

True story of a mass Irish mutiny

■ Connaught Ranger shot after protest over British action in his homeland



BY IAN KENNEALLY

IN the early morning of November 2 1920, a young Irish soldier sat in a prison cell, waiting and praying.

As the gloom of night lifted, he could hear the sound of approaching footsteps and he knew that his wait was over.

The footsteps ceased, to be followed by the jangling of keys and the creaking of hinges as the metal door of his cell was prised open. The young man, 21 years old, could see an officer and a small group of soldiers in the doorway. His name was James Daly, the place was Dagshai, northern India, and he was one of the famed Connaught Rangers.

For over a century, Galwaymen had joined the Rangers and fought for the British army. Daly's family, as with many others, had a long history of service with British forces and he was a veteran of the First World War.

Yet, on that morning in November 1920, Daly would soon stand before a British firing squad.

Now a new 90-minute radio documentary to be broadcast on Galway Bay FM tells the tragic and often misunderstood story of Daly and the mutiny within the Connaught Rangers.

Over its existence the regiment had served across the world - in the West Indies, Egypt; India; South America; North America, and throughout Europe.

They fought on the Iberian Peninsula during the Napoleonic Wars and served in the Crimean War during 1854-56.

Founded in 1793, the regiment had quickly become an integral part of the British army winning many battle honours and it was used in the frontlines of campaigns wherever the British Empire was engaged. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, they served in South Africa, during the Zulu War of 1879, and again during the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Sadly, the cataclysmic conflict that began in 1914 proved to be a harrowing time for the regiment and it suffered heavy losses fighting at the Western Front, Gal-

lipoli, and Mesopotamia, among other theatres of war.

Yet the story of Daly and the mutiny would take place after that war. During October 1919, the 1st Battalion of the Rangers were posted to India, a British colony that was on the edge of open revolt.

Earlier that year, the British army had carried out a massacre in the city of Amritsar, near to one of the bases in which the Rangers were now stationed.

For the next eight months, the Rangers lived and trained amid an increasingly fraught environment. Yet India was not the only part of the British Empire in which discontent with British rule was evident.

By 1920, Ireland was in the midst of the War of Independence and, although that conflict had yet to reach its climax, the Irish Republican Army was becoming more confident in its attacks on the Crown forces.

The Irish Administration in Dublin Castle responded by curtailing the activities of civil society through mass arrests, censorship, suppressing newspapers, and instituting curfews.

Simultaneously, the Crown forces began to take a more violent approach, targeting civilians and businesses with reprisals.

Throughout the first half of 1920, many of the Rangers in India became increasingly perturbed by the news from Ireland.

Their anger culminated at the end of June when 400 men stationed at Wellington Barracks, Jullundur, refused to carry out orders in a protest against British policy in Ireland.

This mutiny, an extraordinary event in the history of the British army, would play out over the following days, spreading to the Rangers stationed at a second barracks in a place called Solon.

It would end with violence, followed by the imprisonment of hundreds of soldiers and, ultimately, the court-martial of dozens of the most prominent men.

Sentenced to death, James Daly would pass into history and into legend. But the story of James Daly is just one story in the history of the mutiny and the history of the regiment.

We are now well into Ireland's 'Decade of Centenaries' and there is a huge interest among the public in exploring this complex time in our shared past.

Alongside the focus on the Easter Rising and the War of In-



Above: A group of officers from the Connaught Rangers, dating from the Crimean War 1855. Left: James Daly...Connaught Ranger. Below left: James Daly's grave in Tyrrellspass in Co. Westmeath.



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