

Some background of the German gas attack on the Irish Brigades at Hulluch during late April 1916.

In the week Patrick Pearse declared the Irish Republic on the steps of the GPO, the Irish Brigades of the 16th (Irish) Division suffered horribly in a gas attack launched by the Germans on 27 April 1916 at Hulluch.¹ Like the men from the 2nd Dublins back in May 1915, many died years later as a result of this attack. On 29 April the Germans launched another gas attack on the Irish lines, however on this occasion the wind turned right round and blew the gas back over the German lines, the result being equally appalling.² During April 1916, the Irish Division suffered 2,128 Irish casualties; approx. 538 were killed, the remainder were to suffer chronic lung and breathing conditions for the rest of their lives.³

The timing of the attack on 27 April was very poignant indeed. News of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin reached the Irish troops at the front with disappointment. The Easter Rebellion was regarded as a stab in the back for the thousands of Nationalist Volunteers who followed John Redmond's advice. Captain Stephen Gwynn's post-Rising speeches to the House of Commons and his letters to the press were bitter about the damage the rising done to Home Rule.⁴ He told his fellow Nationalist MP, Major Willie Redmond MP, 'I shall never forget the men's indignation. They felt they had been stabbed in the back.'⁵ John Redmond commented in the House of Commons:⁶

Is it not an additional horror that on the very day when we hear that the men of the Dublin Fusiliers have been killed by Irishmen on the streets of Dublin, we receive the news of how the men of the 16th Division - our own Irish Brigade, and of the same Dublin Fusiliers-had dashed forward and by their unconquerable bravery retaken the trenches that the Germans had won at Hulluch?

¹ Hulluch is a French village in the Arrondissement of Lens in northern France. The village sits approx. 6 kilometers north of Lens.

² Denman, Terence. *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers. The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992).p.69.

³ *Ibid.*p.62.

⁴ Leonard, Jane. "The Reactions of Irish Officers in the British Army to the Easter Rising of 1916 " in *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, ed. Cecil H and Liddle P H(London: Lee Cooper, 1996).p.264.Gwynn was a nationalist MP serving with the 6th Connaught Rangers.

⁵ Denman.p.144.

⁶ *Ibid.*p.129.

Was there ever such a picture of a tragedy which a small section of Irish faction had so often inflicted on the fairest hopes and the bravest deeds of Ireland.

An officer of the 7th Leinster Regiment, Lieutenant Lyon, had the terrible task of gathering the dead. 'They were in all sorts of tragic attitudes, some of them holding hands like children in the dark.' He and his men found themselves pestered for the next few days by 'half-poisoned rats by the hundred.'⁷ The Chaplain to the Dublin Fusiliers described the scenes after the attack in a letter home to his father.⁸

Many men died before I could reach them and were gone before I could pass back. There they lay, scores of them (we lost 800, nearly all from gas) in the bottom of the trench, in every conceivable posture of human agony; the cloths torn off their bodies in a vain effort to breathe while from end to end of that valley of death came one long unceasing moan from the lips of brave men fighting and struggling for life.

To commemorate this tragic event which fell on the people of Ireland during the Easter Rising, Dublin City Library and Archive in co-operation with The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association will present a one day seminar at the Council Chamber in Dublin City Hall on Saturday 16 April 2016. We intend to invite a selection of speakers who will present the story from both Irish and German sides of the German gas attack at Hulluch.

Tom Burke.

⁷ Ibid.p.69.

⁸ O'Rahilly, A. *Father William Doyle S.J* (London: Longman's Green and Company, 1920).p.237.