

World War II and the New York Irish

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

Most histories of the immigrant Irish families that settled in New York City tell a familiar story. Usually a pioneer member of the family arrives sometime in the nineteenth century and sets up a pattern of emigration from the old country that continues from one generation to the next. Siblings follow siblings, nieces and nephews follow aunts and uncles, cousins follow cousins, friends follow friends, and the pattern repeats itself from one era to the next. But major events occur and interrupt that continuity, and of all these events none is more disruptive to established patterns than the outbreak of war. The Second World War was, for several years, anticipated by New Yorkers of Irish background, and it was from the standpoint of both American and Irish

politics that they watched it approach. The war changed some of the city's oldest Irish institutions, like the old 69th Regiment and the Carmelite Church, Our Lady of the Scapular. It cut completely the Atlantic road that connected America and Ireland. The Irish of New York City adapted to the changes as best they could, but when it was all over it was a changing if not changed city.

BEFORE AND AFTER WORLD WAR I

In the mid-nineteenth century, following the catastrophe of the Great Hunger, New York's

Its the 4th Week
For New York's Own
Fightin' Irish!

BOY, HOW
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GOING
FOR

JAMES CAGNEY
PAT O'BRIEN
GEORGE BRENT

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BROS. SUCCESS

IN PERSON PAUL WHITEMAN
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Irish community had few institutions that portrayed positive images of themselves. One institution that proved an exception was the 69th Regiment, a unit of the state militia. When the American Civil War broke out, the unit was rushed to the front where, over the course of the next few years, it established a record of which any of America's ethnic communities would be enormously proud. And the Regiment became synonymous with the Irish. No American military unit had as strong a connection to an ethnic group as did New York's 69th Regiment despite several attempts by government and military authorities to change it. In the 1930s, its regimental headquarters was not only a military gathering place, but a gathering place for

leaders of the Irish social societies. When recruits were needed, the Regiment turned to officers of the Irish organizations to steer into their ranks their young and fit members. It was not just on St. Patrick's Day that the 69th represented the Irish community. Its ranks included hundreds of members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the *Clan na Gael*, and individual organizations of the thirty-two Irish county organizations and dozens of other Irish groups.

The Irish community in New York responded loyally when America entered

Illustration:
In 1940 a film depicting New York's 69th Regiment in World War I played to large crowds in the New York City theaters. During that War, the unit was officially renamed the "165th Infantry," but "69th Regiment" endured as the more popular designation.
Courtesy of
John T. Ridge.

With the Fighting Irish Somewhere on the Pacific

By **BILL FEALEY**



BILL FEALEY

Although the attention of our readers and friends is presently centered on the latest happenings in the Pacific theatre of operations, especially the campaign in the Marshall Islands, we are sure that they will enjoy reading the following article which was written by Coast Guardsman Everett L. Garner. During the operations in the Gilbert Islands, Garner served aboard a Coast Guard transport, which landed the 3rd (Shamrock) Battalion of the 69th on the shores of Makin Atoll. Here is his story:

IT WAS AN IRISHMAN'S FIGHT

By **EVERETT L. GARNER**

Combat Correspondent, Pacific Area

This Coast Guard transport has spear-headed its third invasion. Africa and Sicily were the first two. Down near the belt of the world recently she landed the shamrock battalion, "Fighting 69th" of the 165th Infantry, on the coral studded beaches of Makin.

Illustration:

Bill Fealey's column in the Irish Advocate was a remarkable chronicle of the 69th Regiment (165th Infantry) from before the attack on Pearl Harbor through the entire war. He also united, through words, friends and families on the home front and with servicemen on the firing line. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

World War I in 1917. No unit represented the Irish more than the New York 69th, the "Fighting Irish." The 69th (renamed the 165th) rendered extraordinary service, and its leaders such as Colonel "Wild Bill" Donovan and Chaplain Father Francis Duffy became symbols of Irish-American valor and patriotism for the entire country. However, just before the outbreak of World War I a battle had been waged between the officers of the old 69th and the military and political leaders in Albany and Washington over the retention of the Regiment's distinctive Irish character. There was no other ethnic unit like the 69th in America. That made it different and consequently somewhat mistrusted by pro-British leaders preparing the military for participation in the European war. For America and the 69th, that entry into the war came only one year after the attempted Rising in Dublin in 1916. In the aftermath of this rebellion, many New York Irish-Americans harbored anti-British sympathies which, in turn, led American army

leaders to try making the 69th less ethnic, less Irish.

At first, army high command attempted to remove old officers of the Regiment and replace them with men from the regular army, but soon infusions of new recruits from all ethnic backgrounds diluted the old Irish character of the unit. Yet, the changes were never severe enough to fundamentally alter the traditional composition of the 69th. When the war ended and the unit reverted to state control, the old recruiting ethnic patterns were reinstated in the 1920s and 1930s. In the years between the wars, the armory on Lexington Avenue was once again the scene of Irish activities, social events, musical evenings and entertainments, even formal military reviews by officers of the Irish county organizations from whose ranks many of the new recruits came.

BEFORE PEARL HARBOR

In 1938 the 69th Regiment attended the annual memorial mass in commemoration

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**Photo:**

Carroll O'Connor, later to become a film and television star, was the grandson of Irish Advocate owner John O'Connor. As a nineteen-year old cadet from the Merchant Marine Academy, before America entered the war, he had already made several dangerous convoy voyages to bring supplies to Europe. After the war, he wrote his own weekly column for the newspaper.

Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

of Washington's Birthday at Holy Cross Church on West 42nd Street, where Father Joseph A. McCaffrey, who had succeeded Father Duffy as pastor as well as the chaplain of the famed Regiment, summed up the isolationist sentiment of many New York Irish at the time:

*"Certainly, the last war should be a lesson to us, summed up in the homely phrase, Mind your own business," said Father McCaffrey. "Certainly, those of us who went to war do not want to go again. There is no honor, no glory in killing our fellow man. We may have to go to war, it is true, but let it be a war of defense only. We should protect our boundaries and that is all we should try to protect. Let us stay out of war, protect ourselves and use every means of preparation for self-protection."*¹

Events in Europe kept intruding on those who wished to isolate America from the growing threat of war. The menace of Nazism was clear to see in its rearmament of Germany, while the Soviet Union promoted

its own program of world revolution with a build-up of its military. The New York Irish community like the rest of America had its extremes of right and left that became more evident as war broke out in Europe in September, 1939.

The interventionist Roosevelt administration in Washington was not happy with the independently minded 69th Regiment and its anti-war and anti-British attitudes. With Britain under attack, any group that advocated neutrality now became the object of government investigation—or worse. In January, 1940, the Federal Bureau of Investigation swooped down in a series of coordinated raids to arrest eighteen individuals, several of whom, including a captain and two sergeants, were active members of the 69th Regiment of the New York National Guard. The chief accusation against these individuals was that they had plotted "to seize control of the United States Government." Several of the accused were members of the Christian Front, a loosely-organized group of supporters of Father Charles E. Coughlin, the so-called "radio priest," whose fiery anti-Roosevelt broadcasts had made him a national and highly controversial figure. The Christian Front was mainly centered in the Northeast and spent much of its time in street demonstrations which sometimes resulted in bloody confrontations with local leftists. The trial became known as the "Christian Front" case, or less frequently the "sedition" case.²

The trial and its consequences stretched over a year before all the defendants, less one who had committed suicide in the interim, were acquitted of all charges. Captain John Prout, the highest ranked officer of the 69th, and the other members of Regiment also faced court martial proceedings, but these charges were also found to be without merit. The case was long and complicated one, and some observers considered the entire process to have been little more than a government inspired warning shot to the isolationists that the time for opposition was over. Certainly, the message carried deep into the ranks of the 69th as all the

accused members of the Regiment were consequently dismissed from the unit.³

In the aftermath of the trial, an interesting perspective on the inner working of the Regiment was provided by the New York Irish weekly newspaper, the *Irish Advocate*, which carried a column written by Bill Fealy, nephew of the owner and publisher of the paper, Co. Kerry native John C. O'Connor. Although a native New Yorker, Fealy was so immersed in the cultural and social life of Irish New York that he was as knowledgeable as any native of Ireland about its history and customs. His column in the *Irish Advocate* was initially a light-hearted look at the social life of the individuals and organizations that constituted Irish New York, but in 1941 he was called up for federal service when the 69th was called up for military training at various camps in the South. Corporal Fealy, nevertheless, continued his column, reporting on his fellow soldiers of the 69th, many of whom were familiar figures in the city's Irish social life. Fealy reported events with an amazing frankness and independence indicating just how firmly he and his fellow Irish differed from the regular army brass. He vehemently opposed what he felt was a deliberate effort to swamp the Regiment with non-Irish draftees:

This type of trainee is being sent to the 69th purposely in order to eliminate the Irish traits of the Regiment and is causing much discontent among the Irish and Catholics of the 69th. The 69th is and will remain an Irish Regiment, despite the presence of these "undesirables." Yes, we have gotten a few Irish trainees, but not as many as we would have liked. Many members of the Regiment think something should be done about the problem and protest against the assigning of "undesirables" to the 69th.⁴

There existed within the Regiment an association of soldiers, headed by a Limerick-born private determined to keep the Irish traditions of the 69th alive "and

TO THE IRISH BOYS OF NEW YORK

Company "D" of the Fighting 69th offers a few real men an opportunity to associate themselves with others of Irish blood in joining this famous regiment. Call any Friday or Monday evening at 68 Lexington Avenue, and ask for Captain Baker.

close to the hearts of all who wear the far-famed green insignia, regardless of their racial extraction before they became Irish by adoption."⁵ The association traced its origins to an incident in 1939 while the Regiment was in training at Plattsburgh, New York, when an Irish harp flag was ordered to be taken down from the roof of a barracks. Sgt. Michael Tierney, who had started his soldiering career back in Tipperary in 1914 with the Irish Volunteers and had known rebels such as Sean Treacy and Dan Breen, seized the flag and led a protest parade down the company street.⁶

Just three months before Pearl Harbor, Fealy wrote of the indignation in the 69th when Chaplain Joseph M. Egan was "transferred to another unit because he wasn't British enough to suit certain high officers." The chaplain also sympathized with the men of the Regiment in their desire to go home after their required period of service had ended, and his expressed opinion that American soldiers should never be sent overseas to fight for some foreign cause. According to Fealy:

The popular chaplain also met with disfavor, when he took the side of a non-commissioned officer who said he would never fight on the side of England. The soldier was ordered reduced to private and assigned to a labor battalion. Through Father Egan's intervention, the order was squashed. Later, the same soldier was requested by higher-ups to put in for a transfer to another regiment. This he has refused to do, and with

Illustration:

In 1937, the 69th Regiment advertised in the Irish Advocate for recruits for its Company D, the "most Irish" of all its companies. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

IRELAND NEED YOUR HELP NOW TO PRESERVE HER FROM INVASION!



