

Some Thoughts on the Irish Artillery Corps

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Almost a decade ago I began to put pen to paper (or, more accurately, finger to keyboard) to attempt to trace the history of the Irish Artillery Corps since 1922, ultimately resulting in a book by that same title. The reader might well ask how and why a retired U.S. Army officer of Italian parentage became interested in Irish military history, and of the Artillery Corps in particular; the best explanation I can give is that many, many years ago I ran across an article in *An Cosantoir* about the Comet tank in Irish service, which led me to write a book about armored vehicles in Irish service, which in turn led to somewhat of an obsession with the Artillery Corps.

Be that as it may, I recently was asked if I would consider writing an article for the Artillery Club Newsletter, an honor I am not sure I merit.

After some consideration, I thought that it might be appropriate to highlight some of the milestones of the Artillery Corps, as well as some of the episodes, some amusing and others, unfortunately, tragic, that most impressed me as I researched the history of the Corps.

I am fully cognizant of the fact that I may in large measure be preaching to the choir, and that despite the fact that I have published a book on the subject, most those who read this article may well be more aware of the proud history of the Corps than I am.

I can only hope that those of you who do read the article find it interesting, accurate, and perhaps at least minimally informative. With that, let me lower the muzzle, chamber a round, and fire at point-blank range.

Although the Artillery Corps marks its official establishment as 23 March 1923 at Islandbridge (Clancy) Barracks, its beginnings can be traced back somewhat earlier, to 27 June 1922, when four National Army officers, Emmett Dalton, Tony Lawlor, Peadar McMahan and John Doyle, collected two 18-pdr field guns and relative ammunition from the British at what was then known as Marlborough (now McKee) Barracks.

Within hours, during the early morning hours of 28 June, one of the guns, a Mk II 18-pdr, serial number 10756, positioned at the corner of Winetavern Street and Merchant's Quay across from the Four Courts, crewed by Colonel Tony Lawlor, Captain Johnny Doyle, Corporal McLaughlin and two privates, fired the first of some 375 rounds against the Four Courts. That gun, along with the second gun held in reserve under Peadar McMahan, was by 2 July joined by two other 18-pdrs supplied by the British. The exuberance of at least one gunner, Ignatius O'Neill from County Clare, can hardly be overstated: O'Neill decided to deal with a bothersome sniper in the dome of the Four Courts by elevating the barrel of his 18-pdr as high as he could and aiming at the dome.

Unfortunately (or perhaps, fortunately, for the sniper), O'Neill's shell went through the dome and landed on the grounds of the Royal Hospital (now the Irish Museum of Modern Art) in Kilmainham; the British tenants of the hospital were neither understanding nor amused.

Less than two weeks later, on 13 July, there was a somewhat similar use of an 18-pdr firing at a machine gun crew that was ensconced in the belfry of a Protestant church in Collooney, Co. Sligo; the machine gunners had fired against the crew of the 18-pdr, grazing a Sergeant Cassidy, who trained the gun on the belfry and fired a round that, quite amazingly, hit the belfry, rang the bells, and blew the top of the tower into the air; the top of the belfry then settled back into place, with the machine gun crew somehow surviving the ordeal.

Throughout the civil war that lasted until 24 May 1923 (two months after the formal establishment of the Artillery Corps), artillery played a disproportionately important role in the conflict. The 18-pdrs employed by National Army – by the end of the conflict the number in inventory had grown to nine - conferred a tremendous advantage over the opposing Republican forces, who essentially were totally bereft of artillery, and who had no really effective defence against the 18-pdrs.

In many instances, the mere presence of the guns was enough to cause the Republicans to, quite sensibly, retire, thus avoiding needless bloodshed. On one occasion, during the battle for Waterford, on 19 July, an errant shell from an 18-pdr very narrowly missed causing a tragic civilian fatality. This, of course, was in the days before GPS coordinates and sophisticated targeting techniques – the range was estimated and the fall of the shot was observed with the naked eye, with adjustments made accordingly.

As it was, the wayward round resulted in property damage, as well as acute embarrassment for Colonel Patrick Paul, a native of Waterford who was directly in charge of the attack against the city he was brought up in. The gun was firing on Republican targets, including several barracks, but a near-miss hit his own house on Newgate Street, still occupied by his mother who, happily, escaped unscathed.

It is interesting to note that since the very first deployment by the National Army of the few 18-pdrs that constituted the nascent Artillery Corps, towing of the guns was mechanised rather than horse-drawn.

