

**In Memory of
Second Lieutenant HUGH MAGUIRE**

**3rd Bn., Connaught Rangers, attd. 7th Bn., Royal
Inniskilling Fusiliers
Who died age 24
On 09 September 1916
Second Lieutenant MAGUIRE, Son of Conor
Maguire M.D. and Florence Maguire, of Claremorris,
Co. Mayo.**

**Remembered with honour
THIEPVAL MEMORIAL**

Extracts from many letters to his parents and family:

I hope all the family are well, and all enjoying their holidays. I'll take mine when the war is over, or before that if I can get them. After all, this is what I joined for and if I get it in the neck will have only myself to thank for it. Nobody asked or urged me to join so I can truly say in the words of John Dillon "alone I did it".

These are the words of Hugh O'Neill Maguire, Lieutenant, 3rd Battalion, Connaught Rangers, writing to his mother, just after he had arrived at what he liked to call "the back of the Front", on 3 August 1916. The Great War, the war he was fighting in France, killed 13 million people, and changed the world forever.

Early Life

Hugh was born in 1892, the third of four surviving boys. Two elder brothers, Brian and Frank, died in infancy and early teens respectively. His father, Dr Conor Maguire, was medical officer for the Claremorris district. Conor Maguire was one of the original founders of the Gaelic League, and a close friend of both Douglas Hyde and Padraic Pearse. His wife was Florence O'Neill, sister of Fr George O'Neill, SJ,

War Recruitment

On 20 September 1914, at Wooden Bridge, Co. Wicklow, John Redmond urged his supporters to volunteer for the British army. Whether he did this because he actually believed that Britain was fighting "in defence of right, of freedom and of religion", or not, it was the best tactical move available to him in his fight for Home Rule. The result was that between January and August 1915, a further 37,000 did so. In the following eight months, a disproportionate number – about half – came from Ulster. Leinster supplied more than a quarter, with Munster and Connaught providing relatively few. These recruitment figures provide a clue to public opinion. Ireland provided less than half as many recruits, proportionately, as England, Scotland and Wales. If one allows for Unionist recruits from Ulster and Leinster, and attributes some of the Dublin working-class recruitment to sheer economic necessity, it could be argued that enthusiasm for the war was never as widespread in nationalist Ireland as the media suggested.

In the Trenches

Hugh says about the trenches:

This dug-out is infested with rats and mice and other beings not spoken of in the best society. We lived in a deep dug-out but the accommodation below was rather limited so that we slept in a bundle as it were. It rained a bit the last two days so that the trenches were at least ankle deep in water. Conditions like this caused Trench-foot, where the soldiers' feet rotted because they were kept in water so long. The same problem was encountered by the British army as recently as the Falklands war: a fully waterproof boot for soldiers has only recently been invented. He told his uncle towards the end of August:

Trench warfare in general is not the sort of game that would appeal to a person who liked to feel clean and tidy as you generally feel very dirty, untidy and unwashed –which you really are. It must be really awful in the winter time.

“Please Don’t Show This to Mother”

When Hugh wrote to his father about his experience of living under fire, he wrote across the top of the letter, “Please don’t show this to mother”:

I don’t know whether you are the most warlike of the family or not or whether little details of life in the firing line interest you. Well to begin with the smallest –i.e. the bullet. It passes you by something like the crack of a whip exactly. You can tell by the loudness of it whether it has passed close or not and it’s the one you don’t hear does the trick. Bullets passing high over create a sort of whizzing sound. Rifle or machine gun fire in the distance goes something like tapping on a board. In the open, rifle fire, no matter how close, does not affect your ears and is surprisingly silent. Of course I’ve had experience of it before so it’s nothing new for me here. Next comes the rifle and hand grenades. You can generally see them coming and if you’re quick get under cover. They go off with a pretty bang and pieces fly in all directions.

Then there are the trench mortars of various sorts and sizes. You can also see them on the way but when they burst they make a hell of a row and it’s not particularly good for one’s health to be near them. Aerial torpedoes are something the same but rather more rowdy. To come to the artillery. The field gun shell (about three and a half feet) is a pretty hefty piece. You can hear them quite distinctly passing over with a “whizz” and they go “bang” on landing. They are popularly called “whizz-bangs”. One burst within three feet of me today but luckily on the top of the parapet. I was covered with dust and bits of chalk and a bit shaken, winded by the explosion, but otherwise unhurt. I could not believe that I had escaped for a few minutes but I was not even scratched. It put the wind up me, as we say, for a few minutes.

His parents received was a telegram from Chem.’s Office in London:

Deeply regret to inform you that 2nd Lt. H. Maguire Connaught Rangers was killed in action 9th September. The army Council express their sympathy. Kindly notify Casualties War office full name address and relationship next of kin to this office. Secretary War Office.

There are various accounts of the battle in which Hugh died.

According to his cousin Brian, who went to the front a few days after Hugh was killed:

Hugh got over the parapet and advanced a good distance when they came under heavy machine gun fire so they started making rushes from shell hole to shell hole. At last Hugh told them to make a final rush, and on giving them the word, jumped up from the hole. He immediately fell forward, struck in the chest by a machine gun bullet.

About a year passed before Hugh’s parents heard such detailed accounts of the terrible event which had devastated their family. A soldier in Hugh’s platoon wrote to the dead man’s father, while he was on leave:

Well, dear sir, as regards your son’s death, he died very happy. He was shot through the right

lung and right thigh. He never spoke one word. He was unconscious until he died, which only lasted II minutes. He never felt any pain. I held him in my arms until he died. I closed his eyes and crossed his arms and then left him, but I could not tell you anything about his burial. But as soon as I go back I will search the graves and see if I can find any trace of him and then I will let you know. I knew your son only for about 2 months. He was very quiet and never troubled himself much about things, which he was greatly liked for by the men that was under him. Well now dear sir I think I have told you all that I can and yourself and Mrs Maguire may rest quite contented. He died a lovely death you could see it on his face. And I am. very thankful to you Sir for your present of £1 which I received. And I hope now that Mrs. Maguire will take everything all right and not fret about him for he is happy thank God. I will close now hoping that my letter will please you both. I remain yours, obediently, Pte. T. Leary.

Hugh's mother, Florence, never recovered from his death, and it was said that she never smiled again. Hugh's grave was never found. He is commemorated, with more than 70,000 other British soldiers who died on the Somme and have no known grave, on the Thiepval Memorial.

By Roderick Maguire (1995)

In April 1994, Roderick Maguire gave his Poetry Academy paper 'on the short life and wartime experiences of his grand-uncle Hugh (1909) killed on the Somme in September 1916. This account based on the family collection, of Hugh Maguire letters from the front, vividly evokes the reality of life in the trenches during "the war to end all wars" .