Come to the MASS MEETING
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23, at 2 P. M.
MANHATTAN CENTER

PROMINENT SPEAKERS WILL TELL WHY
Eire Needs Your Help

The urgency of Ireland's situation is reflected in cable dispatches from Dublin:
EAMONN DE VALERA, IRISH PREMIER
— SAYS —
“The Irish want neither an old master nor a new one.” (Oct. 5).
“There is a high probability that Eire will be involved in the war.” (Oct. 19).
“The Irish must be ready to defend themselves to the death against whomever may become the aggressor.” (Nov. 2)

Entertainment by outstanding Irish Artists
GENERAL ADMISSION: FREE RESERVED SEATS: 50 CENTS
Sponsored by
AMERICAN FRIENDS OF IRISH NEUTRALITY
112 PARK AVENUE NEW YORK, N. Y.
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FILL OUT THIS COUPON NOW

I enclose \$..... to be used in furthering the cause of Irish Neutrality:
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112 PARK AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

many other Irish-American soldiers of the 69th, is continuing his fight against the British and un-American control of the army and the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic activities now going on in the army and elsewhere.⁷

Government declaration of war against Japan. When the country or one of its possessions is attacked, political and other subjects are forgotten, and the nation stands united in support of our government.¹⁰

Illustration:
The American Friends of Irish Neutrality in 1941 tried to help Ireland preserve strict neutrality in the face of the war in Europe. After Pearl Harbor the organization immediately self-liquidated. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Father Egan was transferred back into the 69th by late October, 1941, but the War Department came down strongly on dissidents, prohibiting publication of the regimental newspaper bulletin and ordering all members of the 27th Division, to which the Regiment was attached, to “cease anti-British remarks and writings.”⁸ Bill Fealy wrote happily in his column that they had scored another victory against these “un-American schemers in the Army.” Furthermore, he stated that “the men of the 69th Regiment have no desire or intention of fighting alongside British troops and their comrades from Communist Russia....”⁹ But after Pearl Harbor, everything changed. Fealy wrote in late December, 1941:

The members of the 69th Regiment stationed at Fort McClellan, Ala., are 100 percent behind the U.S.

IRISH NEUTRALITY

The new Free State of Ireland, composed of the twenty-six counties of southern Ireland, changed leadership in 1932 when Eamon DeValera became its leader. The War for Irish Independence had extended the legacy of strife between Ireland and Britain, and between the political parties in southern Ireland which were still deeply wounded by the scars of the Irish Civil War. DeValera was strongly resolved to yield no more sovereignty to the United Kingdom and to win back control of several still occupied Irish naval ports. Only a short time before war broke out between Britain and Germany the Irish ports were given up, but the u-boat war in the Atlantic threatened Britain's lifeline. The ports and neutrality of Ireland again became an issue for the British government

and their American political allies. The DeValera government argued that anything less than complete impartiality in the war compromised Ireland's fledgling independence.

In January, 1941, the American Friends of Irish Neutrality was formed in New York City, and shortly afterward, Paul O'Dwyer, brother of the future New York mayor and a prominent Irish political and cultural leader, became its national chairman. The organization worked closely with the Irish Consulate in New York to regularly hold rallies where speakers, including notables like writer Liam O'Flaherty, author of *The Informer*, strongly condemned any threat to the neutrality of the Irish Free State. By May, the organization claimed over twenty-thousand members in the Eastern United States.¹¹ A month later, more than, three-thousand members of Irish societies bearing the banners of all of the county societies and other kindred groups paraded through Manhattan streets before entering St. Patrick's Cathedral where Cardinal Francis J. Spellman celebrated a mass for Irish neutrality.¹²

AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

Although America still remained officially neutral, the war was having direct effect on the New York Irish community. Marie Doherty, one of three sisters who were popular performers at Irish venues, particularly in Irishtown in Rockaway, wrote in her weekly column in the *Irish Advocate* about one such event:

*I would like to thank each and every one who extended sympathy on the death of 12 of our relatives killed in an air raid at Clydebank, Scotland. Frank Doherty (brother of my father) and his 9 children were killed, his wife is badly injured, and in the hospital. Rose Doherty (niece of my father) was killed. Her mother Margaret Doherty is seriously injured. Miss Grace Mulhern (a sister of my mother) was also killed.*¹³

Luftwaffe attacks had mistakenly bombed Dublin and vicinity on at least two occasions, and in late May another attack killed twenty-four people. The u-boat war reduced the availability of some food products in Ireland. In response, one New York shipping company advertised that ten pounds of ham would be delivered guaranteed anywhere in Ireland from Dublin for \$5.95, or the same amount of bacon for \$7.50.¹⁴ Perhaps the most sought after commodity was tea. Two pounds for \$1.75, or five pounds for \$4.00, could be sent to the old country by the exporter Garrettson & Son, Front Street, Manhattan. The department



store, Hearn's, with branches at 14th Street and at 149th Street and 3rd Avenue in the South Bronx, boasted of eight-thousand successful deliveries of food parcels of various kinds of rationed goods to Ireland.¹⁵

Irish societies came together for a benefit administered by the Red Cross for members of a group known as Ulster Victims of Aerial Warfare at the end of May, 1941. Another group, the Aid to Ireland Committee, whose members wore buttons with name of their group on their lapels, placed collection boxes in taverns and restaurants around New York.¹⁶

In response to the near total failure of the Irish wheat crop, an old cargo ship, the *Leda* (of Panamanian registry) was purchased by the Irish government to transport eight-thousand tons of wheat. Brightly painted in green, white, and orange, it was the first ship to bear the Irish flag from a United States port since the establishment of the Irish Free State when it sailed from Brooklyn's Bush Terminal for an undisclosed Irish destination in July, 1941.¹⁷

Photo:

Marie Doherty (center) and her sisters performed a military-style dancing act at Irish cabarets and especially in Irishtown in Rockaway. In April, 1941, she wrote in her *Irish Advocate* column about the loss of twelve family members in a Nazi bombing raid in Scotland. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



**Hurry!
Hurry!
Hurry!**

THE END of September is in sight. And the end of September brings us close to the end of the 3rd War Loan drive. If you haven't bought \$100 worth of extra War Bonds—extra, mind you—dig up that money and buy your share today!