Throughout the period of the Civil War, the use of Lancia armoured troop carriers to tow the guns was standard, universal practice; there are some references to and photographs of the guns being mounted portee-style on lorries as well, but there was possibly only one instance, during the landing at Fenit on 2 August, that a team of horses had to be pressed into service to tow the 18-pdr supporting the attack because the vehicle designated to tow the gun had been damaged while offloading from the ship.

Following the cessation of hostilities, Irish draught horses were used to tow the guns, until 1939-1940, when the 18-pdrs and 4.5 inch howitzers were upgraded with steel disc wheels and pneumatic tyres making them suitable for high-speed towing by lorries; these conversions were accomplished at a time when most of the continental armies, to include the Germans, who accorded a high degree of importance to mobile operations, still relied largely on draught animals to tow most of their artillery. The Artillery Corps was, in this respect, somewhat ahead of the times.

From September 1939 to 1945, during the period known as The Emergency, that Irish Artillery Corps underwent a number of organizational changes and saw a huge expansion in size and equipment holdings. In April 1940, the field artillery inventory consisted of 25 18-pdr field guns,

four 3.7 and eight 4.5 howitzers, supplemented by a lone 2-pdr anti-tank gun, one 60mm mortar and 48 81mm mortars. By 1943, there were twenty-two field artillery batteries, equipped with a total of eight 75mm guns, thirty-five 18-pdrs, four 3.7 inch mountain howitzers, thirty-eight 4.5 inch howitzers and six 60-pdrs.

Although, happily for Ireland, the field artillery battalions were not called upon to defend the homeland, the Air Defence Artillery component of the Corps did in fact fire shots in anger in reaction to German aircraft which, intentionally or not, flew over and on one occasion bombed the Dublin area.

The first instance occurred on 23 April 1941 when rounds were fired at German aircraft over Trimblestown and Ringsend, followed by a brief engagement against a lone German aircraft at Ballyfermot (Phoenix Park) the next day.

In the early hours of the morning of 31 April, an estimated twenty German bombers, probably as a result of a navigational error –presumably they were on their way to bomb targets in Northern Ireland, likely Belfast - approached Dublin from the south. These aircraft were engaged by anti-aircraft guns of various calibre deployed at Clontarf, Ringsend, Stillorgan, Collinstown and Ballyfermot, but despite the reaction, or perhaps because of it, dropped or jettisoned their ordnance. The bombs dropped on a number of locations in Dublin claimed 28 lives, wounded 90 and destroyed some 300 houses.

During the post-war period, the artillery establishment was drastically reduced, and an equipment modernisation program was begun. By 1949 the iconic 25-pdr had largely replaced the 18-pdr that had served well since 1922, and 6-pdr and 17-pdr anti-tank guns also were added to the inventory.

In 1953 the 120mm Brandt AM50 mortar was introduced into service with the Heavy Mortar Batteries, serving until 2004, being replaced beginning in 2008 by the Swiss RUAG M87 120/81 mortar. Mortars have provided artillery support to all Irish peacekeeping operations since 1960. With respect to field artillery, in 1980 the first battery of the 105mm L118 light gun was delivered to the Artillery Corps and remains in service to the present.

Anti-aircraft artillery has similarly witnessed progression from the four 3-inch 20 cwt guns acquired in 1927, to increasingly more capable and sophisticated weapons including the Bofors L/60 guns and the RBS70 air defence missile system.

It would, of course, be entirely inappropriate to fail to make any mention of an iconic figure in Irish artillery lore, Gunner James Magee, who perhaps best embodies the spirit of the Irish gunner, and who set the standard long before the creation of the Corps itself.

It is perhaps superfluous for me to recount the tale, which is likely a part of the DNA of any gunner reading this article, but for the sake of Magee's memory, let us just recall for a moment the splendid example he set on 8 September 1798, during the Rebellion, at Ballinamuck, Co. Longford, when, in spite of overwhelming odds, he and the crew of his damaged 6-pdr nevertheless faced off against the English in a last desperate gesture of pride and defiance. He and his companions, in the best tradition of gunners, made the ultimate sacrifice for a cause they believed in.

Irish gunners, be justly proud of your heritage.

Note from Artillery Club Committee

Ralph's comprehensive history of the Artillery Corps, titled *The Irish Artillery Corps Since 1922* (Green Series), was published in 2012 and is available from Amazon.

