

Military Lodges in the Irish Constitution

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Shortly after joining Garryowen Masonic Lodge, No. 923, I was 'volunteered' by the the Worshipful Master, Mitch Bresland, (a practice, the start of which is lost in the mists of time!) to research into Military Lodges in the Irish Constitution. My first port of call was the Irish Freemasons' calendar and directory which listed two extant Military Lodges, No. 295 Saint Patrick's in the Royal Dragoon Guards and No. 322 Glittering Star in the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment. Content with a job well done, I dutifully reported this information back to the Worshipful Master who gave me some good and wholesome advice and instruction which led me to the Library in Molesworth street where the enormity of the undertaking hit home. I was helped further by W. Bro. Reggie Magee who highlighted some exceptionally well written transactions on this subject from the Lodge of Research. I quickly realised that there was little new that I could unearth that had not already been covered by more learned men than I, so I would ask that the Honoured Guests from Lodge 200 bear with me and hope that this general overview will be able to enlighten at least some of the remainder.

I discovered that our own Constitution issued the first Military or travelling Warrant to the 1st Regiment of Foot (The Royal Scots) in 1732, nine years prior to the Grand Lodge of Scotland and twenty three years before the Grand Lodge of England granted their first travelling Warrant. The issuing of Military Warrants was slow at first with a total of five being held at the end of 1734, and by the time the Scottish Grand Lodge started granting them (1741), there were still only eight in the Irish Constitution. Due to the large number of English and Scottish Regiments based in Ireland in those days however, they continued to seek Warrants from Dublin even after their own Grand Lodges were granting Military Warrants. This led to a steady growth in travelling Warrants so that by 1813 there were an incredible 123 military lodges labouring under the Grand Lodge of Ireland, more than our sister Grand

Lodges combined. It should be noted that this list is only of travelling Warrants and does not include those Lodges in Garrisons and other static locations which were of a Military nature. Whilst it is true to say that most Mainland Regiments who were granted Warrants by the Irish Constitution did so when stationed here, there is at least one exception worth highlighting. The 17th of Foot (Leicesters) applied for a warrant from the Grand Lodge of Ireland when they were garrisoned in Minorca in 1743 and were granted Warrant No. 136 which is currently held by Ulidia Masonic Lodge, Belfast. Why this English Regiment based on an Island in the Mediterranean should seek a warrant from our Grand Lodge is not known, but could be explained perhaps by the presence of another Irish Constitution Military lodge in the Garrison, or, an Irish Freemason in the Regiment. This was certainly the case in another English Regiment, the 28th of Foot (The Glosters) who, in 1734 were commanded by Major General Price who came from Saintfield in County Down. The Regiment applied for a Warrant from Dublin and were given Warrant No. 35, which is now being worked by Union Masonic Lodge, Belfast.

The exceptional growth in Military Lodges can be explained by a number of reasons, the most intriguing being the following suggestion by W.Bro. C. G. H. Filor that, "It is difficult to accept that all of these (Military Lodges) represented a spontaneous development during a period of barely one hundred years and, taken together with the evidence of Masonic tradition within the Army in earlier centuries it appears very probable that some of these new lodges were derived from much older lodges from the years before Grand Lodges existed." The fact that in many cases the first Worshipful Master of the Regimental Lodge was the Commanding Officer could point to this being the case, and would no doubt have a direct bearing on its growth! This also led to the practice of soldiers, on being questioned on their whereabouts after a Lodge meeting, replying "Taking wine with the Colonel." Another possibility is that Officer Freemasons saw the potential of the Craft to foster the *esprit de corps* and strengthen the bond along the chain of command. For individual soldiers, in addition to the self improving aspects inherent in membership, the benevolent nature of the Order in the days before widespread insurance surely would have been an added attraction.

It should be borne in mind that in those days there was little in the way of diversion for off duty soldiers, as an excerpt from a letter from Lt.

Knox of the 43rd of Foot, stationed in Nova Scotia highlights "the time passes very wearily, and when the calendar does not furnish us with a loyal excuse for assembling in the evening, we have recourse to a Freemasons Lodge, where we work so hard it is inconceivable to think what a quantity of business of great importance is transacted in a very short space of time", it is heartening to know that some 240 years later, the same can be said of Garryowen Masonic Lodge No. 923! The Regimental Lodge can therefore be seen as a counter to the long periods of boredom which is involved with military service, then as now. It was also an additional help in times of stress as in the case of the 9th of Foot in 1805, when they were wrecked on the French Coast. The brethren of the Battalions Lodge, No. 183 met regularly in Valenciennes which, one imagines, contributed in no small measure to the maintenance of morale during their thirteen years of captivity.

If further proof were required of the calming influence of Freemasonry on the military character one need only look at the records of Military Lodges during the First World war, when there was no shortage of candidates. This was evidenced in the case of Lodge No. 595 in the Fifth Royal Irish Lancers who met only once prior to the outbreak of war and no less than thirty times in France between 1915 and the Armistice in 1918. During this time they raised eleven brethren through the three degrees in addition to the normal work of any lodge such as Installations and routine administration, and at the same time fought in some of the bloodiest engagements in the history of warfare. The work of this lodge in particular, exemplifies the stoicism of Military lodges in general, as highlighted by Rt.W.Bro. C. W. Olden, "Not once in the lodge minutes of the meetings held during the war, is there any mention of the perilous conditions under which these meetings were held, other than in reference to specific casualties suffered by the lodge."

