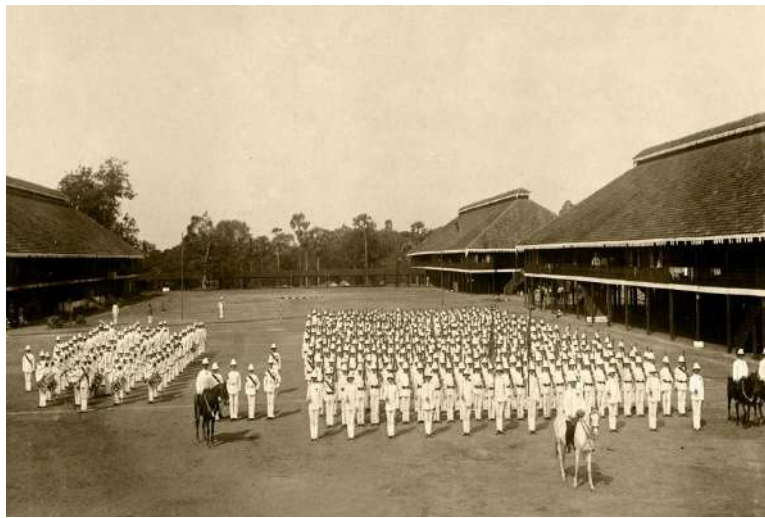




The Earlsdon Company

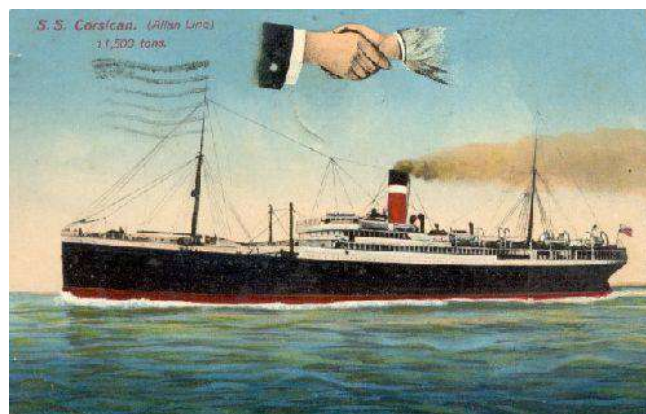
By Simon Shaw

11 January 2015 marked the 100th anniversary of the 1st Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers arriving in Coventry. The battalion had spent most of the previous two years stationed in the balmy heat of Rangoon, Burma (Yangon, Myanmar).



1st Bn Royal Munster Fusiliers pictured in Rangoon, 1913.

On 6 December 1914 they began the voyage to England from Bombay, India, where they embarked on the SS Corsican.



The SS Corsican which transported the Munster Fusiliers to England.

Just over a month later they arrived at Avonmouth on 10 January 1915 and the next day were entrained for Coventry. At a bitterly cold Pool Meadow, the troops were assembled and billeting parties comprising of local constables and scouts met them and guided them to homes in Chapelfields, Earlsdon and the Coundon Road area where they were warmly welcomed and became 'part of the family' for the next two months. 'D' Company of the battalion was particularly well represented in Earlsdon. Many of the "Munsters", who were largely recruited from Ireland, were wearing khaki tropical uniforms - including shorts and pith helmets - so an early priority was to obtain more suitable clothing to cope with the Coventry winter.



Cap badge of the Royal Munster Fusiliers

The genial Irishmen had been “Sent to Coventry” to join the 86th (Fusilier) Brigade of the army’s newly formed 29th Division. The South Wales Borderers and Royal Army Medical Corps were also housed in the city, as regiments assigned to the 29th from all four corners of the UK made Warwickshire and North Oxfordshire their temporary home while they trained for what would prove to be a baptism of fire for the division just a few short months later.

