



remembrance ni



## Emma Duffin VAD nurse

Emma Sylvia Duffin is best known in Northern Ireland as a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment during WW1 and particularly through her service during the Belfast Blitz in WW2. She died on 31st January 1979. Emma was born in

Belfast on 08/11/1883. Emma and her six sisters were educated at home until age sixteen, when she left home to attend Cheltenham Ladies' College in Gloucestershire, England. She stayed there until 1903 when she left to go to Churchill College, Shrewsbury.

When she returned to Belfast she attended the Belfast Art College and developed a range of artistic skills. In 1911, she went to Germany as an au pair to develop her understanding of German culture and language.

Following the outbreak of the war, Emma decided to enlist as a VAD nurse at aged 31. She was first sent to Alexandria in Egypt where many of the soldiers wounded at Gallipoli were sent. At the end of her six-month service, she re-enlisted and from the spring of 1916 until the end of the war in November 1918 she was based in the military hospitals of Le Havre and Calais. There she tended the wounded brought straight from the Western Front and who were too seriously injured to be shipped to Southampton.

She wrote about her experiences in a series of journals, which were recently published.

Emma spoke German fluently and her tales of caring for wounded German soldiers add a humanitarian perspective to what is already a story of devotion and selflessness.

## **Belfast blitz**

On her return to Belfast, Emma worked as an illustrator of cards and books, including children's stories written by her sister Ruth. On the outbreak of the Second World War, she

was invited to be Commandant of the VAD based at Stranmillis Military Hospital in south Belfast.

She resumed her diary-keeping and provided a searing account of the impact of the Easter Tuesday blitz on Belfast, in which over 800 people were killed.



Most gripping is the day she spent in St George's Market, Belfast, which was used as a morgue for the many unidentified bodies.

There, she helped stricken families search among the coffins for their loved ones.

Appalled by what she saw, she wrote in her diary: "I had seen many dead [in WWI], but they had died in hospital beds, their eyes had been reverently closed, their hands crossed on their breasts; death had been glossed over, made decent..."

"Here it was grotesque, repulsive, horrible ... Death should be dignified, peaceful. Hitler had made even death grotesque".

Emma served as honorary secretary of the Belfast Council of Social Welfare from 1933 to 1953.

In this role, she was involved in ensuring that the comparatively rudimentary but effective social services it had provided between the wars in a city whose poverty had been starkly exposed during the evacuations were incorporated in the new welfare state that was created at the end of the war.

Emma died on 03/01/1979, at age 95. and her remains were buried in Newcastle, Co Down.

Her full diary, along with many other items can be viewed at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

### **Emma in The Great War: 1914-1918**

Throughout the Great War, she maintained a journal, detailing her work and the horrors she saw in battlefield hospitals.

Her writing shows her caring nature and casts a humanitarian perspective on events. For 6 months between September 1915 and March 1916, she was in Alexandria, Egypt. There, she tended the wounded of the Gallipoli campaign. When the initial 6 months were up, Miss Duffin re-enlisted for a further 2 years.

Between April 1916 and November 1918, she served in military hospitals in Le Havre and Calais, France. There, she aided those wounded on the Western Front. Many of the injured men were too hurt to return by boat to Southampton. As well as Allied troops, she also cared for wounded German soldiers, speaking to them in fluent German. For her service, she was Mentioned in Despatches on 31st December 1918.

## **Emma - The Second World War and the Belfast Blitz**

After the outbreak of the Second World War, in March 1940, Emma Duffin became a Commandant of the Voluntary Aid Detachment. She took charge of a group of over 100 volunteer nurses based at Stranmillis Military Hospital, Belfast. This building is now Stranmillis College. While there, she continued to write journals. Her records provide a detailed look at the events and aftermath of the Belfast Blitz in April and May 1941. In contrast to her work during The Great War, her writing describes a much more administrative role.