Men who are fighting for you . . . bleeding for you . . . ready to die for you . . . are waiting for the news that you people at home are backing them up 100%.

They know what invasion costs in blood and lives. They know, too, what it costs in equipment, munitions, supplies, that must reach the front in a never-ending stream. And they're counting on you for the money that goes to keep that stream flowing.

No matter what you have to sacrifice . . . no matter how much it pinches . . . you cannot let them down!

They're calling on you to hurry, hurry, hurry! Get that \$100 extra into War Bonds before the drive is over.

3RD WAR LOAN

BACK THE ATTACK... WITH WAR BONDS

SPONSORED BY

JAMES A. GLENNON 916 THIRD AVE., N. Y. C.	PAT SHEEHAN 1475 & 1497 THIRD AVE., N.Y.C.
PATRICK JOSEPH O'REILLY (O'REILLY BROS.) 829 Third Ave. N.Y.C.	KANE & McCOY— PALMS RESTAURANT 885 THIRD AVE., N.Y.C.

Illustration:
Throughout the war, Irish restaurant and tavern owners sponsored advertisements promoting the various war bond drives such as this one in the *Irish Advocate* during 1943. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Additional cargo ships were later added to transport supplies across the Atlantic, creating the first small fleet of the Irish merchant marine.

In the final months of 1941, it was announced that several hundred members of the 69th Regiment would be released sometime in December or January from military service owing to expiration of their enlistments or they had reached age twenty-eight. Columnist Bill Fealy, with the Regiment in Alabama, wrote to his friend entertainer Peter McNulty that he expected to be home for Christmas and released from the service a few weeks later.¹⁸

On the night before Pearl Harbor, December 6, 1941, the Sligo Ladies Association celebrated at the Innisfail Ballrooms in midtown while the United Irish Counties Auxiliary Dance with Paddy Killoran was at the Hotel Abbey. The Clare Ramblers danced at the Tuxedo Ballroom, and the Rathmore (Co. Kerry) Social Club danced at the Star O' Munster Ballroom in the South Bronx. The next day, December

7th, the Philo Celtic Society, one of two societies in the city offering free instruction in the Irish language, was scheduled to hold its regular Sunday evening *ceili* at the Central Opera House at East 67th Street, but with the shocking news of the Pearl Harbor attack, it was not to be. An editorial a few days later in the *Irish Advocate* sought to calm the Irish community:

*The war with Japan and Germany which we are just entering, will naturally affect the routine of life and business of all our undertakings. We just can't tell what time will bring forth. There is no reason to be unduly worried and should go on, as near as possible, with our social activities, our works of charity and the passing everyday work to sustain our homes and those dependent on us for their livelihood.*¹⁹

The American Friends of Irish Neutrality almost immediately closed its headquarters on Park Avenue and announced the dissolution of the organization. Dozens of Irish societies, including the umbrella group for the individual Irish counties societies, the United Irish Counties, pledged themselves to the war effort through the purchase of defense bonds. Whatever anti-war feeling that had been present in the 69th Regiment immediately vanished. Bill Fealy wrote that “when this country or any of its possessions is attacked, political and other subjects are forgotten, and the nation stands united in support of our government.”²⁰

Three thousand members and guests of the New York County Ancient Order of Hibernians at their annual dinner six days after Pearl Harbor honored the memory Captain Colin P. Kelly, Jr., killed after the bombing of the Japanese battleship *Haruna*, with a ceremony where a bugler sounded taps, followed by the solemn recitation of the pledge of allegiance.²¹ Another military man to fall in the first days of the war was Brooklyn boy Major Emmet O'Donnell, who perished after bringing down four Japanese planes in the battle for the Philippines.²²

The entry of America into the European war had changed Irish-American opinion on most of the issues involving the question of Irish neutrality. A Gallup poll in February, 1942, indicated that Irish-Americans voters responded with a seventy-two percent affirmative, compared to ninety percent of all voters, to the question "Would you like to see the Irish Free State let the Allies use war bases along the Irish coast?"²³ However, the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR), the principal American support group of Eamon DeValera's Irish

war became evident slowly in 1942. One of the most popular individuals in the city was Patrick J. Walsh of the Yorkville neighborhood. He was well known to thousands of Irish-Americans as the Treasurer of the United Irish Counties Association and as President of the New York County Board of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Lieutenant Walsh, although severely wounded by a shell fired in a surface attack from a German u-boat, remained at his post until another shell destroyed the bridge. Initially declared Missing in Action, there was an agonizing wait before he was sometime later officially

declared dead.²⁶ Early in the war a few soldiers did come home, usually after severe wounding, and sometimes continuing to serve as speakers promoting the sale of war bonds. At the annual dinner of the St. Patrick Society of Brooklyn held at the Waldorf on St. Patrick's Day, 1943, Corporal James F. Smith of the Marine Corps told of being with the first landing detachment on Guadalcanal in August, 1942, and the subsequent battle



Republican party, passed a resolution at its New York State convention in the same week a Gallup poll was published, stating that the stationing of American soldiers in Northern Ireland was the cause of "great embarrassment, perplexity and misgivings to the lovers of Democratic government."²⁴ A few months later in May, Assemblyman Owen McGivern, a private in the 69th, in contrast to the isolationism expressed at previous gatherings, was applauded at the Regiment's annual communion breakfast at the Hotel Pennsylvania when he called for Ireland to open coastal locations for use as submarine bases.²⁵ Few signs of opposition to the war and questions of Irish neutrality were evident in the Irish-American community after 1942.

