



remembrance ni



Welsh Cemetery (Caesar's Nose) is located to the North of Ypres and was begun in July 1917, at the spot known then as Caesar's Nose, by the 38th (Welsh) Division, 23 of whose soldiers are buried here. Total WW1 burials 68.

**The battle of Verdun begins**

## **The battle of Verdun begins**

**Today, on February 21, 1916 at 7:15am, the battle of Verdun began and became one of the longest, one of the bloodiest and one of the fiercest battles of the first world war for the French and German armies.**

Lasting for 303 days, it was one of the most costly in human history. In 2000, experts calculated 377,231 French and 337,000 German casualties, a total of 714,231, an average of 70,000 a month.

The battle of Verdun was originally planned by the German Chief of General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn to secure victory for Germany on the Western Front. The aim was to crush the French army before the Allies grew in strength through the full deployment of British forces. Without France's ninety-six divisions the Allies would be unable to continue fighting in the west.

To achieve his aim Falkenhayn needed to target a part of the French front where strategic necessity and national pride combined. The ancient fortress city of Verdun on the River Meuse was just such a place. By securing the heights on the east bank of the river, the Germans would dominate the surrounding area, making it crucial for the French to retake the ground or lose Verdun. Here Falkenhayn planned to use more than 1200 artillery pieces to destroy French units, whilst making limited use of German infantry to minimise his own casualties.

At 4am on 21 February 1916 the battle began, with a massive artillery bombardment and a steady advance by troops of the German Fifth Army under Crown Prince Wilhelm. Five days into the battle, German forces captured

Fort Douaumont, the largest and highest of the 19 forts protecting Verdun. The battle appeared to be going Falkenhayn's way. French military leaders declared Verdun could not be held if the east bank of the Meuse was lost and that French national morale would not survive the loss of the city. At this point, however, Crown Prince Wilhelm and his staff stopped following Falkenhayn's strategic concept and committed the Fifth Army to greater offensive action. The seizure of ground became the priority and by the end of February, German losses at Verdun were similar to the French casualties.

General Philippe Petain was then given command of the French Second Army at Verdun. Petain had a reputation as a master of defence and organised his forces to defend in depth by establishing a series of mutually supporting strongpoints, rather than pushing all his troops into the vulnerable front line trenches. Petain also rotated units through Verdun on a regular basis and whilst this exposed much of the French Army to the battle, it ensured troops did not spend long periods of time at the front. The French also greatly increased the number of artillery pieces at Verdun, leading to the Germans suffering equally from incessant shelling. The ability of the French to sustain the battle was due to ammunition and supplies arriving along the "Voie Sacree", the Sacred Way, a single road into Verdun kept open despite constant German shelling.

On 6 March, the Germans renewed their offensive, this time on the west bank of the Meuse. The already terrible battlefield conditions were made worse throughout March and April, as persistent rain turned the area into a quagmire. In late April, General Robert Nivelle took over French command from Petain and began large-scale counter

## Eye - witness

"You can't imagine the landscape around us, no more vegetation, not even a ruin; here and there, a stump of a tree trunk tragically stands on the ground riddled with thousands and thousands of shell holes touching each other. No more trenches or casings to find your way around. Between us and the Germans, no barbed wire, everything is pulverized as the cannonade goes on. But more active than the bombardment, worse than the lack of supplies, is the stench that lingers, heavy and pestilential, that squeezes your guts, lifts your heart, prevents you from eating and even drinking. We live in a huge mass grave where only filthy flies gorged with blood and big rats gleaming with fat look like they're enjoying themselves: everything is stinking with rotting corpses, human waste of all kinds, dust from explosives and gas slicks."

**Private Eugène Bouin, May 1916, Verdun**

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attacks. This offered the Germans a chance to return to Falkenhayn's strategy but by this time all sense of the original concept was lost, replaced by a fixation to take Verdun. In early June the Germans took Fort Vaux after very tough fighting. This proved to be their final success. Efforts to continue the advance later that month failed, despite the use of phosgene gas.

On 24 June, the Allied bombardment began on the Somme. The German offensive at Verdun was reduced in order to reinforce the Somme front. Nivelle seized his chance and

attacked. His Second Army had artillery superiority and he employed new tactics based on specialist infantry sections armed with light machine guns, rifle grenades, mortars and light field guns. Even so, the Germans were not prepared to give ground. Casualties rose as villages such as Fleury changed hands several times. There was also terrible fighting for the forts taken by the Germans earlier in the battle before these too fell to the French.

The battle of Verdun ended on December 15, 1916, as winter conditions and results of fighting on the Somme made further activity impossible. The French had lost 377,000 men and the Germans 330,000. Falkenhayn's plan to destroy the French army had failed. Even worse from a German perspective, the heavy losses at Verdun combined with even greater casualties suffered on the Somme to create a manpower crisis within the army that would become increasingly difficult to resolve as the war continued.

