



remembrance ni



## Victims of 1918 HMS Otranto disaster at Islay buried in Belfast

On 16 January 1919 to be precise, a small low-key ceremony took place in Belfast City Cemetery. On that day, Lieutenant James Jeffres of the American Red Cross led a small party of individuals to decorate the graves of twenty-one American soldiers with wooden pegs containing the soldiers' individual details. The wooden pegs were also fixed

with a miniature union flag and the stars and stripes of America. On each grave the daughters of Lieutenant Jeffres placed a flower before laying a laurel wreath on the soldiers' burial ground. But how did these American soldiers come to be buried in Belfast, so far from home?



**The HMS auxiliary cruiser Otranto. Edwin Edmonds from Belfast perished in HMS Otranto on this date in 1918.**

On Sunday 6 October 1918 the HMS auxiliary cruiser *Otranto*, in convoy from the USA was damaged in a collision with a freighter named *Kashmir*. The convoy entered atrocious weather conditions off the coast of Scotland with waves so high that it hampered steering and gales so strong that the *Kashmir* was allegedly blown out of the water and into the collision. The *Otranto*, ironically built by Belfast's Workman & Clark, was the flagship of the convoy and was carrying over a thousand American servicemen on board. Some of the men were rescued by other ships in the convoy, including almost 600 who were landed safely on the northern Irish shore. Unfortunately, the *Otranto* sank around twelve hours later off the coast of the Scottish island of Islay. Due to the adverse weather conditions it was impossible to deploy the lifeboats and consequently 335 soldiers, 11



### **Funeral on Islay of 199 American soldiers from Otranto.**

officers and 85 crew were lost in this incident. The remains of some of these men were brought to Belfast for burial.

News of the *Otranto* disaster struck a chord with the people of Belfast and prompt measures were taken to organise a relief party for the survivors. Amongst those in the relief party who left the city by motor car were J. F. Cleaver of Robinson & Cleaver, Fred Gardiner a well-known Irish rugby international, and several doctors in possession of medical supplies. They had hoped that there would be about 200 survivors at Islay, and sufficient supplies were carried to accommodate that number, but they were disappointed to discover on arrival that only around 20 men had landed alive on the island.

Many of the survivors were subsequently brought to Ulster for further medical attention, whilst some of the dead were buried in Belfast. An initial cortege of 12 coffins belonging to the United States Army passed through the streets of

Belfast which were lined by thousands of people who paid silent homage to the dead. The body of Acting Sergeant Keller, as the most senior rank amongst the victims, was conveyed on a gun carriage; the remains of the other victims were carried behind in lorries. In attendance at the interment were Brigadier General Hackett-Pain representing the local military authority, the Lord Mayor of Belfast Sir James Johnston, and West Belfast's Nationalist MP Joe Devlin. Detachments of the Hampshire Regiment and the Northumberland Fusiliers were also in attendance; the bands of these two regiments played appropriate music as the cortege made its way along the Falls Road to the City Cemetery past businesses which had displayed the American flag.

In total, 21 American soldiers from the *Otranto* were buried in Belfast City Cemetery. They have all since been exhumed in the 1920s and were relocated to, in some cases the USA, and in other cases Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey. A further 3 Catholic French soldiers who were also lost in the Otranto disaster are buried in Milltown Cemetery.

## Islay remembrance

The Otranto was part of a convoy carrying US soldiers to war when it encountered the storm off Islay's Atlantic coastline.

As they approached the west coast of Scotland in near hurricane conditions, it was accidentally rammed by another ship in the convoy.

The HMS Kashmir ripped the Otranto's steel hull wide open.



But the Kashmir and the rest of the convoy sailed on, under orders not to give assistance for fear of U-boat attack.

Despite the weather, the Royal Navy destroyer HMS Mounsey came to the rescue under the command of Lieutenant Francis Craven.

Around 600 men were rescued but the hundreds of soldiers and crew who remained on board the ship were not so lucky - it was thrown on to a reef and smashed to pieces. Most of the bodies were recovered from the sea and laid to rest by islanders. Almost 500 people are thought to have died in the disaster.

**At a 2018 commemoration former Nato Secretary General Lord Robertson, whose grandfather Malcolm MacNeill was a police officer on the island in 1918, led the tributes.**

He praised the "heroism" and "raw courage" of local people who responded to the disaster - nursing survivors and burying the dead.

"In the comfortable lives we lead today, how can we possibly begin to imagine what the Otranto disaster meant to this island?" he said.

The Otranto tragedy came after the SS Tuscania, carrying 2,500 US soldiers and British crew, was sunk by torpedo off Isaly's coast in February 1918.