Her Second World War-era writing highlights the horrors of the Luftwaffe bombing of Northern Ireland. On describing the scene in the temporary morgue at St. George's Market, Belfast, where her sister Molly Duffin had requested her help in helping families search for loved ones, she wrote:

In the aftermath of the Belfast Blitz, Emma travelled by foot to the top of the Oldpark Road, Belfast. Her writing describes the debris and destruction she encountered. Bombs had reduced houses to rubble and survivors searched through the wreckage for family and friends. Many others were fleeing the area and Emma, as a caring nurse,

noted the dirt and lice on the children as they escaped the horrors of the city.

Throughout the Second World War, Emma listened to news reports from the BBC on the wireless. Her knowledge of languages also permitted her to understand German and French broadcasts.

## The Battle of May

**Three submariners from Belfast were lost in a tragic incident in 1918 which became known as the Battle of May - a catastrophe that left 270 RN dead.**

Isaac Gibson from Argyll Place and John McDonald whose father was based at Chichester Street Fire Station, were in HM Submarine K17 and Joseph Hayes from Shaftesbury Street was in HM Submarine K4.

The two K Class submarines were destroyed on 31/01/1918 when they were sunk and three more were damaged along with a surface cruiser.

No enemy ships were involved in the sinkings, 20 miles off Fife Ness on Scotland's east coast. The deaths were all caused by a series of night-time collisions within the British fleet.

So embarrassing was the incident that even though one officer was court-martialled, the facts were not generally admitted for more than 60 years, until after the death of the last survivor.

Jim Rae,  
secretary of  
the Scottish  
branch of the  
Submariners'  
Association  
said: "It was  
an absolute  
bloody  
disaster from  
the beginning.  
The K Class  
submarines  
did not have a



very impressive record. You can see why those who served in them were known as the suicide club."

The submarines proved far more lethal to their crews than to the enemy, so much so that the K was said to stand for Kalamity. Driven by oil-fired steam turbine engines, they were large and cumbersome, too slow to keep up with surface ships, hard to manoeuvre and stifling for their crews. Of the 18 that were built, none were lost in action but six were sunk in accidental collisions.

In January 1918, as British warships steamed north from Rosyth to join their fleet at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, they were accompanied by two flotillas of the submarines. The first two subs found themselves bearing down on two minesweepers and changed course. The third, K14, veered to starboard to avoid colliding with them but performed a complete circle as its rudder jammed.

That brought it back into line just in time to be rammed by the last submarine in the group, K22. A battlecruiser, HMS Inflexible, then ploughed into K22.

The first ships in the convoy turned back to rescue the submarines and steamed straight into the chaos. A cruiser, HMS Fearless, rammed K17, another of the subs, sinking it within eight minutes. Then two further submarines, K4 and K6, collided. To complete the disaster, a destroyer then carved through the survivors of K17, killing many of those who had been left in the water. The entire 59-man crew of K4 was lost and all but eight of K17's.

The Royal Navy hushed up the catastrophe and it was not until 2002 that a commemorative plaque was erected on a cairn in Anstruther, the nearest village on the coast, though even that does not refer to the cause of the loss of life. The Submariners' Association however, now holds an annual commemorative service.

## On this Day – January 31

### 1916

During this period the 107th Brigade (8th, 9th, 10th and 15th Battalion's Royal Irish Rifles.) were attached to the Regular Army's 4th Division with the 15th attached to the 2nd Battalion Duke of Wellington's (West Riding Regiment)

From the 15th Btn., War Diary - "TRENCHES / 31.1.16 / Fine but dull, Bosch shelled REDAN 1pm to 1.30pm and again at 2.30pm our heavies replied at 3.30pm they shelled

TENDERLOIN. Our casualties three killed + one wounded. West Riding Regiment two killed + 2 wounded". See Riflemen Ellis, Gibson and Moore, RH 1916 below.

6 German Zeppelins raid East Anglia and the Midlands. A reported 70 killed and 113 injured.

## 1918

HM Submarine E50 was lost with all hands (31 men) in the North Sea, cause unknown. Her wreck was found off the Danish coast in 2011.

## 1940

Britain secretly approached neutral Italy about purchasing badly needed fighter planes for the war effort. Germany would ensure that no such deal would be made.

