillery Corps is unique within the Defence Forces, in that it has an historical figurehead, namely Gunner James Magee, from whom derives the Corps unique esprit de corps, its rich heritage, and its enduring values of professionalism, respect, loyalty, selflessness, physical courage, moral courage and integrity.

Since the establishment of the Artillery Corps on 23 May 1923, Gunner Magee's courage, heroism, and resourcefulness have inspired gunners of all ranks, and his heroic stand during the Battle of Ballinamuck has been commemorated and honoured by the Corps.



Magee Barracks Kildare



Arising from his defiant stand in Ballinamuck, Gunner Magee received national recognition in 1954, when the Government formally named the Military Barracks in Kildare Dún Uí MacAoidh (Magee Barracks), which garrisoned the Depot and School Artillery, and the 1 AA Regiment. This reflects an appropriate tribute to Gunner Magee, recognising his resilience and unquestioning valour in the face of superior forces, a fact that is made all the more poignant considering the futility of his heroic stand.

The Magee Gun Trophy



The Magee Gun Trophy honours and commemorates the unquestioning courage of Gunner Magee and his gun crew, their resourcefulness in their ability to keep the gun in action, and their ultimate sacrifice for Ireland. Gunner Magee and his gun crew embodied those values which continue to inspire the present generations of Irish gunners of all ranks.

Under the direction of the OC Depot and School Artillery Lieutenant-Colonel A. Dalton, this magnificent replica of a French 6-pdr was designed by Captain Kevin Danaher of the Artillery School, and skillfully executed by the master craftsman, Company Sergeant James F. 'Tiffany' Scanlan. Wrought in bronze in 1943 in the workshops of the Depot and School Artillery, the trophy is a model of a smoothbore gun with a double bracket trail, and with its right wheel broken to recall the scene at the Battle of Ballinamuck.

The trophy remains a reminder not only of Gunner Magee, but also the enduring loyalty, courage and professionalism of Irish gunners past and present.



Honouring the courageous and heroic exploits of Irish Gunners in the historic events of Ballinamuck in September 1798, the Magee Gun Trophy resides in the Artillery School, Defence Forces Training Centre, Curragh, County Kildare.

The Battle of Ballinamuck Painting



Honouring Gunner James Magee, the Artillery Club commissioned oil on canvas painting of the “*Battle of Ballinamuck*” by Thomas Ryan PPRHA. The painting was unveiled in the Officers’ Mess Magee Barracks, in 1995. On the closure of Magee Barracks, the painting went on loan to the Officers’ Mess Column Barracks, Mullingar. Restored by Ciara Brennan MA in 2014, the painting is currently on loan to the 2 Artillery Regiment, and is on display in the Officers’ Mess, Custume Barracks Athlone.

Defence Forces Magee March

In 1992, the Depot and School Artillery invited the Army School of Music to compose a March honouring Gunner Magee, which could be played on appropriate occasions associated with the Artillery Corps. Captain Mark Armstrong, conductor Band of the Curragh Command, composed *The Magee March*. In addition to the original score, the march avails of the air of the traditional folk song *O Tannenbaum*, (also the air for the Artillery School’s Song *You’ll never be a Captain, Sir*”). The inaugural rendition of *The Magee March* was played by the Band of the Curragh Command, under the baton of Captain Mark Armstrong, during an Open Day in Magee Barracks. Subsequently, *The Magee March*, or selected pieces, were played on numerous occasions by Bands of the Defence Forces School of Music, in the context of Artillery Corps ceremonial events.



Ballad of Gunner Magee – Composed in 1949

Familiar with the oral traditions of 1798, in 1949, the bilingual novelist and poet Eoghain Ó'Tuairisc composed "*An Gunnadóir Mac Aoidh*". Using folk-history accounts of the Battle of Ballinamuck, the poem emotively depicts the last stand of Gunner Magee, noting that "*Ach ar éacht an Ghunnadóira beidh trácht go lá an bhráth* (the gunner's exploits will be eternally recounted). The poem was republished in 1964, in a well-received collection of poetry titled *Lux Aeterna*. Lieutenant-Colonel Denis Burke, OC Depot and School Artillery, translated the poem into English.

Service with the Royal Longford Militia

Following the practice in England, the Royal Irish Artillery Regiment trained selected personnel in Irish Militias, such as the Royal Longford Militia, in the art and science of gunnery.

The Royal Longford Militia was a military force raised from the civilian population to support the regular army. It is generally believed that Gunner James Magee served in the Royal Longford Militia. Throughout all the narratives of the Franco-Irish campaign, James Magee is mentioned as Gunner Magee. As Irish Militias did not have the rank of gunner, it is likely that Gunner Magee trained with the Royal Irish Artillery Regiment.