Lord Robertson compared the impact on the island community of the first sinking to that felt by residents of Lockerbie after the downing of Pan Am 103 - but then they were hit by a second catastrophe.



## **Funeral of the victims of the Otranto at Kilchoman on Islay**

He said: "The dramatic shock of the event, made so much worse by the miserable fact that it was happening for the second time in only eight months, must have been both sobering and sickening.

"What we can do though is to remember and commemorate and honour those who died in our service, those who were saved and their descendants alive today because of it, and of course those remarkable folk from our strong, resilient, generous and spirited Islay who did so much for so many a hundred years ago from today."

Sandy MacTaggart's uncles helped recover the dead when the Otranto went down.

"It was a terrible disaster, that was all they could say, there was nothing they could do," he said.

"They just helped when the bodies came in on the shore. It was a grim job."

As a police officer, Lord Robertson's grandfather had to report what happened and attempt to identify the drowned men. His descriptions filled 81 pages in his notebook.

Speaking before the ceremony, Lord Robertson said: "When they were finally buried, it fell to my grandfather to correspond with the families in the United States who were desperate to know more about the fate of their loved ones.

"They wrote with information which they hoped could be used to identify the bodies of their sons, husbands or brothers, and in an extraordinary example of compassionate public service, my grandfather replied to each letter, providing what information he could."

Jenni Minto, Chair of WW100 Islay, said: "One hundred years ago the people of Islay were faced with the horrors of war arriving on their shores for the second time that year. They worked with compassion and humanity to ensure those who survived the Otranto tragedy were cared for as though they were their own, and those who sadly died were buried with dignity and respect. Today we paid tribute to those selfless acts and remember those who were lost."

Acknowledgments - Belfast Extra, BBC News, US National Archives, CWGC

## On this Day – October 16

**1914**

Battle of the Yser begins [Belgian date.].

New Zealand Expeditionary Force leaves New Zealand for France

Indian Expeditionary Force "B" leaves India for East Africa.  
First units of Indian Expeditionary Force "D" leave India for the Persian Gulf

## 1915

France declares "state of war" with Bulgaria (see 4th and 15th).

British Government offer Cyprus to Greece if she will support Serbia

Entente Governments proclaim blockade of Ægean coast of Bulgaria.

## 1917

Action of Nyangao (German East Africa) begins.

Naval action in Gulf of Riga. Russian battleship "Slava" sunk.

## 1918

### **Northern Whig**

### **Ulster Division Rank & File Fatality**

### **Private S. Broomfield.**

At the early age of 19 years 28687, Private S. Broomfield, Royal Irish Fusiliers (Armagh Volunteers), was killed in action on the 4th September. This gallant young soldier, who has made the supreme sacrifice, joined the colours on the 27th September, 1917, and went to France in April of the present year. The second son of Mr. S. J. Broomfield,



Moneyquin, Armagh. Private Broomfield was a young man of exemplary character. He was a prominent member of Armagh " Nimshi " Lodge of the Independent Order of Good Templars, and was also identified with Crosskeys Loyal Orange Lodge No. 88. At the time of his enlistment he was in the employment of Mr. W. J. Lennox, Market Street, where he served his apprenticeship in the drapery business. He was held in the highest esteem.

Private Samuel Broomfield, 28687, 9th Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, killed in action 4th September, 1918. Son of Samuel James and Martha Broomfield nee Freeland, of Moneyquin, Armagh, County Armagh. Deceased who was born 20th April, 1899 was only 19 years of age when he was killed, he is commemorated on the Ploegsteert Memorial, Belgium.

Austrian Emperor issues manifesto proclaiming a Federal State on the principle of Nationality (excluding Hungary).

## **1939**

A German air attack damages the British cruisers HMS Southampton, HMS Edinburgh and the destroyer HMS Mohawk in the Firth of Forth, in Scotland.

Heavy German attack on Western Front halted.

German bombers attack Forth and Rosyth bridges.

## **1940**

Benjamin O. Davis becomes the U.S. Army's first African American Brigadier General.

U-124 torpedoes and sinks the merchant ship Trevisa of Convoy SC-7 south of Iceland, 7 are killed. Convoy SC-7 (30 ships) is on the final leg of its journey from Sydney to Aberdeen, and is attacked by 7 U-boats in the North Atlantic between the 16th and 19th October. Losses amount to 20 ships for 79,646 gross tons. No U-boats were lost.