Today, the battle of Verdun remains the strong symbol of the courage and spirit of resistance of the French army, of their "Poilus" who fought in absolutely appalling conditions during 300 days and 300 nights of a nameless hell in which almost all the French army fought with an exceptional heroism. Gone but not forgotten, France does not forget these heroes.





# On this Day – February 21

## 1915

The Plymouth Battalion RMLI, plus the headquarters of the Royal Marine Brigade on HMHS Braemar Castle and the Chatham Battalion sailing on Cawdor Castle, arrive at Lemnos in the Aegean.

## 1916

The Battle of Verdun commenced The battle was fought from 21 February to 18/12/1916, and was the largest and longest battle of the First World War on the Western Front between the German and French armies. Lasting for 303 days, it was one of the most costly in human history. In 2000, experts calculated 377,231 French and 337,000 German casualties, a total of 714,231, an average of 70,000 a month.

## 1940

Britain reduces passenger train service due to coal shortage.

## 1941

The first flight took place over the 'Donegal Corridor,' a strip of land in the Irish state used by Royal Air Force planes during the Second World War. Though Ireland was officially neutral, the airspace was secretly allowed to be used.

Third and final day of Swansea Blitz (Luftwaffe bombing of

Swansea, Wales): 230 killed, but docks and facilities are undamaged.

## **1942**

Convoy ON-166 (60 ships) sailing from Britain to North America, is attacked in the North Atlantic by 19 U-boats from wolfpacks Ritter and Knappen between the 21st and 26th February. 14 allied ships are lost for 87,901 tons. 4 U-boats U-225, U-606, U-529, U623 were sunk during the battle.

House of Representatives begins hearings about removal of Japanese-Americans from West Coast.

German spy Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn convicted of espionage for sending information about Pearl Harbor to the Japanese before and during the attack.

## **1943**

The 25th Anniversary of the creation of the Red Army is celebrated in all allied countries. There was a large parade in Belfast attended by many dignitaries civil and military.

## **1944**

U.S. Marines complete the capture of Eniwetok Atoll, suffering 339 dead.

Hideki Tojo becomes chief of staff of the Japanese army.

## **1945**

38(Irish) Brigade. 2 LIR in Italy. 0830 CO, IO, RSM and company representatives proceeded on lecture & demonstration of Control of Kangaroos (Troop carrying tanks). 1800 CO's O Group held on Kangaroo and details

arranged for the 4 rifle coys to do an exercise on morning of the 22nd.

The 1st Ukrainian Front captures Guben.

The US 8th Air Force bombs Nurnberg with over 1,000 bombers.

The British 2nd Division establishes another Irrawaddy bridgehead, while the British 36th Division breaks through at Myitson, in northern Burma. Meanwhile further British forces cross the Irrawaddy in central Burma.

Off Iwo Jima, Japanese kamikazes sink US escort carrier Bismarck Sea and damage the Aircraft Carriers Saratoga and Lunga Point.

US Sixth Army secures Bataan Peninsula on Luzon.

Scottish Olympic runner Eric Liddell (memorialized in Chariots of Fire) dies in Japanese internment camp in China, where he had served as a missionary.

## Roll of Honour – February 21

*Representing their comrades who died on this day*

**1915**

**+GILLESPIE, S**

Royal Irish Rifles, 2nd Btn. B Coy. Rifleman. 4768. Died 21/02/1915. Age 22. Son of the late William George and Annie Gillespie; husband of Maria Adams (formerly Gillespie), of 67, Lanark St., Belfast. Kemmel Chateau Millitary Cemetery, Belgium



**+McKEE, Samuel**

Royal Irish Rifles, B  
Coy. 2nd Btn.  
Rifleman. 5204.  
Died 21/02/1915.  
Age 19. Son of  
Samuel and Ellen  
McKee, of 33,  
Gregg St., Lisburn.  
Loker Churchyard,  
Belgium

Welsh Cemetery  
(Caesar's Nose) is  
located to the North  
of Ypres

**1916**

**+DAVIS, John  
Henry**

RAMC. Lieutenant.  
Died 21/02/1916. Belfast Model School. QCB 1886, MB  
1899. BCh BAO. Son of Robert Davis, Duncairn St., Belfast.  
Died from head and leg injuries after his motorcycle collided  
with a tram. Belfast City Cemetery.