Nevertheless, despite Gunner Magee's rank, it comes as no surprise that popular culture and social memory has claimed him as a member of the Royal Longford Militia, (less the "Royal" designation).

1798 Franco-Irish Force

Under the command of General Jean Humbert, the long awaited French expedition landed at Kilcummin on the north Mayo coast near Killala on 22 August 1798, to revive the efforts of the United Irishmen, and to provide the nucleus of a Franco-Irish force equipped with three 4-pdrs, muskets, swords, pikes and ammunition.

Having secured Ballina, General Humbert advanced on the Crown Forces concentrated at Castlebar. Reaching Castlebar on 27 August, only one of General Humbert's 4-pdrs was operational. Nevertheless, despite effective artillery fire from the Crown Forces, the Franco-Irish force assaulted and routed a well defended position. Twelve artillery pieces were captured by the Franco-Irish force: five light 6-pdrs and one howitzer from the Royal Irish Artillery Regiment, and two light 6-pdrs from each of the Kilkenny Militia, the Longford Militia and Frazers Fencibles. After their defeat in Castlebar, 53 men of the Longford Militia joined General Humbert's Franco-Irish force, including Gunner Casey and Gunner Magee.

By 30 August, the Franco-Irish force had seized the strategic towns of Westport, Newport, Swinford, Ballinrobe and Hollymount. General Humbert departed Castlebar on



03 September, marched north east towards Sligo, with the intention of crossing the River Shannon, and to advance in the general direction of Granard. Following an engagement in Colooney, the Franco-Irish force captured two additional light 6pdrs.

On 07 September, the force crossed the Shannon at Ballintra. Departing for Granard, General Humbert was obliged to leave an unspecified amount of his artillery assets behind, as a number of gun-chains were stolen.

Battle of Ballinamuck



At daybreak on 08 September, Lieutenant-General Gerard Lake was ordered to attack the Franco-Irish force, without delay. General Humbert decided to adopt a defence posture against the advancing troops, at Ballinamuck, County Longford. The selected location on Shanmullagh Hill represented key terrain, with limited maneuver space on the flanks for an attacking force with superior combat power.

Gunner James Magee and Gunner Casey deployed their two guns at the Black Fort, near Gaigue, accompanied by French grenadiers and Irish pikemen. Concurrently, cavalry and artillery elements of the Crown Forces deployed in the vicinity of the Church in Ballinamuck.

Contemporary accounts record that for some time, the guns on both sides intermittently discharged their grape and canister at the opposing lines. A target round from the Crown Forces disabled Gunner Casey's gun. Encouraged by this, the English rallied. According to social memory, a chain-ball from Gunner Magee's gun stopped their progress. A second chain-ball fired by Gunner Magee's gun struck and exploded a Crown Forces limber containing ammunition.

With the Battle of Ballinamuck technically lost, General Humbert and his officers surrendered their swords. The battle was terminated after an hour of hostilities with a decisive victory for the Crown Forces, and marked the defeat of the French force, which arrived in Ireland on 22 August 1798, in support of the Society of United Irishmen.



As a deserter from the Longford Militia, Gunner Magee would have expected little mercy from Lieutenant-General General Lake's victorious army at Ballinamuck. Rather than retreating to an adjacent bog, Gunner Magee remained with his gun. Supported by his gun detachment, a small number of pikemen, and a limited amount of ammunition, Gunner Magee made a gallant stand against all odds.

Soon after neutralising an ammunition limber, Gunner Magee's ammunition supply was almost exhausted. To address the deficiency, broken pots and pieces of metal were mixed with grape and canister. Using this improvised ammunition, Gunner Magee fired at the advancing cavalry forcing them to withdraw.



Whilst preparing his gun for further action, a chain ball struck Gunner Magee's gun, and broke the stock of the right wheel. In order to bring the gun back into action, Gunner Magee's gun detachment heroically stepped forward, and balanced the weight of the gun with their shoulders. When Gunner Magee fired the gun, his gallant comrades were killed by the recoil. Without any subsequent opposition, the gun was captured, and Gunner Magee was taken prisoner.

With the last of the Franco-Irish guns neutralised, the ensuing onslaught by the both cavalry and infantry was "Bloody and Unrelenting". Casualties from this reign of terror were buried in locations such as the Croppies' Grave and Graves Meadow in Ballinamuck, and the Highlanders Grave in Gortletteragh, 5 kilometers from Ballinamuck.

A drumhead court-martial condemned Gunner James Magee to execution by hanging, as a deserter from "His Majesty's Army".



End