## **1941**

Moscow now considered in real jeopardy. Following the evacuation of the Soviet government and diplomatic corps from Moscow to Kuibyshev, panic begins to spread among the civilian population, with thousands fleeing the city to places further east, but Stalin decides to stay. Odessa falls to the Romanians after a Soviet evacuation by sea. During the 2 month siege, the Romanians have suffered 98,000 casualties.-The Japanese government falls. Prince Konoye is replaced by Hideki Tojo, Japan's minister of war.-Admiral Harold R Stark, US chief of Naval Operations warns of potential hostilities between Japan and the USSR and possibly between Japan and the USA.

## **1942**

The naval convoys assemble for Operation 'Torch', the Anglo-American landings in French North Africa. The Japanese are forced back by Australians at Templeton Crossing, New Guinea. The shelling of Henderson Airfield continues.

## **1943**

Vatutin launches a 4-day breakout attempt from the Bukrin bridgehead south of Kiev. Koniev launches an offensive to cut off the First Panzer Army on Dnieper River.

Jews in Rome rounded up, with over 1,000 sent to Auschwitz.

## **1944**

The U.S. First Army surrounds Aachen. The Red Army enters German territory near Goldap in East Prussia. Thousands of German civilians flee the area in panic. U.S. Rangers land on islands in an approach to Leyte Gulf, in the Philippines.

## **1945**

Peron returns to Argentine politics as a 'strong man'.

## **1946**

Ten Nazi war criminals are hanged in Nuremberg, Germany. These including the Fuhuer's top military advisor, General Alfred Jodl. In a posthumous retrial in 1953, the courts rule that Jodl was involved only in regular military operations and clear his name of all charges.



# Roll of Honour – October 16

*Representing their comrades who died on this day*

**1914**

**+GARDNER, Joseph**

Royal Irish Rifles, 2nd Btn. Rifleman. 7634. Died 16/10/1914. Age 28. Husband of Mary Crooks (formerly Gardner), of 33, Glenallen St., Belfast. Le Touret Memorial, France

**+McCAFFREY, John Joseph**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. Fusilier. 4065. Died of wounds 16/10/1914. Eldest son of John and Anne McCaffrey. Born in Moyglass, County Fermanagh on 10/07/1895. The family later lived at 26 Blackhill, Cookstown. John worked at Adair's Mill at Greenvale, Cookstown. Cite Bonjean Military Cemetery, Artmentieres, Nord, France

**1916**

**+BAIRD, James Cameron**

Royal Irish Rifles, 12th Btn. Rifleman. 17224. Died 16/10/1916. Born Larne. Son of Mrs. Baird, of 27, Cleines St., Ayr. La Plus Douvre Farm Cemetery, Hainaut, Belgium

**+WOODS, Robert Samuel**

Royal Irish Rifles, 12th Btn. Rifleman. 18/921. Died 16/10/1916. Age 22. Son of Joseph and Marie Woods, of Lisadian, Hillsborough. La Plus Douvre Farm Cemetery, Hainaut, Belgium

**+HAZLETT, Francis**

Royal Irish Rifles, 14th Btn. Rifleman. 17/1427. Died 16/10/1916. Age 18. Son of Francis and Jane Hazlett, of 71, Kimberley St., Belfast. Pond Park Cemetery, Belgium

**+McPARLAND, Patrick**

Royal Scots Fusiliers. 2nd Btn. Private. 40451. Died 16/10/1916. Age 21. Enlisted in Glasgow. Son of the late Matthew and Elizabeth Boylar McParland, of Cavancaw, Clanabogan, Co. Tyrone. Thiepval Memorial, France

**+WOODS, Robert Samuel**

Royal Irish Rifles. 12th Btn. Rifleman. 18/921. Died 16/10/1916. Age 22. Son of Joseph and Marie Woods, of Lisadian, Hillsborough, Co. Down. La Plus Douve Farm Cemetery, Belgium

**1917**

**+CRAWFORD, Alex**

Royal Irish Fusiliers. 2nd Btn. Private. 7821. Died 16/10/1917. Age 38. Husband to Elizabeth Crawford, of Dunaird, Broughshane. Mikra British Cemetery, Kalamaria, Greece



**1918**

**+CAMPBELL, James**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 2nd Btn. Private. 29935. Died 16/10/1918. Age 27. Son of James and Ellen Maria Campbell, of "Denamona," Clanabogan, Omagh. Duhallow A.D.S. Cemetery, Belgium

**+EDMONDS, Edwin**

RN. AB. SS/3266. HMS Otranto. Died 06/10/1918. Age 27. Drowned through collision and wreck of vessel off Isle of Islay. Born 30/06/1891 Ballywalton, County Down. Son of William Edmonds, Roden St., Belfast. Chatham Naval Memorial, Panel 28. Family Memorial Dundonald Cemetery. IMR. ADM 188/1097/3266

