

Company Sergeant Major Martin Doyle VC, MM



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



LEFT Company sergeant Major Martin Doyle VC MM being presented to HM Queen Mary in 1920.
(ALL IMAGES VIA LORD ASHCROFT UNLESS NOTED)

BELOW Doyle's VC and MM. (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

Fusiliers. He went to France with his new regiment and served in some of the early campaigns. He was promoted to sergeant in 1916.

It was, in fact, only after transferring to the 1st Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, in early March 1918 that Doyle received official recognition for his bravery on the battlefield. On March 24, he showed such valour that he was later (*The London Gazette* September 13, 1918) awarded the Military Medal for his courage in northern France in capturing a barn held by a German gun crew.

Doyle later described his part in the action in Hattenville, France, to an Irish newspaper, *The Free Press*: "We had to cross about 1,000 yards of open country, exposed to terrible shell and machine gun fire. The casualties were very heavy. Having reached the trench, we found that the Germans were dug in not more than 40 yards ahead of us.

"A big barn stood in the ground between us and a fight ensued to take possession of it. On the enemy side there was long grass, which afforded them cover, and a machine gun party succeeded in creeping out and capturing the ruin, and they set up a heavy fire.

"I called for volunteers and went over the top at the charge but when I reached the barn I was alone. I bayoneted the two Germans that I found there, seized the machine gun, and took possession of the barn."

As the enemy pushed forwards later in March 1918, Doyle was captured during fighting early in the German 'Spring' ▶

"Doyle, a keen runner, served in India in 1913 where he won both the regimental lightweight boxing title and an elephant in a local raffle"

This month's special iteration of Hero of the Month from the Great War presents a difficult and provocative historiographical question; how does – or indeed, should – a figure's actions after the event alter or preclude perceptions of previous courage and gallantry and its commemoration?

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Victoria Cross recipients tend to lead adventurous lives both on and off the battlefield. However, few can have led such challenging and complex lives as Company Sergeant Major Martin Doyle. His irrefutable courage in the service of the Crown was honoured with the conferring of the Victoria Cross. But, Doyle is a controversial VC-awardee who is unique among his gallant peers, as, within a year of the announcement of his VC, he was fighting against the very country that had bestowed the award upon him.

This was because Doyle, an Irishman, is the only recipient of Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious award for bravery in the face of the enemy who is also known to have been a member of the Irish Republican Army. We use the term 'hero' in this feature to describe his actions in World War One – not for anything he did for the Republicans post-war.

This year is the centenary of Doyle's VC award and, because I own his medal group and to mark the occasion, I carried out extensive enquires, with the help of his extended family, into his highly unconventional life. Doyle was born on October 25, 1894 in the village of Gusserane, close to the County Wexford town of New Ross. He was the son of Larry Doyle, a farmer struggling to make a living off the land, and his wife Bridget.

Educated at primary schools in Gusserane and nearby Cushinstown. Doyle joined the

Royal Irish Regiment on Boxing Day 1909 and was given service number 9962. At the time, he had only recently turned 15 but he lied to the authorities that he was two years older.

Doyle, a keen runner, served in India in 1913 where he won both the regimental lightweight boxing title and an elephant in a local raffle. (Winning the latter was like winning a modern-day tractor, as elephants were used to work the land in India at that time.)

GREAT WAR SERVICE

Shortly after the outbreak of World War One in August 1914, when still only 19, Doyle was transferred to the Royal Dublin





Offensive' and became a prisoner of war. It is unclear how long he spent as a PoW but it was no more than a matter of days as he was freed again following an Allied counter-attack.

VICTORIA CROSS

Doyle was promoted to acting company sergeant major in August 1918, just days before his VC action in France. His Victoria Cross citation takes up the story: "For most conspicuous bravery on September 2, 1918, near Riencourt [during the Second Battle of Bapaume], when as acting company sergeant major, command of the company devolved upon him consequent on officer casualties.

"Observing that some of our men were surrounded by the enemy, he led a party to their assistance, and by skill and leadership worked his way along the trenches, killed several of the enemy and extricated the party, carrying back, under heavy fire, a wounded officer to a place of safety. Later, seeing a tank in difficulties, he rushed forward under intense fire, routed the enemy who were attempting to get into it, and prevented the advance of another enemy party collecting for a further attack on the tank. An enemy machine gun opened on the tank at close range, rendering it impossible to get the wounded away, whereupon CSM Doyle, with great gallantry, rushed forward, and, single-handed, silenced the machine gun, capturing it with three prisoners. He then carried a wounded man to safety under very heavy fire.

ABOVE Martin Doyle's headstone in Grangegorman Military Cemetery, Dublin.

RIGHT A British Lewis Gun team during the Spring Offensive, near Bailleul, April 1918.

"Later in the day, when the enemy counter-attacked his position, he showed great power of command, driving back the enemy and capturing many prisoners. Throughout the whole of these operations CSM Doyle set the very highest example to all ranks by his courage and total disregard of danger."

His VC was formally announced in *The London Gazette* on January 31, 1919, more than two months after the Armistice. As a result of his decoration, Doyle was given a hero's welcome when he returned to New Ross in March 1919.

Doyle attended a Buckingham Place investiture on May 8, 1919 at which he received both his MM and VC from King George V. However, after being demobbed in July, the Ireland that Doyle and his comrades returned to was very different to the one that most had left at the start of World War One. This is where, notwithstanding his gallant and hazardous feats in service of Britain, Doyle's path took a dramatic turn.