The presence of so many soldiers was a boon to the local economy. It also created challenges as to how to keep the soldiers entertained when they were off duty. A “Soldier’s Club” was set up at the Corn Exchange and many other places, including the Earlsdon Wesleyan Chapel (The present day Criterion Theatre), set up a “Soldiers Room” where the men could relax, read newspapers, books and periodicals, write letters home and avail themselves of tea, coffee, cheap cigarettes and tobacco. Concerts, whist drives, billiards, musical evenings and dances were laid on all over the city along with sporting activities. The Godiva Harriers staged a ‘Regimental Race’ which started with three laps of the track at the Butts before heading out along Albany Road, Broomfield Road, Hearsall Common towards Tile Hill and returning to the Butts via Allesley Old Road where a final lap of the track completed the five mile course. The Royal Army Medical Corps team won, with the Munsters second and the South Wales Borderers in third. The Munsters’ football team, with a couple of guest players from the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, faced Coventry City at Highfield Road on Saturday 23 January. ‘The Bantams’ beat them 8 - 3 in front of a crowd of 700 spectators. (Contemporary newspaper reports suggest City would have gone out of business back then if it were not for large numbers of billeted soldiers watching their matches during this period). The Regimental band was to play at many church services, concerts and sporting occasions in the area and was very popular. Other ‘off duty’ activities included the soldiers helping with household chores such as wash day and showing their hosts how to set potatoes in the ground properly. The Athletic Club of the Coventry Chain Company at Spon End gave some of the Munsters a tour of the factory and afterwards they adjourned to the rifle range for a spot of shooting.



The Munster Fusiliers Regimental Band somewhere in Coventry



This postcard shows Munster Fusiliers enjoying a party in an Earlsdon back garden

The Butts was also where the soldiers practiced their shooting. Other training took place at “Devil’s Dungeon” off Kenilworth Road where a new entrenching tool was put to the test and the existing hole in the ground made considerably deeper. Another trench is said to have been dug where Warwick Avenue meets Earlsdon Avenue South.



Devil’s Dungeon with a tribute to The Munsters, March 2015.

Romance flourished and a number of relationships blossomed. One of these resulted in a very special occasion at Coventry’s principal Roman Catholic church. On Thursday 4 March, Maud Bates of 19 Albany Road, Earlsdon, was married to 2nd Lieutenant Timothy Sullivan at St Osburg’s church by special license. Father H.M. Caffrey conducted the ceremony. 2nd Lt Sullivan was a native of Bantry, County Cork and his best man was 2nd Lieutenant John Watts, who was from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Miss Stokes was the Bridesmaid and Maud was given away by her father, John Henry Bates, who was the owner of The Albany Hotel, 24 Albany Road. On 13 February, 2nd Lt Sullivan and 2nd Lt Watts had both been promoted from the rank of Company Sergeant Major.



Maud Bates and 2nd Lt. Timothy Sullivan on their wedding day.

The departure of the Munsters on 15 March 1915 was a tumultuous affair. Thousands lined the streets as they marched to the railway station led by a band. The battalion's mascot, a bull terrier dog called 'Coventry Buller' went with them. Buller, as he was known, had been presented to the Munsters on behalf of the people of Earlsdon by William Williamson, owner of the Williamson Motor Company. The landlord of the Royal Oak, William Mayo, was among the presentation party and the soldiers included 'Rosy' O'Grady and Sergeant 'Busty' Murphy. A special coat was made for the dog with an edging of shamrock that featured the city arms of Coventry on one side and the regimental badge of the Munsters on the other. Buller was billeted at The City Arms with members of 'D' Company and maybe it was them who the legendary landlady of this pub Mary Jane 'Ma' Cooper, danced jigs with and recited to?

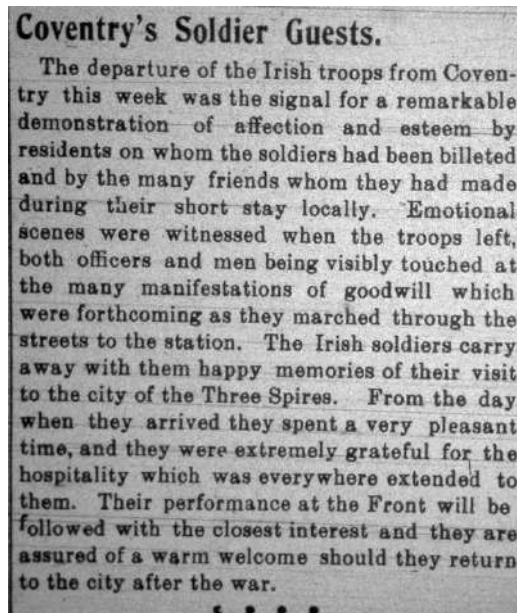


The Presentation of 'Coventry Buller' the English Bull Terrier to the Munster Fusiliers:

Left to Right. Back Row: Mr Guest (Transport Manager, Rover Co.), Mr W Jones (Manager, Williamson Motor Co.), Bert McLaughlan, 'Rosy' O'Grady, Pvt. O'Shaughnessy, Arthur Tett, William Mayo (The Royal Oak). Seated: Mr Stead, Sgt 'Busty' Murphy with Buller, William Williamson (Owner, Williamson Motor Co.) Busty Murphy survived Gallipoli but was killed or wounded at The Somme in 1916. Pvt. Henry 'Rosy' O'Grady died at Gallipoli on 1 May 1915 aged 28. He has no known grave and is recorded on the Helles Memorial.