**+McCANN, Edward**

Royal Irish Rifles, 12th Btn. Rifleman. 18202. Died 16/10/1918. Aged 21. Born in Lisburn, he lived on the Old Hillsborough Road and worked at Messrs. Robert Stewart and Sons. Enlisted at Lisburn. He served in A Company 11 RIR with whom he embarked for France from Bordon in October 1915. Wounded on the Somme on the 01/07/1916 and later transferred to 12 RIR. Born in Lisburn. Son of David and Maggie McCann of 5 Laganside Terrace, Old Hillsborough Road, Lisburn. Tyne Cot Memorial, Belgium, panels 138-140

**+McHUGH, Hugh**

US Army. Private, Died 16/10/1918. He served in France. Son of Patrick McHugh, Blacklion, County Cavan, and brother of John McHugh, Enfield Terrace, Portstewart, who

was teacher-in-charge of the National (Roman Catholic) School, Portstewart.

### **+QUATE, W**

Royal Irish Rifles, 15th Btn. Lance Corporal. 12120. Died 16/10/1918. Son of Mr. W. Quate, of 56, Regent St., Belfast. Dadizeele New British Cemetery, Belgium

### **+SCULLION, Richard**

Royal Irish Rifles, 2nd Btn. Rifleman. 11336. Died 16/10/1918. Age 19. Son of Arthur and Mary Scullion, of 9, Wolfhll Lane, Ligoniel, Belfast. Duhallow ADS Cemetery, Belgium

### **+USHER, George**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 2nd Btn. Private. 31184. Died 16/10/1918. Age 20. Born on 22/04/1899 in Cookstown. Youngest son of James and Margaret Usher of Millburn St., Cookstown. George worked at Gunning's Factory in Millburn. He enlisted in Omagh. Duhallow ADS Cemetery, Ypres, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. Gunnings Factory WM at Cookstown RBL

### **+WILSON, William**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. 7/8<sup>th</sup> Btn. Company Sergeant Major. 6444. Died 16/10/1918. Aged 37. Born in Ballymena. Son of John Wilson, Drumcon, Rasharkin. He enlisted in Glasgow. His wife Jeannie lived at Henry Street, Enniskillen. La Kreule Military Cemetery, Hazebrouck, Nord, France. Rasharkin Presbyterian Church RH

## **1943**

### **+MacCALLUM, John Evelyn Matier**

RAF. Group Captain. Died 16/10/1943. Aged 37. John "Lyn" MacCallum was born on 03/10/1906 in Longstone Street, Lisburn. He was the son of William MacCallum, a teacher, and his wife Charlotte MacCallum (nee Williams). After his education he entered the RAF in 1923. Later gaining a cadetship at Cranwell, he was commissioned as a pilot officer in December 1927. In 1931 he and Patricia Bishop married in Ismailia, Egypt. Until 1932 he was employed on flying an air pilotage duties with Army co-operation squadrons at home and in the Middle East. After three years as a flying instructor at home training schools he was with bomber squadrons in England in 1935-36. He then joined the Far East Command, and was subsequently appointed for personnel staff duties at its head-quarters in Singapore, where he was still serving in 1939. He was promoted squadron leader in August, 1937, and wing commander, in June, 1940. The family notice in the 'Belfast Newsletter', 20th October 1943 stated - MacCallum - In October, 1943, Group-Captain John Evelyn MacCallum, R.A.F., second son of Harry and Lottie MacCallum, Castle Street, Portadown, and husband of Corporal Mollie MacCallum, WAAF. Bangor Cemetery, Co. Down

## **1944**

### **+HENDERSON, James Graham Stewart**

Royal Engineers. 617 Assault Sqn. Lieutenant. 277504. Died 16/10/1944. Aged 20. WOPE 1942 QUB. Son of James

Stewart Henderson and Janet Miller Henderson, of Wormit, Fife. Venray War Cemetery, Limburg, Netherlands. QUB RH

## **+ROBINSON, George**

Army Air Corps. Special Air Service Regiment. 2nd Btn. A Squadron. Lance Corporal. 884882. Died 16/10/1944 killed by members of the Waffen S.S. having been captured during Operation Loyton near La Grande-Fosse, France. Aged 24. George enlisted in the army in 1938 aged 18 years old. Before joining the Special Air Service Regiment, Robinson had served as a gunner in the Royal Artillery seeing action in Malta, North Africa and Italy. In March 1944, he spent 14 days in his hometown while on leave. He was the son of the late Hugh Robinson and Mrs. Robinson of 133 Bridge Street, Portadown, Co. Armagh.