IRISH REPUBLICANISM

After the armed Easter Rising rebellion in Dublin and other areas in April 1916, there was a surge of Irish nationalism with more and more men and women seeking to sever their ties with Britain. As a result, some returning troops were looked upon as traitors by their countrymen for fighting for what had become the 'enemy' during the Great War.

Many of these former troops were quickly won over to Irish republicanism and, after the IRA was formed in 1919, Doyle was one of those who joined the 'cause'. In fact, he was recruited to the Irish Republican Army at around the time that he got married to Charlotte Kennedy, on November 25, 1919. The couple lived in New Ross.

Doyle served with the Mid Clare Brigade of the IRA in Ennis and initially worked as an undercover agent for the Republican cause when he would have preferred to have openly taken up arms against the British. Because of his distinguished military career, Doyle was given a role by the British at its garrison in Ennis and the IRA's leaders were not slow to see that his value as a spy was greater than his value as a fighter.

Years later an IRA colleague, Patrick McMahon, stated that Doyle had "advanced all sorts of arguments to prove why he should leave the home with his rifle and go to the hills, but rightly or wrongly I succeeded in convincing him that he was more useful in the British Bks [Barracks] at the time". It is understood that Doyle provided information to the IRA on troop

movements and even smuggled out weapons and ammunition.

Doyle was certainly serving in the IRA when he attended a garden party for VC recipients at Buckingham Palace in June 1920. Within five months, he was back in London this time representing the Royal Munster Fusiliers at a party to mark the unveiling of the Cenotaph in Whitehall.

After the truce of July 1921, which later resulted in Irish independence but also with the partition of the country, there were further divisions in the new Republic. Doyle sided firmly with Michael Collins and, in February 1922, he enlisted into the Irish Free State Army, serving during the 1922-1923 civil war in Waterford, Kilkenny and South Tipperary.

At one point, Doyle was badly wounded in his left arm, apparently trying to stop a bullet fired at him from close range. However, he recovered from his injuries and, after the end of the civil war, he continued his military career, serving with the 2nd and 20th Infantry Battalions and the School of Instruction.

In November 1929, Doyle attended a dinner for VC recipients at the House of Lords and in 1937 was awarded a Coronation Medal. Doyle retired from the Irish Free

State Army in 1937, when he transferred to the reserves. For the final three years of his life, Doyle worked at the Guinness Brewery in Dublin while living in Kimmage, Co Dublin.

He died of polio on November 20, 1940 at Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital in Dublin, aged 46. By then, he had three daughters, all of whom are still alive.

His gravestone in a corner of Grangegorman Military Cemetery, Dublin, was paid for by his former regiment's Old Comrades Association. It bears the badge of the Royal Munster Fusiliers but not the design of the VC.

His family strongly contradict past suggestions that he asked to be buried in his British Army uniform, stating categorically that he was laid to rest in a brown habit, then traditional Roman Catholic burial attire.

His family, many of whom still live in New Ross, also refute rumours that while serving in the IRA he may have been a double agent for the British. They are convinced that,

"Later, seeing a tank in difficulties, he rushed forward under intense fire, routed the enemy who were attempting to get into it, and prevented the advance of another enemy party"



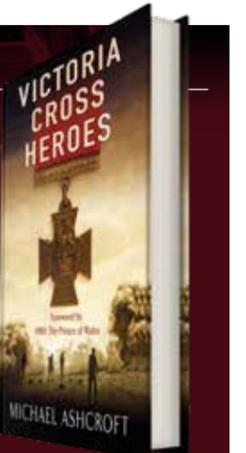
Victoria Cross Heroes



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VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London. For more information, visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes Details of his VC collection may be found at: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

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once he joined the IRA, his conversion to the Republican cause was genuine and lasting. The fact that he was posthumously decorated by the Irish Government, with the War of Independence medal, suggests that this assessment is correct.

FAMILY CONNECTION

I was assisted with my research by two members of Doyle's family: Leighton Thomas, his great, great, nephew, an electrician from New Ross, and Padraig Ryan, his great nephew, a storeman, who also lives in the town. Thomas campaigned successfully for a blue plaque, commissioned by Wexford County Council, to be placed outside Doyle's former home in New Ross.

So, should there be separation between Doyle VC's remarkable feats of bravery in defence of Britain and his subsequent, in the eyes of the crown, treacherous acts in the name of Irish independence? Or, is it right that his later exploits against Britain alter our perception and commemoration of this unique and controversial Victoria Cross recipient? Doyle was, is, for different reasons, hero to many both in Britain and in parts of Ireland. But, while he saved British lives in the Great War, he was at least some part responsible for the probable deaths of others. It is undoubtedly a provocative and difficult case.

I am in favour of such public recognition, like the result of that commissioned in New Ross, for this brave soldier even though he decided to take up arms against Britain within a year of being decorated for gallantry. Most historians and observers distinguish between the early IRA that was fighting for independence and the Provisional IRA that was a terrorist group willing to blow up innocent civilians in its quest to end British rule in Northern Ireland.

The blue plaque, unlike his gravestone, lists his Irish Republican Army service, stating clearly that he served in the British Army, Mid Clare IRA and the Irish Army. As Leighton Thomas puts it: "Martin Doyle was proud Irishman who would have liked to have won his Victoria Cross for Ireland [rather than Britain] but, of course, when the Great War started, Ireland did not exist." ●