

HISTORY

The Military Service Pensions Collection

Delvin native and Mullingar café owner's role in 1921 prison break

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IN the run-up to the Irish Revolution, one of the great centres for exchanges of ideas and strategies among separatists was the tea room run by Jennie Wyse Power as part of her Irish Farm and Produce Company, initially on Dublin's Henry Street and later on Camden Street.

The restaurant, like many others, was a key meeting ground for nationalists before 1916. There, under the cover of having a social cup of tea or some lunch, pressing issues could be discussed and information shared.

Venues like this played an even more important role during the War of Independence as drop-off points for intelligence and communications for the Irish Republican Army and Cumann na mBan. This was especially true of a café at 39 Earl Street (later Pearse Street - now Gloss Hair Design), Mullingar, which was run by a native of Delvin, Elizabeth Leonard, and her sisters Mary and Margaret (Peg).

Elizabeth, or 'Lizzie' as she was named in the 1911 census, was the third daughter of James and Mary Leonard of Ballinvalley, Delvin, and one of six children. Lizzie was just eight years old when her 69-year-old father died of chronic bronchitis in September 1900, leaving her mother and elder siblings in charge of the farm.

Margaret, listed in the 1911 census as an unemployed "confectioner", joined forces with her sisters to open the café sometime during the extended First World War period.

Their brothers, Edward (Ned) and Patrick, also became active in the national movement. They were members of Delvin Company, 4th Battalion, No. 4 Meath Brigade IRA during the War of Independence, and were arrested and interned at Ballykinlar Internment Camp, County Down in December 1920. Meanwhile, the Leonard homestead in Ballinvalley became one of several centres of activity for the Meath Brigade during the period.

Joined Cumann na mBan

In her application for a military service pension, first lodged in 1935, Lizzie Leonard



Left: sisters Elizabeth (top, wearing a Cumann na mBan sash and brooch) and Margaret Leonard, Delvin natives who ran a café in Mullingar during the War of Independence period and played a central role in the national movement in north Westmeath. Right: their brothers Edward (Ned, third from left) and Paddy Leonard (first on the left), who were active members of the IRA and were interned at Ballykinlar Camp in County Down in December 1920. Photos courtesy of Eilis O'Driscoll (née Leonard), Delvin.

told the Army Pensions Board that her first direct involvement with the republican movement was in 1918, when she assisted local Irish Volunteers in the anti-conscription movement. She had joined Cumann na mBan in 1917.

Her primary duties at that time involved the delivery of food to prisoners who had been arrested for publicly reading Sinn Féin manifestos, among them the Castlepollard Volunteer Michael J 'Joe' Kennedy, the future Fianna Fáil TD. Seamus Finn, the IRA veteran from Athboy, County Meath, told the Bureau of Military History that Lizzie was "in the habit of visiting any prisoners held in Mullingar and bringing them parcels of cigarettes, food, etc".

Next, she stated that she "worked in every possible way" to help the republican side for the 1918 general election. Under the direction of Mullingar jeweller and Volunteer officer David Burke, she provided transport and

food for election workers, and wrote material at Sinn Féin election headquarters in Mullingar. She cited Alice Ginnell, wife of election candidate Laurence Ginnell, as a referee. (Incidentally, a nephew of Lizzie's, Fr Pádraig Leonard, wrote a biography of Ginnell in 1945.)

Lizzie said that during the early phase of the War of Independence (April 1919 to March 1920), Cumann na mBan became inactive in Westmeath but was reorganised later. This didn't stop her place of business from being raided frequently. In its February 18, 1920 edition, the Irish Bulletin, the official Dáil gazette, reported that "thirty armed police" had raided the Leonard sisters' café.

The Freeman's Journal of the same date reported: "The premises of the Misses Leonard, Earl street, Mullingar, which are used as a restaurant, were raided by police. A minute search was made for a person who, it is said, is 'on



the run'. The search was fruitless."

In the sixth critical period defined by the pensions board, her involvement with the movement deepened.

Claiming to be "every day on the road" assisting the Mullingar Brigade IRA, Lizzie said that the brigade always called on her and her home and business for "holding meetings [and] feeding Volunteers and prisoners".

"Putting up with raids and searches almost every week... was considered an honour," she added, although admitting that she and her sisters had a "miserable existence" under constant threat of having their premises burned.

Springing a prisoner

Lizzie had a particularly prominent role in one of the standout military operations carried out by the brigade in 1921 - the liberation of an IRA prisoner, Charles Begnal (or Beglan - the correct spelling is unclear), from captivity

in Mullingar. Begnal, whose brother Joseph was involved with the IRA in Mullingar, was captured by Crown forces and taken to Mullingar military barracks, where he was to be arraigned for the murder of a member of the Crown Forces.