**+DORMAN, Thomas Robert Hobart**

Royal Munster Fusiliers. 2nd Btn. Second Lieutenant. Died  
21/02/1916. Age 21. On the outbreak of the war he joined  
the 4<sup>th</sup> Btn Munster Fusiliers and transferred to the Machine  
Gun Corps in April 1916. Educated at Mourne Grange,  
Marlborough and Royal School Armagh. Son of Richard H



Dorman, a civil engineer. In 1901 the family were living in Ballyards and by 1911 at Tullymore Park, Armagh. Brother of Miss M. Dorman, of 97, Lower Mount St., Dublin. Lens Eastern Communal Cemetery, France

**1917**

**+HILL, Alexander**

RN. Seaman. J21769. HMS Princess Alberta. Died 21/02/1917. Born Ayrshire 09/03/1897. Son of Samuel and Elizabeth Hill and brother of James, Samuel (Killed in action 1915), Mary, David and Elizabeth. His father was originally from Carrickfergus but his mother of Scottish and it was there that all of the Hill children were born. Between 1906 and 1910 the family moved to Carrickfergus and by 1911 were living in the North East Division of Eden. Alexander was by now 14 and had left school to work in the Barn Mills Flax Mill along with his brother Samuel and sister Mary.

In January 1913 Alexander left a job as a farm labourer and joined the Royal Navy as a boy sailor on board Impregnable from 18/01/1913 to 15/09/1913, then Crescent 16/09/1913 to 13/01/1914, Vivid 14/01/1914 to 30/01/1914 and Foresight 31/01/1914 to 20/02/1917. On 09/03/1915, his 18th birthday, he was officially enlisted for a 12 year service at which time his service papers list him as 5 foot 3 inches, brown hair, grey eyes and a fresh complexion. It was also around the time of his 18th birthday that Alexander joined the Carrickfergus Total Abstinence Loyal Orange Lodge 1537.

Throughout his time in the Navy his reports are of a high standard and listed as being of very good character. On 31/12/1916 he is promoted to the rank of Able Seaman

while on board HMS Foresight. It is also while serving onboard Foresight in the Aegean Sea that he is transferred for service on board HMS Princess Alberta. Alberta was a 1586 gross tonne steamer owned by M Langlands & Sons and built in Dundee in 1905. During the war she acted as a fleet messenger carrying messages between ships, fleets bases and commanders. While on a voyage from Styros to Mudros in the Aegean Sea she hit a mine laid by German Sub UC23 (Captained by Johannes Kirchner) and was sunk with the loss of 33 including Alexander. His body was never recovered. Green Sq., Whiteabbey. Joymount - PCI RH. Carrickfergus WM. Plymouth Naval Memorial

### **+McKNIGHT, Tom**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 10th Btn. Second Lieutenant. Died 21/02/1917. Age 28. Born 22/08/1888 in Tullyinksay, near Magherafelt. His father was a farmer. By 1911, his father had died and the family had moved to Belfast. Thomas was working as a shop assistant in a jewellery shop. Son of Matilda McKnight, of 71, Alexandra Park Avenue, Belfast, and the late John McKnight. Berks Cemetery Extension, Belgium. Castledawson WM

### **+QUINN, Michael**

Leinster Regiment. 7th Btn. Lance Corporal. 2497. Died 21/02/1917. Husband to Hannah Quinn, of 5, Cape St., Belfast. Boulogne Eastern Cemetery, France

## **1918**

### **+BELL, William John Albert**

Otago Regiment, 1st Btn. N.Z.E.F. Lance Corporal. 32499.



Died 21/02/1918. Aged 29. Previously wounded three times. Born on 20/11/ 1888 in the Moneymore area. His mother was a hotel keeper in Hanover Square in Coagh. His father was a Sergeant in the Royal Irish Constabulary. Like his father, William joined the Royal Irish Constabulary about 1907. He served for 5 years in Fermanagh and at Brown Square Barracks in Belfast. He resigned and emigrated to New Zealand. He enlisted on 25/07/1916. Son of John and Margaret Arm Bell, of Ballygoney, Coagh, Co. Tyrone. Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. Coagh WM



Welsh Cemetery (Caesar's Nose) is located to the North of Ypres

**+McAIRLEY, Andrew**

Royal Irish Rifles. 15th Btn. Rifleman. 13234. Died 21/02/1918. Age 23. Son of James and Mary McAirley, of Belfast. Also known as Andrew McCairley. UK Book of Remembrance

**1942**

**+BARR, William G.**

Royal Artillery. Gunner. 1679353. Died 21/02/1942. Aged 34. 49 Bty., 48 Lt. A.A. Regt. Son of William and Mary Barr of Londonderry. Jakarta (Ancol) Netherlands Field of Honour, Indonesia

**+BUSTARD, John**

RAFVR. Aircraftman 2nd Class. 1057964. Died 21/02/1942. Aged 19. Son of William John and Mary Bustard of Lambeg. Lambeg Parish churchyard

