

Paddy Horkan M.M.Award, World War One Veteran **Old IRA Veteran**

Paddy Horkan, the best known of the Horkan family, who lived with his wife Sarah and *family in* Spencer Street, Castlebar for many years left to work in Coventry in 1915 as a very young man. He joined the army to fight in the First World War on hearing the propoganda that small nations were being overrun, churches burned, priests hung and nuns raped.

Little is recorded in the Horkan family history of the early years of the century. However, their neighbour and friend, Michael Mullen, spoke to Paddy of his early years in Castlebar and of his involvement in the First World War. He trained with the British Army on Salisbury Plain and, having received basic training, set out in convoy for Le Havre in France. Paddy had enlisted with the 14th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment. It was with this group he saw active service. His engineering skills were used to good effect for along with trench warfare, his duties also included keeping roads opened and maintained for the army tanks. In Michael Mullen's account, Paddy Horkan, speaks of carrying a 78 lbs. pack on his back, gun in hand, as he marched 35 kilometers a day until he reached the town of Albert. It was at Albert that Paddy had his first encounter with war. He remembered the waterlogged trenches and the preparations to go 'over the top' as dawn came over the east. A barrage of guns thirty miles behind the lines announced the start of the charge. It threw a wall of protection in front of them and softened up the enemy. With the sound of 'advance!' ringing in their ears and a tot of rum in their stomachs, the soldiers moved out into no man's land, running from shellhole to shellhole, the sound of bullets whizzing over their heads. As Paddy said: 'One never thought of death at these moments. There was a small parcel of scarred earth to be won and the quiet streets of Castlebar were far, far away. In those battles an entire generation of young men was almost wiped out.'

Paddy was wounded three times in the bitter fighting and after being patched up in the field hospital each time he again returned to the front. At the clearing stations on the way to hospital, he remembered the pyramid of corpses waiting to be buried. It was at the advance at Arras that Paddy Horkan won the Military Medal for bravery in the field. His battalion was cut off and seeing the wounded about him, he volunteered to carry them to a place of safety. The action was carried out under heavy fire and Paddy took shrapnel in the thigh. The history of the Worcestershire Regiment carries a graphic account of this engagement in their annals of 'The Battle of Arleux,' making particular reference to the part played by Paddy Horkan: '303363 Pte. Horkan P. awarded the Military Medal at Gavrelle. On the morning of the 29th, the men of the Coy. to which Pte. Horkan belonged, whilst advancing over the open to a fresh position, were caught in enemy barrage. Several men were wounded and were consequently left on the top without cover. Pte. Horkan, a stretcher-bearer, showed great courage and devotion to duty in getting to those men under enemy fire, tending their wounds and eventually bringing them under cover. He himself was wounded but returned to duty after getting the men to the dressing station and having his own wound attended. When the award was announced, Paddy Horkan was again wounded and recovering in the hospital at French Pearl, where he received letters of congratulations from his commanding officers. His Medical Officer, D. Matther, Captain, R.A.M.S., wrote: "I cannot say how pleased I was to hear that your bravery has been rewarded and that you got the Military Medal. In your case it represents devotion to duty, courage in the face of the greatest danger and it becomes more precious than gold. I send you my heartiest congratulations and as your Medical Officer my sincerest thanks. I trust you will soon be back with us when I shall feel it an honour to shake your hand." High praise indeed for the man from Castlebar.

In his account, Michael Mullen's says: 'A silver medal with a faded ribbon commemorates this display of bravery by Paddy Horkan, 303363, on the battle front at Arras some eighty years ago. Paddy spent three years in this theatre of war and he was there for the final advance when America entered the war. And there is another medal which celebrates final victory. It bears the legend that Paddy Horkan had fought in the Great War for Civilisation. He was wounded three times. He was lucky. He was alive at the end of this holocaust. He was demobbed at Owestry in Wales and given the choice of a Henry Martin suit or thirty shillings. He took the thirty shillings, ten shillings for each year.' Paddy returned to Castlebar for a rest. The rest was of short duration. Peter Hynes and Michael McHugh approached him to join 'the boys' and teach them military tactics. But that story is for another day.

In October 2003 Paddy Horkan's son Sean visited the Island of Ireland Peace Park and he writes " it made all we have read about the great war very real, visiting its lovely Irish Round Tower and seeing in the records there that a Patrick Horkan of Swinford and a Patrick Horkan of Foxford were killed in action and are buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in the Ypres Salient. How fortunate are we and our Horkan clan that our father Patrick Horkan of Castlebar came through that great conflict and made it home after that Great War. Looking out on the beautiful landscape and the Flanders Fields sweeping away from the Messines Ridge the sight of this Irish Peace Park, the lines of the John McCrae Poem "In Flanders Field" came very much alive.