THE COST OF WAR

The human cost of America's entry into the

wounds that invalidated him home a short time later. Then, Ensign Phillip G. Nolan, who was one of nine torpedoed seamen who floated two-thousand miles over open sea for thirty-nine days, told the story of how they all had miraculously survived. While adrift on Christmas Day 1942, he had enjoyed what he then thought was a luxurious dinner of a rationed single small piece of chocolate.²⁷

As the war years rolled on, one could read the death notices, sometimes in government-inserted formal lists of dead and wounded by last known address, in paid advertisements inserted by the family, or in short obituaries published in papers that specialized in hometown news like the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Information about the lives of these young soldiers was pathetically brief: name, address, parents, sometimes a spouse, siblings, and other relatives. A mass was normally said for the Roman Catholic

Illustration:

The true story of the five Sullivan Brothers lost in the Pacific when their ship sank after a Japanese attack made it to the screen in 1944. Many Irish-American families sent similar numbers of their young sons and daughters into the service. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

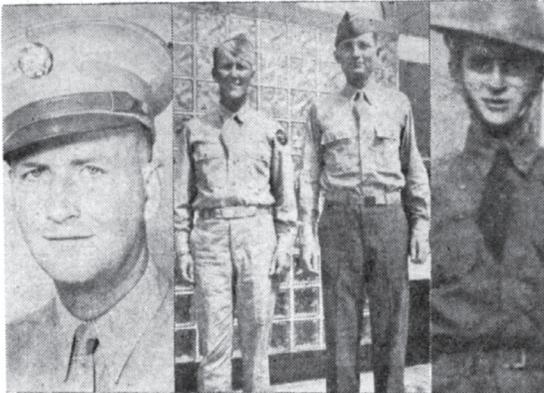
deceased, so the home parish was listed. Irish names tended to come from relatively few parishes, revealing the ethnic clustering still present in the city at that time. Short newspaper-written obituaries sometimes included the parochial school, high school, and occasionally a college, most often an area school. Rarely was there anything else, other

around his neck deflected an enemy bullet.²⁸ More than six-thousand names had been entered into the service flag of members and their families of the United Irish Counties as news arrived about Makin Island.²⁹ A few weeks after the battle, Bill Fealy included the names of many members of the Regiment who had come through the battle without injury including his friend Jimmy Alymer, a prominent member of the Limerick Association and the AARIR. Alymer was one individual frequently mentioned by Fealy and other columnists, and reports of his continuing good health must have been reassuring to his family. Less than six months after the Makin Island landing, Alymer was killed in action on Okinawa.³⁰

The *Irish Advocate* and other New York Irish weeklies were well read by the combat and service troops, frequently in foxholes as shells whistled overhead. The local coverage of Irish events in New York and the chit-chat about the activities of the men and women in service were often better than a letter from home. The newspapers were forwarded from one soldier to another, from one island to another.

The war claimed a steady number of casualties. John McGrail, Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim, and a player on the Co. Down football team in New York, was reported killed in action in Italy in February, 1944. Jack Gill, a former star player of the Galway Hurling Club, was wounded and recovering in Italy at the same time his family substituted for him at a ceremony at the Club social where some of his hurling medals from a previous season were awarded.³¹ Jim Goode, a former officer of the Galway Association, was wounded in the Pacific while Sergeant Johnny McGuire, who had been stationed in Newcastle, Co. Down, for three months, was wounded at Anzio. Both were furloughed home.³² Corporal James Paul O'Shea, from Castlegregory, Co. Kerry, was another immigrant Irishman killed in fighting in the Italian campaign at

The Howard Boys in the Service



Five of the Howard family, of Long Beach, four boys and a girl, four of whom are pictured above are the sons of Pat Howard of Long Beach, L. I. Pat hails from Killeenterna, Castleisland, Co. Kerry. The five Howards are all in the Army. Helen who is a WAC is stationed in England, Staff Sergeant Marty is in Italy, Frank is with the 69th Regt. somewhere in the Pacific; George and John are also overseas.

than those milestones of a young life, a job as a newsboy, activity in the scouts, work in an office in Manhattan or brief employment in a manual or skilled trade. Hundreds and hundreds of these announcements of wartime death appeared with increasing frequency as 1944 turned into 1945, when the sketches becoming so closely repetitive that only the names seemed to change. After all, what can be said about the short life of a twenty-year old?

The landing of the 69th Regiment on Makin Island in the Gilberts in December, 1943, focused attention on New York's Irish Regiment. Death claimed the high and low from Private George Montgomery, a Tyrone native, who was a piper in the Co. Tyrone Pipe Band and a member of the Ulster Irish Society, to its gallant regimental commander Col. Gardiner Conroy. Chaplain Stephen J. Meaney, who was seriously wounded, was only saved when a religious medal worn

Illustration:
Five children of Long Beach restaurant owner and Kerryman, Pat Howard, were in military service by 1944. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



about the same time that Father Joseph A. Gilmore, from St. Stephen's Church on East 29th Street and the first chaplain from the New York Archdiocese, was killed in action on the same front.³³ Another chaplain, Franciscan Father Dominic Tiernan from St. Francis of Assisi on West 31st Street, was killed while administering the sacraments to a wounded soldier on the battlefield in France.³⁴ Many of the fallen, like Lieutenant John Guerin of Manhattan's Ascension Parish who was active in the Kerry Association, routinely had memorial masses in home parishes where friends and family gathered.³⁵ Friends marked the losses in many ways. Some wrote roughly composed poems, such as the one written when Martin McNamara of Limerick City was killed in Italy:

*A Telegram came this morning,
"We regret to inform you," it said,
Pvt. McNamara in action was killed,
Another brave Irishman dead.*³⁶

The larger Irish families of the 1940s sometimes sent multiple members into the service. Peter Coen, one of several brothers

who had given years of service as officers to the Sligo Men's Association, had six sons serving Uncle Sam, four in the military and two as engineers in government plants.³⁷ Pat Howard, owner of a restaurant opposite the Long Island Railroad Terminal in Long Beach, had four sons and a daughter in the military. It seemed at times that the Irish were so numerous that they were almost tripping over one another. George Smyth, a Swinford native and former Brooklyn resident and former captain of the Mayo Football team, was serving with the Army Medical Corps in Italy when he passed a British Eighth Army sentry post and was quickly challenged by the sentry on watch. He advanced and identified himself to his own brother, William, who he had not seen in eighteen years.³⁸

AT WAR'S END

Many optimists had expected an end to the war by Christmas 1944, but it would not end until May, 1945 in Europe and August, 1945 in the Pacific. The end would not come fast enough for former New York Limerick hurler Eddie Barron, eldest son of Paddy Barron,

Photo:
The Carmelite Church on East 28th Street (shown here in the 1920s) was a center of Irish social activity in the 1940s. Courtesy of Alfred Isacson, O.Carm.

Recording Secretary of the New York Gaelic Athletic Association. Eddie Barron was killed in action just days prior to the cessation of hostilities in Europe.³⁹

Kieran P. Fennelly, of McGraw Avenue in the Bronx, was a former vice president of the Kilkenny Association, who by May of 1945 was already more than three years in the army and a holder of the Silver Star. He found himself in a foxhole on Okinawa with a heavy bombardment overhead, when he and his buddies were astounded by the sound of a baby crying throughout the night in no man's land. The next morning Army medics found the baby strapped to its dead mother, and they promptly placed it in the care of Kieran Fennelly. For the next day, he played nursemaid to the little girl, preparing a mushy gruel from his own cereal ration for the starving infant and caring tenderly for the orphan. The baby fell asleep smiling to the sounds of shelling overhead before eventually being turned over to proper medical personnel. Fennelly had a good story to tell his wife when he got home to New York months later.⁴⁰

Many New York Irish serving in Europe got a chance to visit relatives in Ireland in 1945. Sergeant Dave Farrell, born in New York of Clare and Donegal parents, visited an aunt and uncle in Killaloe and then with a group of other Americans soldiers received a warm welcome in the Dail in Dublin. The highlight of the visit was being personally received by Eamon DeValera and his wife, Sile. Less routine was the visit of Lieutenant Buddy Maguire, the pilot of a B-17 bomber. Maguire, whose father was a Fermanagh native, located the family's house in the rural Irish countryside and then flew low enough to drop a note of greetings to his grandmother.⁴¹

Ireland and America had been largely cut off from each other for more than five years. In June, 1945, Charles Lindbergh visited Ireland on behalf of two U.S. airlines and the Army and Navy to prepare the opening of flights carrying up to two-hundred passengers to what would become Shannon Airport.⁴² The need for such a connection was painfully

evident for Irish actor Barry Fitzgerald, who waited in New York for two weeks in August, 1945 hoping he would be able book a seat to Ireland. Fitzgerald had not been home for years, but even he couldn't get a space.⁴³

All over the city, welcome home parties were given for returning veterans. On Davidson Avenue in the Bronx a party for furloughed soldiers Jack Ahern and Tommy Hanna featured accordionist James Brennan and Jack Curtin on the violin before ending at five o'clock in the morning.⁴⁴ At the American Legion Post on Boscobal Avenue in the Bronx, veterans of the previous war, as well as his Leitrim family, welcomed Sergeant Barney Duffy home with a sit-down dinner.⁴⁵ Marine Sergeant Denis McCarthy from Ballybunion, Co. Kerry, came home to Jamaica after three and a half years to another all-night party which lasted from Saturday until Sunday morning, finishing the festivities with the singing of Irish ballads.⁴⁶

Across the city in Irish neighborhoods masses were held for fallen servicemen. The United Irish Counties, the largest of the Irish societies at that time, marked a formal close to hostilities with a memorial mass for the dead on September 16th at the church which was then the focal point for Irish activity, the Carmelite Church, Our Lady of the Scapular, on East 28th Street between First and Second Avenues in Manhattan. The mass was described as a "solemn mass of Irish Thanksgiving," and thousands of Irish New Yorkers flocked to the service.⁴⁷ The Carmelite Order had ministered to a largely Irish neighborhood that by 1945 had changed, leaving the church badly in debt. It survived only because it had become the venue for many of the religious and social activities of the Irish societies. When the church had offered refuge to Irish rebels like Liam Mellows and Eamon DeValera after World War I, the parish future had looked very bright:

The parish at that time was one of the most prosperous in the city and many debts were contracted because the priests knew that the generosity of the parishioners would enable them to

VOTE FOR
O'Dwyer — Church — Fertig

HONESTY

INTEGRITY

HUMANITY

★



DECENCY

TOLERANCE

ABILITY

★

**Give New York an Administration Which Will
be an Honor and Credit to the American
System of Government**

BILL O'DWYER

**Will be a Full Time Mayor -- One who will devote
his Time to City Affairs**

BILL O'DWYER

"I WILL NEVER LET YOU DOWN"

VOTE ROW B

VOTE FOR:--
O'Dwyer — Church — Fertig

Election Day — Nov. 4

Polls Open from 6:30 to 10:30 P. M.