**+GRANT, Archibald**

Royal Artillery, 8th (Belfast) HAA Regiment, 21 Battery. Bombardier. 1463105. Died 21/02/1942. Aged 36. Born in 1905, he was the son of Dixon Grant and Mary Ann Grant (née Lee) of Saunders Street, Belfast. Dixon Grant served in the Boer War. The couple had an older son, William John Grant who died in France on 05/07/1916 during WW1. Bombardier Grant lived at Chamberlain Street, Belfast, with his wife and young son. He died in a motor accident while training with his regiment in Scotland. Before the war, Archibald played football for Linfield Football Club. His days with the club came during the late 1920s as he played left half-back. He was a member of the Orange Order and of

Royal Black Preceptory No. 322. He also had an involvement with St. Patrick's Young Men's Bible Class. He enlisted in the Supplementary Reserve in 1939 shortly before the outbreak of war. Dundonald Cemetery.

**1943**

**+GRAY, John**

Royal Army Service Corps. Corporal. T/134162. Died 21/02/1943 at a military hospital in Belfast. Age 49. He had served in WW1 and was Mentioned in Despatches. After the war, he worked for the Belfast Water Commissioners, rejoining the army in 1939. Son of Thomas Gray and Elizabeth "Ellen" Gray of 1 Stephen Street, Belfast. Husband to Eleanor Gray of Empire Street, Belfast. The couple had a son, John Thomas "Jack" Gray. Belfast City Cemetery, Glenalina Extension

**+McCLEAN, Eric Thomas Harold**

RAFVR. Flight Sergeant. 1058008. Died 21/02/1943. Age 24. 14 Sqd. Son of Richard McClean, and Elizabeth McClean, Dunmurry, Co. Antrim. Alamein Memorial, Egypt

**+McDERMOTT, Michael**

Royal Irish Fusiliers. 1st Btn. Serjeant. 7042903. Died 21/02/1943. Age 35. The Regimental dairy recorded "On 21/02/1943 1 RIrF with 1st Army on Grandstand Hill. At 0730 Lt-Col TPD Scott assumed command of 38 (Irish) Infantry Brigade and Major BH Butler of 1 RIrF. The Sergeant of Patrol Magic died at 1 Field Ambulance during the morning." Son of Charles and Isabel McDermott, of Londonderry, Northern Ireland; husband to Sarah Josephine



McDermott, of Londonderry. Medjez-El-Bab War Cemetery, Tunisia

**+WALKER, Hamilton**

RAFVR. Flight Sergeant. 1063768. Died 21/02/1943. Aged 20. 14 Sqdn. Son of Samuel and Elizabeth Walker, of Belfast. Alamein Memorial, Column 207, Egypt

**1944**

**+DUNCAN, William Garfield**

RAFVR. Flight Sergeant. 1105973. 97 Sqdn. Died 21/02/1944. Aged 26. Son of Samuel Adam Duncan and Maud Duncan of Lisburn. Derriaghy (Christ Church) Church of Ireland Churchyard

**1945**

**+KANE, James**

Irish Guards, 3rd Btn. Lance Corporal. 2717050. Died 21/02/1945. Age 36. He joined the army about 1931. On 21/02/1945, the 3rd Battalion of the Irish Guards were south of . They attacked southwards from the village of Hassum towards Schanz. They encountered extremely strong enemy opposition and thirty seven soldiers of the battalion were killed on this day including Lance Corporal Kane. Born on 14/05/1911 in the Fivemiletown area. Son of Patrick and Mary Kane. Patrick Kane was an agricultural labourer who moved around the Fivemiletown area, working for various farmers. Milsbeek War Cemetery, Netherlands.  
Fivemiletown WM

## VETERAN

### CAIRNS, James John

Lieutenant, 31st Batt., Australian Imperial Force. Died: 21/02/1926. Age: 48. James John Cairns was born in Blackfriars, Glasgow, in 1878, the eldest son of James Cairns, a police constable (later an inspector) and his wife Mary Cairns nee McKeown, who came from Belfast.

After school he became a law clerk for the Glasgow corporation. Some time between 1911 and 1913 he emigrated to Australia where he met his wife Letitia Ford. They married in 1914 and their son James Ford Cairns was born later that year.

He enlisted with the Australian Imperial Force on 5th July 1915. Rising through the ranks he was transferred to the Officer Cadet School in England in April 1917 gaining the rank of Lieutenant by the end of that year.

His relatively respectable career started to go into decline when the war ended being arrested for drunkenness in Belfast in January 1919 and came to an abrupt end when he was cashiered later that year for misappropriating funds.

He left France and turned up in Kenya where he died on 21/02/1926. Aged 48.

His son James Ford Cairns became a well-known Australian politician who was for a while Deputy Prime Minister. In his biography there is an overview of his father's life and career. Family Memorial, Bangor cemetery

# Every day is a Remembrance Day

***We will remember them***

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masthead.**

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

**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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