Meath Brigade officers Finn and Mick Fox (Delvin) were in charge of the prison break, and in his Bureau of Military History witness statement, Finn gives his detailed account of the episode:

"His [Begnal's] brother... sought help from Mullingar Company. Leonard's was a well known haunt of ours and he was brought there, where Fox and I met him along with the Mullingar men. Schemes were suggested but we could not work out a satisfactory one.

"Then one of the Miss Leonard's - Lizzie - came to our aid... she suggested that she would try to smuggle in a second lady's outfit and get Charlie out. It sounded fantastic, but at that time all kinds of

mad schemes were being tried and [were] succeeding.

"So it was agreed. Fox and I then left to make arrangements for keeping Charlie safe when he got out. Her plan worked. She coolly went to the barracks and asked to see her 'brother'. She got in and acted [in] a sisterly manner towards Charlie. Incidentally, she did not know him then.

"She whispered to him [about] what was on and he quickly tumbled and put on the dress, which she had worn over her own. Then she made him put on ladies' shoes and proceeded to go out by a different gate.

"She acted with the utmost coolness and gave him enough courage to act his part. She reached the gate and was most grateful to the sentry there for being so good in leaving her and her sister so long with their brother and asked him to be good to him.

"They then coolly walked away over the open space in front of the barracks, keep-



Delvin, c. 1910 - around the time Elizabeth Leonard turned 18, and a decade before the bulk of her Cumann na mBan activity.



ABOVE: 39 Earl Street (right of photo, with the Greville Arms Hotel and Loftus's Saddlery to the left) early in the 20th century, when it was part of an extensive business run by the Canton family (Canton Casey's), prior to its emulgence as a café run by the Leonard sisters. RIGHT: An advertisement for Elizabeth Leonard's café and catering business in the December 29, 1923 edition of the Westmeath Examiner.

ing Charlie in check until they reached the car where his brother Joe and the Mullingar men were waiting. They came at once to us in Delvin and Fox and I commandeered a car and brought them to Dunboyne. After that we held them safely until they were fixed up by G.H.Q.

"Needless to say Miss Leonard and her sisters got a rough handling from the enemy, but they bore it bravely and put up with all that came their way. In a generation of brave women she deserves to be numbered among the best."

The plan nearly went awry. One of Begnal's fellow prisoners called out, "Is Begnal gone?" after seeing his boots left behind in the billet. Also, Begnal almost rose suspicion after mounting his escape bicycle in the fashion of a man. All worked out in the end, however, and in her application to the pensions board, Lizzie highlighted the fact that she was "mentioned in dispatches" as a result of her involvement in the operation.

Lizzie recalled that during this time, she was constantly on duty in the Mullingar, Glenidan and Castlepollard areas. She also took dispatches to Longford in connection with Sean Mac Eoin's impending trial. Mac Eoin had been arrested in Mullingar weeks after Begnal's escape,

and in the ensuing months, the Mullingar Brigade planned a spectacular ambush of a convoy taking Mac Eoin to trial in Dublin. In the end, the ambush at Griffinstown, Kinneag never came off, and Mac Eoin was later released after the July 1921 Truce.

The IRA subsequently took over policing in Westmeath and, in preparation for an expected collapse of the Truce at some point, rested, re-fitted and continued to train. To formalise their presence as an open military unit, the Mullingar Brigade opened a training camp at a vacant rectory in Reynella, not far off the main Delvin Mullingar road, heading for Killucan. During August and September 1922, the Owens at the Leonard sisters' Pearse Street café never went cold, as they "helped to provide camp requisites". Lizzie was also instructed to participate in certain intelligence work in the event that the Truce broke down.

During the War of Independence, outside of Dublin, Mullingar had functioned as an important intelligence centre for the IRA, something made clear in communications between Mullingar Brigade intelligence officer, Harry Conroy, and GHQ (available in the Michael Collins Papers, Military Archives). The Leonard sisters' café had an important function in this regard,

PROFESSIONAL CATERER.

MISS LEONARD

IS PREPARED TO

CATER

As usual for all Dances during the

:: COMING SEASON. ::

For particulars, etc., apply—

LEONARDS,

39 Earl Street,
MULLINGAR.

something not mentioned in Lizzie's initial pension application, but in a statement by James Hynes to the Bureau of Military History.