Buller wasn't the only gift they received during their stay - the Coventry Irish Club gave them a flag with the slogan "Erin Go Bragh" (Ireland Forever) on it and an illuminated address (scroll), paid for by subscription by the people of Coventry was presented to them in February. The South Wales Borderers also received a similar scroll which prompted some complaints from Royal Warwickshire Regiment soldiers serving in France who felt that as the local regiment they should have been recognised too.

Editorials in local newspapers praised the Battalion unreservedly for its conduct during its time in Coventry and the Munsters reciprocated with letters of thanks praising the people of Coventry for their hospitality.



Editorial: Coventry & Warwickshire Illustrated Graphic, March 1915.

The 29th Division had been preparing to go to France but a late change of plans would see them used instead for the Gallipoli landings which started on 25 April 1915. Winston Churchill's plan to take Turkey out of the war would prove disastrous and the 29th Division would all but be wiped out. The Munsters, who Earlsdon folk had taken to their hearts and informally adopted as "The Earlsdon Company", were the first to land at 'V' Beach, Sedd el-Bahr, with their comrades from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers - who had enjoyed an equally popular billet in nearby Nuneaton.

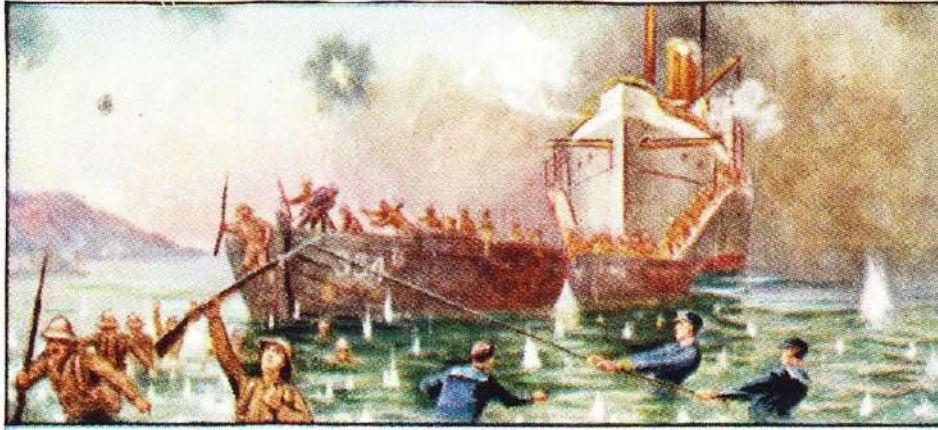
The landing at Sedd el-Bahr was horrific. Incredibly, those who planned it assumed there would be no resistance and vastly underestimated the will of the defending Turkish soldiers to fight tooth and nail to protect their homeland. A naval bombardment of the area, designed to destroy the big guns in the old fort that overlooked the beach and neutralise any ground troops, was closely followed by a converted collier ship called the SS River Clyde being deliberately run aground close to the beach. Her hold was filled with several thousand troops from the Munsters, Dublins and Hampshire Regiment. Special sally ports had been cut in her sides and when the rest of the Dublin Fusiliers appeared alongside her in row boats, disembarkation began.

The Munsters and those on the River Clyde had to reach the shore via a pontoon style bridge made up of smaller boats that were held together by ropes. The ship had not run aground as close to the shore as anticipated and the pontoon bridge, which soon started to drift apart, did not reach the beach. She came to a halt in near silence but as soon as the first soldier tried to leave her, withering rifle and machine gun fire erupted from the old fort and hills overlooking the landing area. Shells rained down and exploded all around.

The naval bombardment had failed. It had destroyed the 'big guns' that were used to attack allied ships but had not killed the ground troops. The Turkish soldiers simply hunkered down in their trenches and as soon as it was over took up firing positions ready for the invasion. In the weeks leading up to the 25 April they had also covered the area in barbed wire entanglements.

The Munsters and Dublins were cut to ribbons. The once clear blue Sea soon turned a ghastly hue of crimson as the blood of the dead and dying Irish soldiers seeped into it. Many were drowned by the weight of their kit bags which dragged them to the ocean floor. Very few were to reach the beach that morning and once there, the only protection was a small sandbank. With the pontoon bridge drifting apart, the Commander of the River Clyde, Edward Unwin, took decisive action. He and four of his men jumped into the sea and physically forced the boats back into position and then held the ropes to keep them there. All were awarded Victoria Crosses.

