

Robert Quigg VC

Robert Quigg was born on 28 February 1885 in Carnkirk, a townland about two miles from Bushmills, between that town and Ballintoy.

Quigg signed the Ulster Covenant in 1912 and was active in the pre-war UVF. He enlisted in the 12th Royal Irish Rifles, one of the battalions of the Ulster Division, in September 1914. Employed before the war on Macnaghten estate, he went to war as batman to Sir Harry Macnaghten Bt (the 6th Baronet), the son of Sir Edward Macnaghten Bt (the 5th Baronet) and the grandson of Lord Macnaghten of Runkerry (a law lord who was also the 4th Baronet). Family tradition has it that Quigg was told by Lady Macnaghten that he was not to return home without Sir Harry. If this is true, Lady Macnaghten's stern injunction may offer a partial explanation of Quigg's actions on 1-2 July 1916.

David James Lavery (1896-1988), who was born at Ballytober, Bushmills, where his parents kept the local post office, served with Quigg in the 12th Royal Irish Rifles. Mr Lavery, in conversation with the late Harry Irwin (a bibliophile who was a great mine of information on so many subjects), recalled that Quigg was regarded by his comrades as 'a madman'. He wanted to kill all the Germans and to calm him down he was posted to the cookhouse and then to the bakery. However, even after his duties were over he was always along the parapet to see where the Germans were. Allegedly, Quigg's behaviour was so reckless that other members of the battalion had a difficult time getting him to keep his head down to avoid getting it blown off.

Mr Lavery vividly recalled the issue of the tot of rum and the final minutes before 'zero hour' (7:30 am) on 1 July 1916: 'We were all tensed up and I can still picture Sir Harry at the end of the trench with a big pocket watch in his hand saying "Calm down boys, we've plenty of time"'. According to David Lavery, Sir Harry was killed minutes later.

Quigg won the Victoria Cross 'for most conspicuous bravery' at the Somme on 1-2 July 1916. According to the citation, 'He advanced to the assault with his platoon three times. Early next morning, hearing a rumour that, his platoon officer [Sir Harry] was lying out wounded, he went out seven times to look for him under heavy shell and machine gun fire, each time bringing

back a wounded man. The last man he dragged in on a water-proof sheet from within a few yards of the enemy's wire. He was seven hours engaged in this most gallant work, and finally was so exhausted that he had to give it up.'

Sir Harry's body was never found. His brother Douglas who was serving as a subaltern with Rifle Brigade inherited the baronetcy, becoming the 7th Baronet. He was killed ten weeks later at Delville Wood, also on the Somme.

Quigg's VC was one of four awarded to members of the Ulster Division as a result of the events of 1-2 July 1916 but his was the only one not to be awarded posthumously. It is worth observing that two of the four Ulster Division's were won by men consciously placing their lives at risk for the sake of their comrades.

Private William McFadzean of the 14th Royal Irish Rifles was in a concentration trench prior to zero hour on the morning of 1 July. While opening a box of bombs for distribution prior to an attack, the box slipped down into the trench, which was crowded with men, and two of the safety pins fell out. Without a moment's hesitation, McFadzean, well knowing the danger, threw himself on top of the bombs to save the lives of his comrades. McFadzean was blown to pieces but only one other man was injured.

Rifleman Quigg received his VC from King George V at Sandringham on 8 January 1917. It is said that when presenting the VC to Quigg, the King observed, 'You're a very brave man, Quigg.' 'You're a brave man yourself, King,' replied the gruff Ulsterman. A possible explanation for this otherwise bizarre exchange is that George V was speaking Standard English, as you would expect, whereas Quigg was thinking in and speaking Ulster-Scots. 'Brave' in Ulster-Scots means 'decent' rather 'courageous'. Quigg, interpreting the King's use of the word in the Ulster-Scots sense, was merely reciprocating what he understood to be the King's compliment.

When Quigg returned to Bushmills he received a hero's welcome and Lady Macnaghten presented him with a gold watch in recognition of his bravery in attempting to find and rescue her son.

Winners of the VC and other awards (and those mentioned in despatches) were usually also awarded Allied decorations from other countries. Although, Quigg does not seem to have been awarded a French or Belgian decoration, he did receive the Medal of the Order of St George, a Russian decoration, originally established in 1769 by Catherine the Great, and

revived in 1994 after the overthrow of Soviet Communism. The Order of St George was (and still is) awarded in four classes, from the First Degree to the Fourth Degree. The highest degree is the First Degree. Quigg received the Fourth Degree. Normally, an individual initially would receive the Fourth Degree, and would gradually be promoted to higher degrees for subsequent acts of bravery.

Quigg retired from the army in 1926 (after he was seriously injured in an accident), having attained the rank of sergeant. A member of Aird LOL 1195 and the flute band associated with the lodge, he lived in the Garnside area of Co. Antrim. Quigg was presented to Her Majesty the Queen when she reviewed ex-servicemen at Coleraine in 1953. He died on 14 May 1955 in hospital in Ballycastle.¹ Quigg received a military funeral after a service conducted by Revd A. N. Kelly, Rector of Billy, and Revd F. G. Guy, Hon. Chaplain to the Forces, and was buried in the graveyard of Billy Parish Church, near Bushmills. Major E. A. D. Liddle, the Commanding Officer of the Royal Ulster Rifles (the Royal Irish Rifles' successor regiment) depot, represented the Colonel of the Regiment, Sir James Steele, a man who has his own niche in British military history. In 1939 Steele, who was born in Ballycarry, signed the executive signal for the mobilization of the army at the outset of the Second World War.

¹ On 16 May 1955 the *News Letter* accorded Robert Quigg, VC, a more extensive obituary than Brigadier J. C. Sproule, the son of the late Mr A. H. R. Sproule and the late Mrs Sproule of Denimona House, Fintona, County Tyrone.