Inserted by the Irish American Non-Partisan Committee for the election of O'Dwyer, Church and Fertig.

carry on. However, the neighborhood rapidly became industrialized and the majority of the parishioners had to move away and now the parish is no longer able to support its church.⁴⁸

The Carmelite Church was one of many parishes in the city to lose its Irish congregation in the next few decades, but for city's Irish there was to be one last triumph.

O'DWYER THE MAYOR

Bill O'Dwyer was the most popular Irishman in the city and especially beloved by his fellow immigrant Irish. Born in Bohola, Co. Mayo, his rise from policeman to Brooklyn District Attorney was an Irish Horatio Alger story. In 1941, he had received the Democratic nomination for mayor to oppose the incumbent Fiorello LaGuardia, who received the Republican nomination and that of several small parties including the leftist

American Labor Party. O'Dwyer was a mainstream Democrat, but failed to win the support of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Transport Workers Union president, Kerry-born Mike Quill. The defection of some Tammany leaders to the opposing camp further weakened the O'Dwyer campaign, and just over a month before Pearl Harbor he went down to defeat by over 100,000 votes. He had to wait four more years for his next chance.

Although strongly identified with several Mayo societies, O'Dwyer had served as an officer in dozens of others with no regional ties. The *Irish Advocate* columnist Terry Long wrote:

He remains the same unassuming approachable fellow he was when he covered his beat. We remember him best for his instantaneous reply to a lad who shouted "Up Mayo," during his talk at the Mayo Association Dinner which we [sic] had the honor to be toastmaster. Said Bill, "Man made the boundary lines, but God made Ireland."⁴⁹

Thanks to more unified support of the Democratic Party and the fact that three-term Mayor LaGuardia was not running again, William O'Dwyer was elected in November, 1945 in what probably was the last political hurrah of the New York Irish. Post World War II New York had become a changed city and continued to change ethnically, socially, and politically. Surprisingly, it entered this new post-war era with an old-time Irish Democrat at the helm.

Illustration:
William "Bill" O'Dwyer first ran unsuccessfully for mayor of New York in 1941 before being elected in 1945. He had a strong personal following from the members of the city's Irish community, many of whom were long-time friends. During the war, he served as a brigadier general in the Army and was executive director of the War Refugee Board.
Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

The Changed Irish Community

The economic depression that hit the world in the 1930s caused a big change in the pattern of Irish immigration to America. After 1931, the number of new arrivals from Ireland fell dramatically and did not resume again, in much smaller numbers, until several years after World War II. Except for the relatively short period during World War I, there had never been a period in immigration history when the Irish were not coming to America. Now, the disappearance of the young immigrants had immediate consequences on Irish life in the city. Irish social activities between the early 1930s and early 1940s became more infrequent. Even a casual glance at the New York weekly Irish newspapers indicated a decline in the number of events of the smaller county associations and Irish local societies. In 1932, one finds an entire page of hundreds of classifieds advertised apartments, rooms for rent, and weekly and monthly boarding, but by 1941 these had fallen to barely a dozen offerings in newspapers like the *Irish Echo* or *Irish Advocate*. Most of the dozens of Irish dance halls had gone by this time as well, replaced by much smaller cabarets featuring fewer

musicians and singers.

The decline of the New York Irish in the 1930s and 1940s can be seen in the struggle to keep alive Gaelic sports, activities almost entirely connected to the number of immigrants living in the city. Although there were a handful of excellent American-born Gaelic football and hurling players, the vast majority of participants had always been natives of Ireland. As long as there was a steady stream of newcomers to New York, the ranks and number of teams in Gaelic sports carried on with amazing vigor and frequency. But by the mid-1930s a special effort had to be made to create minor league teams with increasing numbers of American-born trainees. This worked for a time, but as America edged towards war, and the draft was instituted, manpower for even minor teams began to dry up.

The Gaelic Athletic Association (New York) Annual Report issued in June, 1941, stated that “curiously enough, at a time when our players are becoming old and past their peak, our teams are faster than ever. This, of course, is due the influx of American players, and it is noticeable particularly in Senior football.”¹ Nevertheless, the

number of players available was not what it had been, and it was decided to cut the number of teams. At its peak, just after the end of the Irish Civil War in the early 1920s, there had been over fifty affiliates. More serious, however, was the recurring problem of a suitable playing field. Innisfail Park (today’s Gaelic Park) was in terrible condition, and finances ran at a loss for half the year. Only the annual banquet and the fund-raising field day kept the G.A.A. in the black.²

Worse news for Gaelic sports came a few weeks later when Patrick J. Grimes, later *Irish Echo* publisher, announced that he was unable to continue the lease for the 1941 season. Many people, according to columnist Liam O’Shea, felt that the park at 240th Street and Broadway was too far removed from where the Irish lived.³ A new lease was negotiated at the last minute and a newly renovated park reopened in mid-May, but with only 600 in attendance. According to O’Shea, many old timers had apparently lost interest while the younger Irish had been drafted into the armed forces. It was only when tavern and restaurant owner John “Kerry” O’Donnell leased the park in 1944 that it was made more

secure for Gaelic sports.⁴

While official Gaelic games were played in Gaelic Park, unofficial “scratch” games were played at other sites around the city. Brooklyn’s Prospect Park was probably the most frequented, near a spot called “Donegal Hill” where the Irish met to socialize on weekends. Columnist John J. Keating described Easter Sunday, 1941, when the hill was in full bloom with cherry blossoms “and talk about colleens, they were there by the hundreds” in their Easter hats and plumes. A few weeks later, even in the midst of a strong gale, a few stalwarts still appeared for the weekend ritual that made Donegal Hill at least a social equivalent to Gaelic Park.⁵