Portadown News on 25/08/1945 reported -

“Mrs. Robinson, 133 Bridge St., Portadown, has been informed by the War Office that following full inquiries and close investigation made on the continent it must now be concluded that her son, Corporal George Robinson, of the 2nd Special Air Service Regiment, Army Air Corps, died after capture by the enemy in October 1944.

“Neither the precise circumstances nor the exact date of his death are at present known, stated the War Office letter, but from evidence obtained by an officer sent to investigate what happened to Cpl. Robinson and his comrades, it was presumed they were shot after capture and that death occurred on or shortly after 16th October 1944.

“In a further letter from Lieut.-Col. B.M.F. Franks D.S.O., M.C., who last saw Cpl. Robinson on the night of 6th October, it is stated that inquiries would indicate that the rescue party, in which Robinson was taking part (he had been dropped by parachute into the area of the Vosges, France, at the end of August 1944), ran into a German patrol and were captured on 7th October. Robinson had been traced to a camp at Scirmech [sic], in Alsace, but of what subsequently happened, there is no information.

“The officer, in his letter to Mrs. Robinson, said he did not hold out any hopes of her son’s survival, particularly in view of the fact that others who were captured in similar circumstances had been definitely identified as killed.

“The letter concluded: “I cannot tell you how sorry I am to have to break this news to you, and I send you my most sincere sympathy, and, indeed, that of all the regiment, who knew your son and looked up to him as a fine and courageous soldier. You will not hear any further from the War Office, as at present his death is not official and will, therefore, continue to be shown as ‘missing’.”

Durnbach War Cemetery, Germany. Portadown WM,  
Portadown, Co. Armagh.

**1947**

**+CORR, JAMES**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers . Private. 6985080. Died  
16/10/1947. Aged 24. Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers Upper  
Clonaneese Presbyterian Churchyard, Co. Tyrone.  
Dungannn WM



**+STEVENSON, Alec King**

RN. Surgeon Commander. HMS Ocean a Light Fleet Aircraft Carrier. Died 16/10/1947. Age 44. M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O. 1928 QUB. Son of Dr. A. K. Stevenson, M.D., and Mrs. M. F. Stevenson; husband to Evelyn Stevenson, of Sevenoaks, Kent. Capuccini Naval Cemetery, Malta

**VETERANS**

**BAXTER, Ernest**

Ernest Baxter was born on 10/03/1888 at Annaghanoon, Waringstown, County Down, the first of four children of National School teacher Francis Baxter and his wife Anna Maria (née McCandless). By the time of the 1911 Census he was living at Donaghcloney, County Down, with his parents and three siblings.

Baxter enlisted in the North Irish Horse on 07/06/1916, together with his younger brother John Baxter. He was issued regimental number 2190. He trained at the regiment's Antrim reserve camp until November 1916, when he and around 100 other North Irish Horsemen, including his brother, volunteered to transfer to the Royal Irish Rifles. The formal transfer took place on 7 December (Baxter was issued regimental number 40853), and on that day the men embarked for France. There they were posted to the 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles, joining it on the Somme front on 12 December.

During the early months of 1917 Baxter fell ill with 'trench feet'. The condition was so serious that on 16/10/1917 he was discharged, being 'no longer physically fit for war service' (paragraph 392 (xvi), King's Regulations). He was

granted a pension, his level of disability being assessed at 20 per cent.

Baxter's brother John was killed in action at the Battle of Langemarck on 16/08/1917

**BOYD, Edwin James Alexander**

RN. Seaman. J92230. Enrolled 22/08/1918 for hostilities. Vivid I. Demobbed 16/10/1918. Born Belfast 03/10/1899. ADM 188/831/92230

**HUNTER, Walter Frederick**

Royal Irish Regiment. Second-Lieutenant. Military Cross. He obtained a commission in the Royal Irish Regiment in October, 1915, through the Queen's Officer Training Corps, Belfast, and served at the front with the 8<sup>th</sup> (Service) Btn Royal Irish Rifles. Walter was officially reported wounded. His brother, Second-Lieutenant Stanley Hunter, also of the 8th Btn Royal Irish Rifles (East Belfast Volunteers), was a prisoner in Germany. Walter was discharged 16/10/1919. He was the son of Mr. William Johnston Hunter, 118, Eglantine Avenue, Belfast.

**McKERR, William Cecil**

RAMC Captain MB 1942 QUB. MCB. Born 16/10/1919. Son of William J McKerr, Maryville Pk., Belfast. Post war Bury Rd., Rochdale, Lancs

# Every day is a Remembrance Day

***We will remember them***

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**remembrance ni**

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at [houstonmckelvey@mac.com](mailto:houstonmckelvey@mac.com)

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