

John O'Connor

I was born in 1885, in Ireland, in Liscannon, County Clare.

My father was Patrick O'Connor and my mother was Bridget.

Life in Ireland was hard, we were poor and although things were getting a bit better with the reformers trying to improve the lives of tenant farmers, I could see my best future was in the army.

I was not interested in fighting for independence.

I joined the British army.

I enlisted with the, all Irish, 2nd Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers,

We were one of the top regiments of the British Army since our Battalion was first raised in 1839.

I signed on in Ennistymon in County Clare, but was soon transferred to Aldershot for training.

When War was declared on Germany and Austria on 4th August 1914, I was 29, and already a professional soldier.

We were put into the 1st Guards Brigade of the 1st Division of the British Expeditionary Force, and were immediately mobilized to Le Havre in France on 14th August, only ten days into the war.

We were to fight alongside the Scotts Guards and the Coldstream Guards.

Our Division was commanded by General Haig.

We were put into the line at Mons to help stop the Germans rushing through Belgium, we reached Mons on 22nd August and we were ordered to protect the French army's left flank.

After a lot of heavy fighting on 23rd, where we won a victory despite being much weaker in numbers than the Germans, we were pushed back from Mons on 24th towards the River Marne.

Our Division suffered some 8000 casualties on 25th and 26th, when our artillery ran out of ammunition and our division had to withdraw again, to St Quentin, covered by a French cavalry charge.

Things were not looking good and we were ordered to form a fighting rearguard.

On 27th August, just 23 days after the start of the war, we became trapped at Etreux. Here we fought against overwhelming numbers of Germans, they had six times our numbers!

It was a fine but misty morning on 27th and our three companies were set up on a three-kilometer front. The Germans attacked and we inflicted terrible casualties on them with our rifle fire.

The Germans at one stage drove a herd of cows in front of them to advance behind. We shot the cows.

But by 2pm we had been ordered to retreat and follow the main division but we didn't get the order: it didn't get through to us, so we stood and fought.

We were now on our own; my mates were dead and dying all over the battlefield.

It started to rain heavily.

We managed to retreat across a canal and got back to the village of Etreux.

We set up again but the Germans came on, I had to take ammunition from a dead soldier to keep firing.

By 9 o'clock, we were completely surrounded, trapped in an orchard, out of ammunition and with awful casualties. We fought to the end and finally surrendered to the Germans.

From our three 2nd Battalion companies we lost 127 men killed.

I was one of those Royal Munsters killed that day, together with four of my mates from County Clare.

I was 29.

The Germans thought we had fought so bravely that they sent back to their headquarters for a chaplain to bury us.

So my body was recovered from the battlefield, and I am buried in the Etreux British Cemetery, not far from our final stand in that orchard.