By the summer 1944, Gaelic games in New York were in sad shape, but help was on the way. After a recruiting campaign among Irish-Americans, aged between twelve and fifteen, two minor league teams had been organized by July, Incarnation Parish in Washington Heights and St. Francis de Sales Parish in Yorkville (although the latter team existed only for a short time). Four more were added by the end of the season: St. Jerome’s (South Bronx), St. John’s (Kingsbridge, Bronx), Visitation in the Bronx near Van Cortlandt

Park, and another in Washington Heights in St. Rose of Lima Parish. Several more were added for the following season: St. Luke’s, South Bronx just to the east of St. Jerome’s, St. Pius in the Mott Haven neighborhood of the South Bronx, and St. Nicholas of Tolentine in the Fordham section of the Bronx. Geographically, all teams had relatively easy access by public transport to Innisfail Park (known for a time as Croke Park before finally becoming Gaelic Park). Despite a pledge to organize a minor team in every Irish parish in the city, no team was organized in either Brooklyn or Queens.⁶ The gallant fight of the New York Gaelic Athletic Association (G.A.A.) to promote the traditional sports of Ireland faced the reality of grim statistics. In 1930, there were 220,631 Irish-born living in the city. By 1950, the number of Irish-born had dropped to 144,808, a decline of over 75,000. The economic depression and the Second World War caused the long historic pattern of emigration from Ireland to be almost completely severed. A small wave of new Irish immigrants in the 1950s helped revive the Irish community to some extent, but with each succeeding decade the revival was a little smaller and a little less noticeable. Whether it was

on the playing field or in the places where the Irish gathered for social and entertainment reasons, the War had changed the number of the city’s Irish, but not their capacity to endure as a distinct group within the greater New York area.

—John Ridge

Notes

- 1 *Irish Advocate*, January 25, 1941
- 2 *Irish Advocate*, January 25, 1941
- 3 *Irish Advocate*, February 15, 1941
- 4 *Irish Advocate*, May 24, 1941. Columnist Bill Fealy reported that Gaelic games were regularly played at the training camps of the 69th Regiment in the South in 1941.
- 5 *Irish Advocate*, April 19, 26 and May 31, 1941
- 6 *Irish Advocate*, July 29, 1944, August 19, 1944 and September 4, 1944

Endnotes

- 1 *New York Times*, February 23, 1938
- 2 *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 15 and March 2, 1940
- 3 *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 5 and 6, 1941 and *New York Times*, January 18, 1941
- 4 *Irish Advocate*, February 15, 1941
- 5 *Irish Advocate*, April 12, 1941
- 6 *Irish Advocate*, April 12, 1941
- 7 *Irish Advocate*, September 6, 1941
- 8 *Irish Advocate*, September 6, 1941
- 9 *Irish Advocate*, October 25, 1941
- 10 *Irish Advocate*, December 20, 1941
- 11 *Irish Advocate*, February 15, May 10 and May 24, 1944. One project was to write to most of the eleven-thousand Roman Catholic priests in the United States asking them to organize the praying of the rosary to “invoke Divine aid to preserve Ireland from invasion.” The organization estimated over twenty-two million rosaries had been said for this purpose.
- 12 *New York Times*, June 16, 1941
- 13 *Irish Advocate*, April 26, 1941
- 14 *Irish Advocate*, May 17, 1941
- 15 *Irish Advocate*, May 24, 1941
- 16 *Irish Advocate*, July 19, 1941
- 17 *Irish Advocate*, July 12, 1941
- 18 *Irish Advocate*, November 29, 1941
- 19 *Irish Advocate*, December 20, 1941
- 20 *Irish Advocate*, December 20, 1941
- 21 *Irish Advocate*, December 20, 1941 Captain Colin Kelly’s wife was living in Brooklyn with her parents at the time of his death.
- 22 *Irish Advocate*, December 27, 1941
- 23 *New York Times*, February 22, 1942
- 24 *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 23, 1942
- 25 *New York Times*, May 4, 1942
- 26 *Irish Advocate*, January 29, 1944 and September 15, 1945. See also article “Patrick J. Hurley” by Michael Pocock at www.MaritimeQuest.com.
- 27 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 18, 1943
- 28 *Irish Advocate*, January 15, 1944, Bill Fealy column. A square named in honor of Colonel Conroy was dedicated in 1945 in the Park Slope Section near Prospect Park.
- 29 *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 22, 1944
- 30 *Irish Advocate*, July 14, 1944
- 31 *Irish Advocate*, April 21, 1944
- 32 *Irish Advocate*, April 29, 1944 and May 6, 1944
- 33 *Irish Advocate*, July 1, 1944
- 34 *Irish Advocate*, August 12, 1944
- 35 *Irish Advocate*, October 14, 1944
- 36 *Irish Advocate*, April 1, 1944 (poem by James McGovern)
- 37 *Irish Advocate*, May 6, 1944
- 38 *New York Times*, February 17, 1944
- 39 *Irish Advocate*, May 26, 1944
- 40 *Irish Advocate*, June 9, 1945
- 41 *Irish Advocate*, April 7, 1945
- 42 *Irish Advocate*, June 14, 1945
- 43 *Irish Advocate*, September 1, 1945
- 44 *Irish Advocate*, May 26, 1945
- 45 *Irish Advocate*, July 7, 1945
- 46 *Irish Advocate*, February 3, 1945
- 47 *Irish Advocate*, September 1, 1945
- 48 *Irish Advocate*, April 21, 1945
- 49 *Irish Advocate*, June 30, 1945