## 1941



The 4th Indian Division flanked and then captured Agordat, Eritrea, East Africa. 1,000 Italian troops and over 40 field

guns were captured. The battle was the first big victory in the British offensive against Italian East Africa



Attacked by German aircraft Minesweeper HMS Huntley was at approximately 30 miles north-west of Mersa Matruh, Egypt, and sank with the loss of 18 of her crew.

## 1942

The British Army and allies began their retreat to Singapore following defeat in Malaya. Allied and Axis forces had been fighting in Malaya since December 1941. It was dominated by land battles between British Commonwealth army units, and the Imperial Japanese Army with minor skirmishes at the beginning of the campaign between British Commonwealth and Royal Thai Armed Forces. The Japanese had air and naval supremacy from the opening days of the campaign. For the British, Indian, Australian and Malayan forces defending the colony, the campaign was a total disaster.

The Battle for Malaya had ended in comprehensive defeat for the Commonwealth forces. Nearly 50,000

Commonwealth troops had been captured or killed during the battle. The Japanese Army invaded the island of Singapore on 7 February and completed their conquest of the island on 15 February. The final battle before the surrender was with the Royal Malay Regiment at Bukit Candu on the 14 February. The campaign is notable for the inhumane and brutal treatment of prisoners at the hands of the Japanese.

Destroyer HMS Belmont (ex USS Satterlee) was torpedoed and sunk by German submarine U-82 off Newfoundland while on convoy escort duty. From her 138 officers and men there were no survivors.

## **1943**

German Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus surrendered his Sixth Army in Stalingrad to the surrounding Russian forces, symbolizing the end of the massive battle for the city. The Battle of Stalingrad had begun in August of 1942, when German forces pushed into the symbolic city on the Volga River. The German advance was initially successful, though costly, as they captured more and more of the city. By mid-November 1942, the Germans controlled over ninety percent of the city, and the Russian defenders were clinging desperately to a small foothold on the bank of the river. However, during the battle both sides had continually poured reinforcements into the meat grinder that was Stalingrad, and the German flanks on the either side of the city were severely depleted from this attrition. The Soviets, though suffering mightily, had successfully built up formidable armies on the sides of Stalingrad, and on November 19th, they launched their surprise attack. The German flanks were held by weakly supplied and thinly spread Hungarian, Romanian and Italian troops, and the

Soviets smashed through these positions rapidly. The German focus on the capture of the city had led to them devoting no forces to deal with such an attack, and the German forces in Stalingrad were cut off and surrounded within four days. The Soviets immediately reinforced their gains, and began pressing into the trapped German forces. The Germans attempted a relief operation in December, but it ran out of momentum within two weeks and fell short of the objective. The Germans in the city were left to fend for themselves, but Hitler refused all requests for the Sixth Army to break out. He believed that they could be kept supplied and fighting through the air until another successful relief operation could be launched. However, the German Luftwaffe was utterly unable to supply all of the needs of the Sixth Army, and the situation was made worse by Soviet attacks on nearby airfields in late December, which depleted the German air fleet. By late January, the Germans were pressed into the city from all sides, and were split in two pockets on January 26th. Despite Hitler's refusal to grant Paulus the right to surrender, the situation eventually grew far too desperate for the Germans, and Paulus was captured on January 31st after his headquarters was overrun. The rest of the German forces capitulated two days later, and the most significant battle of the war was over. With their defeat in the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans permanently lost the initiative on the Eastern Front, and faced a long and bloody defensive war back to Germany.

## 1944

Major Lawrie Franklyn Vaile 1 RIrF (**The Irish Brigade**) in Italy on 31st Jan '44 writing home to his wife: "The Russians continue to do great work. The advance from Leningrad is

highly satisfactory & arousing a great interest among the men. The 'Eight Army News', published daily, is very pro-Russian and often has excellent articles about reconstruction after the War. A lot of people out here wonder what's going to happen about the Middle East afterwards. I suppose the prospective Second Front is causing a lot of discussion at home."