HIGNETT'S CIGARETTES



THE " RIVER CLYDE "

Commander Unwin and his men hold the lighters in place while the Munsters attempt to land at V Beach.

Numerous attempts to reach the beach were made but had to be suspended in the afternoon when it became absolutely clear that there was no chance of success during daylight hours. The only protection for the two hundred or so men huddling behind the sandbank was covering fire provided by a couple of machine guns mounted on the River Clyde. There were repeated attempts by the Turks to drive the men into the sea and bayonets were used to repel them. When night eventually fell, more troops were landed under the cover of darkness. Early the next day (26 April) a combined force of the few Dublins and Munsters that had survived the landings along with men from the Hampshire Regiment stormed the fort and captured the nearby village of Sedd el-Bahr. During this action, Corporal William Cosgrove, who had been billeted in Earlsdon, won the Victoria Cross. Barbed wire entanglements had halted the advance and with many of those assigned to cut the wire dead at his feet, Cpl Cosgrove began removing the posts that held the barbed wire in position with his bare hands. All the while bullets were whizzing about him but he showed no fear and lived to tell the tale. He was one of the lucky ones. Of the 26 officers and 1,002 other ranks that had set sail for the Dardanelles, only 3 officers and 314 men remained alive by 22 July 1915.

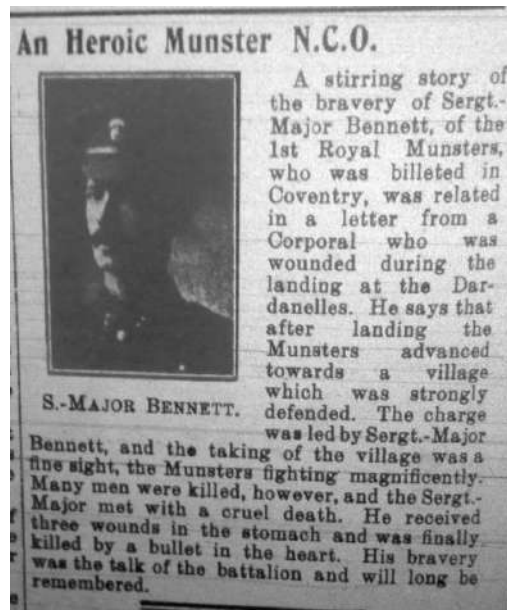


Cpl William Cosgrove, V.C. He survived the war and died in 1936.

Among the dead was 2nd Lt Timothy Sullivan, who had married Maud Bates less than two months earlier. He was slightly wounded in the landings on 25 April and again more seriously a few days later. The latter wound proved fatal. He is officially recorded as having died on 4 May 1915 but his widow Maud placed an 'In Memoriam' notice in the Midland Daily Telegraph the following year which states he died on 2 May. He has no known grave, having been buried on the beach. His name is recorded on the Helles Memorial at Gallipoli. He was 31 years old. His best man, 2nd Lt John Watts, was wounded in five places during the landing but still urged his men on with shouts of "Follow the Captain!" (Referring to a Captain Geddes).

Local newspapers reported extensively on the tragedy that was unfolding and printed letters sent to them by soldiers at Gallipoli and the hospitals in Malta, Egypt and the Greek island of Lemnos where the wounded were

initially treated. There was much sadness throughout homes in Earlsdon and Chapelfields as the news of the dead and injured was revealed. This sorrow was even more intense in the homesteads of Clare, Kerry, Cork and Limerick where families mourned the loss of loved ones they would never see again.



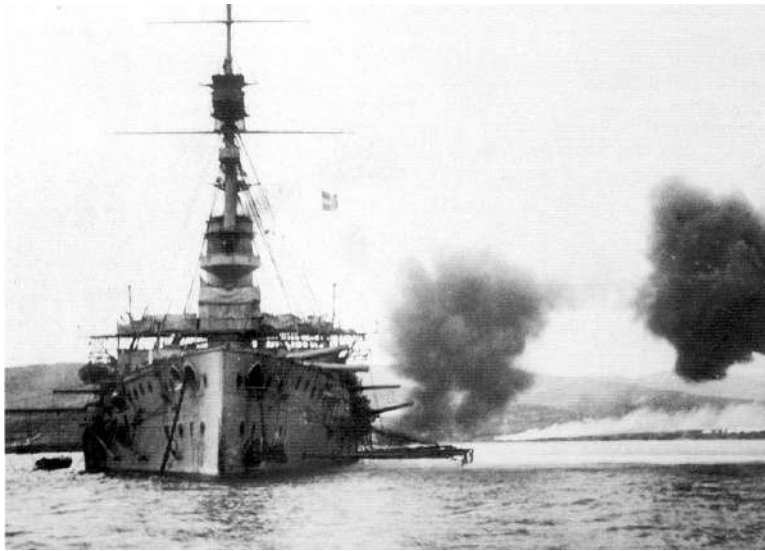
One of the numerous reports in local newspapers about the fate of the Munsters at Gallipoli.