Hynes, then employed in Mullingar Post Office, was an exceptional code breaker who, with the assistance of a Royal Irish Constabulary sergeant friendly to the national movement, was able to break police codes circulating in Westmeath. The venue he chose for leaving decoded messages for Mullingar Brigade officers was the Leonards' café on Pearse Street.

Civil war

As the Truce lasted long enough for the conclusion of a treaty between Ireland and Britain, and the formation of a new Irish Free State, the republican movement split in two. Like many of her Cumann na mBan comrades, Lizzie Leonard rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty and opposed the Provisional Government set up to usher in the new state.

Between the outbreak of civil war and March 1923, she told the pensions board that she was "working all this time carrying dispatches, food &

ammunition to the [IRA flying] column", and was active in the Mullingar, Castlepollard, Ballynacargy and Glenidan areas.

"I bought ammunition, got information of raids on [the] column, delivered often in the middle of the night," she explained, adding that she bore the cost of transport herself on various occasions. She also claimed to be at the centre of arranging an "attack on [a] Free State armoured car", and carried ammunition from one side of the county to the other for the ambush.

Lizzie continued her involvement with the republican movement after the end of the civil war in May 1923, collecting money and materials for jumble sales in order to make money for the dependants of republican prisoners. She remained a member of Cumann na mBan until 1924.

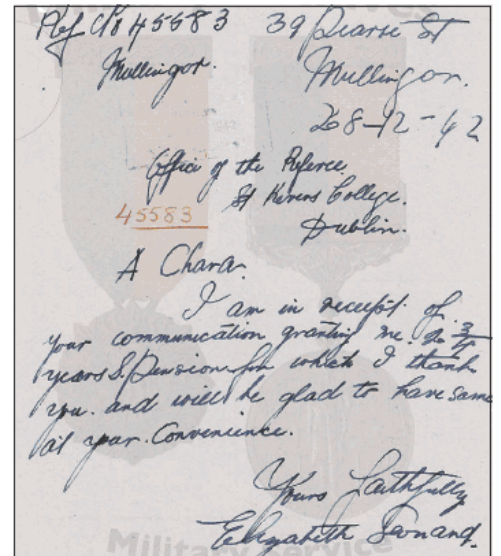
Pension claim rejected at first

For unknown reasons, the Army Pensions Board initially rejected Lizzie Leonard's pension application, a decision which she appealed in 1940.

That time, in support of her appeal, former Mullingar Brigade IRA officers came to her



Mullingar Military Barracks - the site of Lizzie Leonard's finest moment during the War of Independence.



A 1942 letter from Elizabeth Leonard to the Army Pensions Board, thanking the referee for granting her a pension for two and three quarter years' service.

aid with references. Glenidan native James Maguire, former OC of the Mullingar Brigade, could not go into detail about Lizzie's contribution, but vouched for her role in the Bernal break-out.

MJ Kennedy TD also wrote in support of her application, crediting her with "reorganising the Cumann na mBan" in Mullingar.

"She did this efficiently... & was very often in danger carrying dispatches & ammunition, that amongst other things.

"She rescued the late Capt. Charles Begnal who was awaiting military court martial & [was] likely to be sentenced to death. She found shelter and guidance for the men on the run... She rendered equal service during the civil war & broke down her health."

Lizzie was interviewed by the Army Pensions Board in June 1941, when she clarified her collaboration with James Hynes on intelligence work, and added that at one stage during the War of Independence, she had arranged a meeting between the IRA and a soldier in connection with the purchase of arms.

In 1942, her pension case was re-opened, and Kennedy intervened again with a final appeal, stating "as a former Brigade Officer" that Lizzie

was "the mainstay of the organisation in North Westmeath".

Maguire then returned with further information, recalling that Lizzie was "known by all officers in Athlone area, also all over Meath in Oldcastle, Kells, Navan & Dunboyne". "She was always entrusted with the whereabouts of wanted men and always call[ed] upon to do the most delicate work," he added.

In December 1942, Lizzie was finally granted a pension for 2 3/4 years' service. By that time, she was suffering from chronic ill-health, no doubt precipitated by her Cumann na mBan service. In the 1940s, the Leonard sisters sold their café and bought a house at Mary Street, Mullingar. When Lizzie died in a Dublin hospital at the age of 60 in September 1952, she was in the middle of negotiating an additional allowance with the pensions board in light of her ill health.

Sources: Military service pension application of Elizabeth Leonard, Military Service Pensions Collection (Military Archives, <http://mspcsearch.militaryarchives.ie>, file 45583); Bureau of Military History witness statements; Freeman's Journal, Westmeath Examiner; 1911 census returns.