1 London Irish Rifles (The Irish Brigade) - "Plans were made for another attack on Castelforte. All was being prepared for action when suddenly the telephone rang at battalion headquarters. The Commanding Officer answered it and turning to the Adjutant said: "It's all off, we are going to Anzio."

5,239 Polish Jews arrived at the German #Auschwitz camp from the ghetto in Pruzana. After the selection 562 men and 212 women were registered in the camp. 4,537 people, including 1,207 children below the age of 10, were murdered in gas chambers.

American Army and Marine forces land on Kwajalein Atoll. The island was declared secure four days later. Almost all Japanese defenders were destroyed, including some 300 Korean slaves.



# Roll of Honour – January 31

*Representing their comrades who died on this day*

**1915**

**+JAMIESON, J**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. 9th Btn. D Coy. Private. 11663. Died 31/01/1915. Age 18. Son of Thomas and Ellen Jamieson, of 39, Colvil St., Strandtown, Belfast. Born at Newtownstewart. Ardstraw C of I Churchyard

**1916**

**+ELLIS, William Alexander**

Royal Irish Rifles, 15th Btn, (North Belfast Volunteers). Rifleman. 11924. Died 30/01/1916. Age 36. Born Castledawson. Enlisted Belfast. Son of John and Mary Jane Ellis nee McNeal, of 56 Cultra Street Belfast. Sucrierie Military Cemetery, Collincamps, France. Castledawson WM

**+GIBSON, John**

Royal Irish Rifles, 15th Btn, (North Belfast Volunteers). C Coy. Rifleman. 11945. Died 30/01/1916. Age 23. Son of Margaret Gibson nee Waring and the late James Gibson, of 78 Lilliput Street, Belfast. Sucrierie Military Cemetery, Collincamps, France.

**+MOORE, Thomas**

Royal Irish Rifles, 15th Btn, (North Belfast Volunteers).  
Rifleman. 12084. Died 30/01/1916. Age 19. Son of William Moore and the late Margaret Moore nee Topping ; Stepson of Sarah Moore nee Moore, of 206 Oldpark Road, Belfast. Sucrierie Military Cemetery, Collincamps, France.

**+SWEENEY, J**

Connaught Rangers. 6th Btn. Private. 2197. Died 31/01/1916. Husband to Sarah Sweeney, of 36, Stanhope St., Belfast. Bethune Town Cemetery, France

**1917**

**+BOYD, Samuel**

Royal Irish Fusiliers, 2nd or 14th Btn. Rifleman. 16260 or 14/16264, Died 31/01/1917. Born Carrickfergus. Berks Cemetery Extension

**+CAMPBELL, Andrew**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 2nd Btn. Private. 3438. Died 31/01/1917. Aged 38. Husband of Matilda Campbell, of 31, Ottawa St., Belfast. Belfast City Cemetery

**+COPE, G**

Royal Irish Rifles. 16th Btn. Rifleman. 438. Died 31/01/1917. Age 19. Son of James and Mary Elizabeth Cope, of 60, Skipton Street, Belfast. Vlamertinghe Military Cemetery, Belgium

**+FULTON, Joseph**

Royal Army Medical Corps. Private. 2549. Died 31/01/1917. Age 33. Son of Joseph and Annie Fulton; husband of Annie



**Guards Memorial in London - Five life sized bronze soldiers representing each of the Guards regiments (Grenadier Guards, Scots Guards, Welsh Guards, Irish Guards and Coldstream Guards) standing easy against stone cenotaph on podium and three stepped plinth.**

Fulton, of 33, Jenny Mount Terrace, York Rd., Belfast.  
Carnmoney Cemetery

### **+GRIBBON, George**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st Btn. Private. 27776. Died 31/01/1917. George enlisted in Hamilton, Scotland. He was born in Dalzell, Motherwell, Lanark about 1895. The 1911 census lists a 16 year old George Gribbon, working as a servant for the Wilson family in Ballydugennan, south east of Toome. A beneficiary in his will lived there. Other newspaper reports suggest George Gribbon also lived in the Brecart, just east of Toome. Theipval Memorial, France