When they were well enough, some of the wounded were shipped back to England to continue their treatment at local hospitals including the one at Courtaulds.



Wounded soldiers who were treated in Coventry.

A few of the even more lucky ones who escaped injury and survived subsequent redeployments to other landmark battles such as The Somme found their way back to marry the sweethearts they had met during their billet and made Warwickshire their permanent home after the war had ended. These included Bob Jordan who married Elsie Flemming in 1916. As for Buller, the Battalion's mascot, he is said to have survived the landing unscathed and then found a new home aboard HMS Cornwallis. Beyond that the fate of the dog is not known.



HMS Cornwallis pictured at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli in December 1915. She was sunk in the Mediterranean by a German U-boat on 9 January 1917 with the loss of 15 lives. Whether Buller was still onboard we will never know.

The Gallipoli campaign ended on 9 January 1916 when the last of the allied forces were evacuated. Nowadays in the west, Gallipoli is largely associated with the loss of life suffered by soldiers from Australia and New Zealand, but combatants and 'Labour Corps' from across the world took part - including Maoris, Sikhs and Senegalese. Over 100,000 people from all sides lost their lives, with another 200,000 wounded.

Gallipoli was a disaster for Great Britain and her allies. For Turkey it was a landmark victory and is regarded as a foundation stone for the nation that was to emerge from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal, who had served as an inspirational leader for the defending soldiers, became the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey and is known as Atatürk - 'Father of the Turks'. In 1934, he gave a famous speech to the mothers of ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand) troops who perished at Gallipoli:



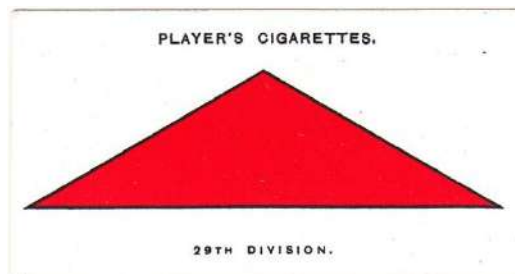
Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

"Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives... you are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets where they lie side by side here in this country of ours... You the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. Having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well."



The Memorial to the 29th Division at Stretton-on-Dunsmore

A monument to the 'Immortal' 29th Division stands near the village of Stretton on Dunsmore at the junction of the Fosse Way and the London Road. It was built on the spot where King George V inspected the Division on 12 March 1915 and commemorates their stay in Warwickshire and subsequent exploits during the Great War.



The famous Red Triangle of the 29th Division.



Turkish War Memorial at Gallipoli, 2013.

To mark the centenary of the billet and the Battle of Gallipoli, the Earlsdon Festival and local residents associations in Chapelfields and Earlsdon commissioned Charlee Sully, a graphic designer from The Usual Studio to create a special scroll loosely based on the 'Illustrated address' that was presented to the Munster Fusiliers by the people of Coventry in 1915.

“To Live in the hearts of those
we leave behind is not to die”

April 2015



In fond remembrance of 1st Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers

a.k.a. ‘The Earlsdon Company’
who were billeted in Coventry
from January to March 1915
and their sacrifice at The Battle of Gallipoli
which began on 25 April 1915.



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Maud Sullivan (nee Bates) remarried in 1920. She and her husband James Sneddon had one son. Maud died in 1968 in Northampton.

Acknowledgements:

Sheila Medlock
Jean Prendergast

Further Reading:

- “Earlsdon At War 1914-1918 1939-1945” by Trevor Harkin
- “An Outrage Against Simple Men” - <http://www.jordan-maynard.org/gallipoli.html>
- Newspaper Archives at the History Centre, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum
- RMF Association website: <http://www.rmfa92.org/>
- RBL Limerick Branch website: <http://rbl-limerick.webs.com/> (The WW1 Centenary Irish Poppy pin badge is available to purchase via this website)
- The Gallipoli Association: <http://www.gallipoli-association.org/>
- Gallipoli Campaign on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallipoli_Campaign
- Commonwealth War Graves Commission: <http://www.cwgc.org/>