Despite the circumstances the lodge was concerned about the irregular intervals between communications and received the following letter from the Deputy Grand Secretary, V.Wor. Bro. H. E. Flavelle, "*In reply to yours of 23rd inst. In the ordinary way the Bye-Laws should, of course, be strictly observed but at the present time the lodge is meeting under such absolutely unprecedented circumstances that I think you would be justified in calling the meetings at such times as would suit the exigencies of the moment. If the matter at anytime came to be considered by the Board of General Purposes, I am quite satisfied that they would exonerate the Lodge from blame*".

Whilst there is no doubt that many individual soldiers and the Regiments themselves benefited from membership of the Craft, it is equally evident that the Order was strengthened by having so many military men in its ranks. Examples of this are given by Bro William Geoghegan M. B. E. in his paper on the First Volunteer Lodge. On the 13th February 1913, the officers of the Lodge appeared before the Grand Lodge of Instruction and gave an exemplification of opening and closing the lodge, on which occasion the first degree was conferred by the Worshipful Master in a praiseworthy manner, the Lodge receiving the congratulations of the Grand Lodge of Instruction for the manner in which the work was done. The tendency of the Military to encourage and develop less experienced members was shown in 1914, when a team of the most junior members of the Lodge attended before the Grand Lodge of Instruction and exemplified to opening, closing and calling up of the Lodge, the Second Degree being exemplified by Bro. T. Wallace Dickie. In complimenting the team, the Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Instruction said, "The Degree and working of the Lodge were illustrated by brethren, not one of whom had held office, and were exemplified in a manner displaying such efficiency, precision and accuracy, as could not be excelled by the most experienced Mason in the land". Praise indeed!

The popularity of the Craft among military men was not restricted to the British Army, with most of the European powers and the early United States Army having their own Regimental Lodges. This gave ample opportunity for the Fraternal aspects of Freemasonry to be shown over the years, even during hostilities, without in any way negating the allegiance owed to the Sovereign or Rulers of the state in which the participants resided. For example, to quote from "The History of Freemasonry" by Robert Freke Gould, the Thirty-ninth of Foot's working tools and jewels fell into the hands of the enemy during the Peninsular war, but were returned to the Regiment. The same fate befell the Lodge chest in the Sixth Dragoon Guards (No. 277, now Irvinestown) which was returned under a flag of truce and with a guard of honour. The Seventeenth of Foot lost its warrant in the American war of Independence, and it was courteously transmitted to them by General Parsons, with a fraternal letter. The Forty-Sixth of Foot (227 currently dormant) twice lost its chest, which was sent back on the first occasion by order of General Washington, and on the second, by the French military authorities, three years after its capture at Dominica, in 1805.

As Regiments were posted to other parts of the British Empire their Lodges took the warrant and regalia in a chest which was second only to the Colours in the degree of protection given to it. It can also be inferred by the number of Provincial Grand Lodges of the Irish Constitution in former Countries of the Empire, that they gave the Light of Freemasonry to many who would not have received it otherwise. Indeed, Lodge number 128 in the Thirty-ninth of Foot claimed to have made the first Freemason in India under a European Warrant in 1757, and went on to establish many Lodges in Hindustan, justifying their title "Primus in India". Military lodges were also to the fore-front in the Antipodes, where the Brethren of Lodge No. 227 in the Forty-sixth Regiment of foot took part in a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of the Anglican Cathedral in Sydney in 1816. Their turnout and bearing certainly impressed onlookers, some of whom approached members of the Lodge, which ultimately led to the formation of a regular Lodge in Sydney. The first Lodge in New Zealand, although not directly formed by an Army Lodge, did apply for a warrant from the Grand Lodge of Ireland through the Australian Social Lodge which had been constituted in 1820 by Lodge No. 218 of the Forty-eighth of Foot. Members of the Fifty-eighth of Foot (No. 466 currently dormant) formed Ara Lodge in Auckland after the first Maori war, and the United Services Lodge was , as its name suggests, initially formed by service men.

The large amount of Regimental Lodges in North America, mostly Irish Constitution contributed to the predominance in that Continent of the "Ancients" over the "Modems", as highlighted by Robert Freke Gould, "The Irish Lodges always worked the system in vogue among the so-called Ancient Masons, or perhaps it would be better to say, that the latter took their masonry undiluted and unchanged from the former. The result, in America, where the influence of the Army Lodges made itself chiefly felt, was very marked". W. Bro. R. J. Clegg points out that the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts was established mainly by Military Lodges, one Scottish and two Irish and shows the influence of Regimental Lodges in New York and other American Cities. Further North in Canada, the ubiquitous Forty-sixth of Foot's warrant, No. 227 which was dormant due to the deaths of most of the brethren through a cholera epidemic, was re-issued in 1848 to the Lodge of Social and Military virtue in Halifax Nova Scotia, where the Regiment was then stationed. In 1805 this Lodge joined the Grand Lodge of the Province of Canada as Lodge No. 1.

So why have the numbers of Military lodges in the Irish Constitution dwindled from around two hundred at its height, to the two lodges of today? As always there are several possible explanations, the most obvious being the decline in the number of Regiments in the British Army, and the later adoption by the English and Scottish Grand lodges of also issuing military warrants. In a sense, it could be said that they were a victim of their own success, in so much as there is almost nowhere on the Globe that a Regiment could be posted, that does not have its own permanent lodges complete with meeting places. The time available to soldiers for extra curricular activities is also more limited and the advantage of attending an established lodge rather than maintain one in the Regiment can be clearly seen.