### **+GIBSON, John**

Royal Irish Rifles. 15th Btn. C Coy. Rifleman. 15/11945. Died 31/01/1916. Age 23. Son of the late James Gibson, and of Margaret Gibson, of 78, Lilliput St., Belfast. Sucrierie Military Cemetery, Colincamps, France

### **+McMICHAEL, William**

Irish Guards, 3rd Btn. Private. 6070. Died 31/01/1917. Aged 26. He volunteered for active service in 1914. He served in France and was injured in the neck in the winter of 1915 and was wounded again in the autumn of 1916. He died of wounds in hospital in Paisley, Scotland. Prior to enlisting he was employed by Mr. Daniel Reid, a contractor. His mother lived at Cromore, Portstewart. He is commemorated on Portstewart's War Memorial, Portstewart Presbyterian Church's War Memorial, the Roll of Honour of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Ireland's Memorial Record. Paisley (Hawkhead) Cemetery

### **+MURPHY, William**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st Btn. Private. 4542. Died 31/01/1917. Aged 20. Son of Robert and Sarah Murphy, of 3, Ernest St., Rosemount, Londonderry. Theipval Memorial, Somme, France

### **+SANDS, David**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st Btn. Private. 20139. Died 31/01/1917. Aged 23. Born about 1894 in Dungannon. Son of James and Catherine 'Kate' Sands. The CWGC records the family names as "Sandes". This is incorrect. His father worked on a farm and his mother was a linen weaver. The family lived at Mullaghanagh, Derrygortrevy, Tyrone. David was with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers for a time. Son of Kate

Sandes, of Park Rd., Dungannon. Grove Town Cemetery, Meaulte, Somme, France. Dungannon WM. St Anne's C of I Church WM

**1918**

### **HM Submarines K17 and K4**

K17 and K4 were sunk on 31/01/1918 during the night time fleet exercises later known as the Battle of May Island. (Operation E.C.1) when they were attached to the 13th Submarine Flotilla. HMS Fearless ploughed into K17 at the head of a line of submarines. She sank in about 8 minutes with the loss of all hands.

#### **+GIBSON, Isaac**

RN. Chief Engine Room Artificer. 2nd Class. 270632. HM Submarine K.17. Died 31/01/1918. Age 39. Born Downpatrick. 22/03/1879. Before the war he worked as a mechanic with J & TM Greeves, flax spinners - mills in Conway St., and Cupar St. Belfast. Son of Samuel and Charlotte Gibson, Tennent Street, Belfast; husband to Ellen Duncan Gibson, Sidney St., Saltcoats, Ayrshire. Plymouth Naval Memorial. Tennent Street, Argyll Place - PCI RH. ADM 188/434/270632

#### **+HAYES, Joseph Charles**

RN. Stoker 1st Class. K19004. HM Submarine Fearless K4. Died 31/01/1918. Age 24. Enrolled 18/04/1913 for 12 years. War service in Pembroke II, Blonde, Marshall Ney, Dolphin and Fearless K4. Born Belfast 07/09/1893. Son of Joseph Charles Hayes, Belfast; husband to Minnie Hayes, Shaftesbury St., Belfast. Chatham Naval Memorial. ADM 188/905/19004

**+McDONALD, John Riddell**

RN. Stoker 1st Class. SS114477. Died 31/01/1918 in HM Submarine K.17. Age 24. Enrolled 23/07/1913 for 5 years regular and 7 years reserve. Served in Pembroke, Dominion, Dolphin, Maidstone and Crescent (K17). In HMS Boadicea at Jutland. Born Belfast 05/09/1894. Son of Hugh G. and Sarah J. McDonald, Central Fire Station, Chichester St., Belfast. Chatham Naval Memorial. Rosemary St. - PCI RH. ADM 188/1120/114477

**1918**

**+ARBUCKLE, Robert**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. 2nd Bn. Serjeant. 7789. Died 31/01/1918. Ozinghem Military Cemetery, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium

**1920**

**+McCALL, William Henry**

King's Own Scottish Borderers. 6th Btn. Private. 41354. Died 31/01/1920. Age 24. Born in Belfast, son of Archie McCall, but by 1901 was living with his family in Dawson St., Armagh. In 1911 he was living with his grandparents William and Jane McCall in Killylea, Tynan. His effects were left to his grandmother Jane. Cologne Southern Cemetery, Germany

**1944**

**+BRODIE, William James Totten**

RAFVR. Sergeant. 1795365. Died 30/01/1944. Aged 21. 622 Sqdn. Son of Andrew D. and Christina A. Brodie, of Lisburn. Runnymede Memorial, Panel 225

**+CLARKE, Ernest Sumner**

RAFVR. Flight Lieutenant. 107142. Mentioned in Despatches. Died 30/01/1944. Aged 22. 97 Sqdn. Son of Frederick Ernest and Adah Mary Clarke, of Belfast. Barsingerhorn (Kolhorn) General Cemetery, Noord-Holland, Netherlands . 502 (Ulster) Squadron WM, St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast

**+HILLEN, James**

Royal Artillery. Gunner. 1427283. Died 31/01/1944. Aged 24. 16 Defence Regt. Son of Patrick and Bridget Hillen, of Newry. Yokohama War Cemetery, Japan

**+WEIR, Samuel Joseph**

RAFVR. Sergeant. 1081810. Died 31/01/1944. Age 21. 172 Sqdn. Son of Samuel and Elizabeth Weir, Craigmore, Bessbrook, County Armagh. Runnymede Memorial, Surrey. Bessbrook WM1944

**1946**

**+IRWIN, Wallace John Talbot**

Royal Artillery. Major. 101657. Died 30/01/1947. Aged 47. 178 Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment. Son of William and Gwendoline Mary Irwin; Husband to Elizabeth Gladys Irwin of Knock, Belfast. Dundonald Cemetery

**+MURDIE, John Brown**

RAFVR. Leading Aircraftman. 1795125. Died 31/01/1946. Age 23, Son of Joseph and Emily Bennett Murdie, of Belfast. Delhi War Cemetery, India

**VETERANS**

## **BEATTIE, John William**

Rfm John William Beattie. 8622. 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Rifles. John was born in 1884 at Barrow-in-Furness where his father was working in the Shipyard. The family relocated to Belfast and initially set up home at Hillman Street before moving to Canning Street. John enlisted on 02/09/1915 and embarked for the front early in 1916. He saw action at Messines and at Passchendaele where he was severely wounded. He was discharged on 31/01/1918 with the Silver War Badge and resumed his occupation as a Plater in the Belfast Shipyards.

## **DUFFIN, Emma**

Following the outbreak of the war, Emma decided to enlist as a VAD nurse at aged 31. She was first sent to Alexandria in Egypt where many of the soldiers wounded at Gallipoli were sent. See article above.

## **HARRIS, Walter**

Private. Somerset Light Infantry and Royal Marine Labour Corps. Walter was born at Taunton, Somerset, in 1883 and initially enlisted in the 3rd Battalion Somerset Light Infantry in October 1902. This was a Militia Battalion and he remained with it until 1905. He enlisted again with the SLI in 1917 and saw action in France where he may have been wounded in April 1918. He transferred to 3rd (Reserve) Battalion and was stationed at Victoria Barracks, Belfast, in June 1918 when he married Mary Jane Blundell from Lower Frank Street in the city, at St Patricks C of I, Ballymacarrett. Discharged on 31/01/1919, he enlisted in the Royal Marine Labour Corps in March 1919 and served at Le Havre, until November that year when he was discharged.

# Every day is a Remembrance Day

***We will remember them***

**To return to Home Page - click on Remembrance NI  
masthead.**

**Information about individuals who served - please  
forward to remembrance ni at email below**

**remembrance ni**

---

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)

**Copyright** - all material in this **remembrance ni** publication is copyright, and must not be reproduced in print or electronically.

**Please forward** - information about those who served - names, regiment, ship or unit, date of death to [houstonmckelvey@mac.com](mailto:houstonmckelvey@mac.com)

---