

Ballyhaunis emigrant ended up hero of Vietnam War

Some Irish-born soldiers who gave their lives in combat are less remembered than others. About a dozen Irish men died in the Vietnam War. Among them was Patrick Gallagher from Mayo.

Everyone knew him as "Bob" though his real name was Patrick. He was the second eldest of nine children born to Mary and Peter Gallagher. They lived at Derrintogher, three miles from Ballyhaunis in co. Mayo. His mother Mary still lives there.

When he was 18 years of age Patrick went to his aunts on Long Island in New York. The prospects for a young man in the Ireland of 1962 were limited. There were few jobs, education was expensive and not many could afford to go to secondary school. Patrick had done well at the Vocational School in Ballyhaunis, however America beckoned, bright young men could do well there so Patrick followed in the footsteps of so many others from that part of Ireland.

In the US he got a job in real estate and started law school. He was interested in politics and canvassed for Bobby Kennedy. In February 1966 Patrick returned to Ballyhaunis for three weeks. He didn't tell his family then that he had been drafted into the US Marines and would be off to Vietnam on his return to the US. He didn't want to worry them. He went to Vietnam in April and on July 18th 1966 he saved the lives of three comrades there. Four of them had been manning a defence post at Cam Lo near the border with North Vietnam when it was attacked by Communist forces. Patrick kicked a grenade out of their position before it exploded and as the citation for the Navy Cross he was later awarded read "another enemy grenade followed and landed in the position between two of his comrades. Without hesitation, in a valiant act of self sacrifice, Corporal Gallagher threw himself upon the deadly grenade in order to absorb the explosion and save the lives of his comrades" As the three other marines ran to safety two further grenades landed in the position and exploded "miraculously injuring nobody". Patrick's squad leader ordered him to throw the grenade he was lying on into a nearby river. It exploded on hitting the water.

"Through his extraordinary heroism and inspiring valour in the face of almost certain death, he saved his comrades from probably injury and possible loss of life" the citation continued. He was awarded the Marine's highest honour, the Navy Cross and promoted. "It is a pleasure to pin this on your breast" said Gen Westmoreland commander of all US forces in Vietnam at the awards ceremony. In Washington the military authorities decided to award Patrick the US forces highest honour, the Congressional Medal of Honour. He did not live to receive it.

His bravery meant Patrick had to tell his family he was in Vietnam. He waited until the very last minute. On January 28th 1967 he wrote home. He had just heard that day about the award and that they were likely to be notified so he thought he would

let them know before they read it in the press". He began the letter " I hope you won't be too mad at me for the news I got for you. When I was at home last year I had my orders for Vietnam when I went back to the US. I have been in Vietnam since last April 1966 and I will be leaving here in 60 days. Now don't get worried, everything is just fine here and I am enjoying it very much..

News of this local here caused great excitement in Ireland. It was all over the radio and TV. RTE sent Sean Duignan to interview the family and great plans were laid for Patrick's homecoming. On the day he was to arrive, they buried him instead. On 30th March 1967 he was shot dead while on patrol in Da Nang. He was 23. The American embassy in Dublin contacted Father Rushe, parish priest in Ballyhaunis. He told Patrick's parents following that Sunday's mass.

His remains were sent back to Ireland in a large casket accompanied by US Marine Sgt. Gerry Moylan – the funeral was one of largest ever seen in Ballhaunis. There was a poignant scene as Staff Sgt. Moylan laid a wreath on the grave on behalf of the US forces and then presented the American flag, which draped the coffin, the Navy Cross insignia and the citation to Mrs Gallagher, mother of the deceased.

At the graveside were other mothers who lost sons in Vietnam, Mr and Mrs Nevin, Brize, Balla, Co Mayo whose son Christopher (29) was killed in Vietnam in February 1966 and Mrs Mary Freyne, Church St. Ballaghaderreen whose son Corporal Bernard (Brian og) Freyne 21 was killed in Vietnam about a month before.

By then the Gallagher family had received a letter from Bobby Kennedy, dated 10th April he wrote, "Winston Churchill said, "courage is rightly esteemed as the first of all human qualities because it is the one that guarantees all others". This courage Corporal Gallagher gave to all of us. To him and to his family are due the thanks of a humbly grateful nation. Within 14 months he too would be dead from gunshot wounds as well.

Four Mayo men were killed in the Korean War,

Michael Fitzpatrick, P.F.C. 23rd Infantry regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, Whiting Indiana. Native of Cappagh, Claremorris, Mayo. -- KIA North Korea 18th August 1951

Michael Gannon, Dooniver, CPL 15th Field Artillery Bt, 2nd Infantry Division, Cleveland Ohio, native of Achill, Co. Mayo KIA 14th August 1927.

Michael Patrick Hardiman PVT E-2, 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry division, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, native of Ballaghaderreen, Co. Mayo KIA 22nd September 1926

Mark James Brennan, SGT U.S Army 78th AAA Battalion, Greenwich, Connecticut, native of Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo Died in Air Crash 10th July 1929.