



# Easter RISING

Australians on leave were caught up in the Irish revolt in Dublin in 1916. by Jeff Kildea

As dawn broke across Australia on 25 April 1916, heralding the first ANZAC Day, a day which commemorates the defining moment of the Australian nation, Irish rebels who had seized the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin the day before were fighting to establish a nation of their own. When the British Empire marshalled its forces to strike back, Australian soldiers on leave in Ireland were called to arms to help put down the rising. While the men of the AIF, newly arrived in Belgium and France, were preparing themselves for battle with the Germans, these Australians found themselves called upon to fight not the Hun but Irishmen with whom they had no quarrel.

Among them were two drivers, Private George Davis and his mate Private Bob Grant, and two Queenslanders from the 9th Battalion, Privates John Chapman and Michael McHugh. Each had been

evacuated from Gallipoli to England due to illness and decided to spend Easter leave in Ireland.

On Easter Monday, the day of the rising, Chapman was returning by train from sightseeing in Killarney and was held up because of the fighting. When he arrived in Dublin the next day he was escorted to the Royal Barracks and told to be ready for action at any time. He soon found himself alongside soldiers of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers fighting in the streets around the quays along River Liffey. The insurgents had seized buildings on both sides of the river in the vicinity of the barracks. A group of about 20 men, led by 19-year-old Sean Heuston, occupied the Mendicity Institution on the south side, preventing troops moving along the northern quays toward another insurgent stronghold at the Four Courts. It took more than two days to capture Heuston's position and free up access along the quays.



Davis and Grant had also been to Killarney but were back in Dublin in time to witness the rebels mustering for the seizure of the GPO and other buildings throughout the city. Ignoring a warning to get out of Dublin, the two diggers joined a crowd of locals watching rebels firing at people from the roof of City Hall. Their complacency was soon dispelled when bullets began hitting the nearby pavement. As the two Australians fled the scene, a man running alongside them was shot in the back and fell to the ground. The diggers dragged him around the corner and bundled him into a taxi.

In the meantime, McHugh had been out in the streets when the rising started and took refuge in Trinity College. He found himself among a small band of defenders, including five New Zealanders. The ANZACs were posted on the roof of the college, where they acted as snipers. As well as making it dangerous for insurgents to cross the streets within their field of fire, the ANZACs engaged in sniping duels with rebels in nearby buildings. The marksmanship of the ANZAC sharpshooters at Trinity College became legendary.

Deciding to heed the advice to get out of Dublin, Davis and Grant made their way to Portobello Barracks only to learn there was no transport to England. Instead, they were ordered to protect the barracks and that night joined a party of 70 men escorting arms and ammunition to Dublin Castle. As they passed under a street lamp a volley of rifle shots rained down on them. Davis recalled, "bullets 'pinged' and broken glass clattered to the footpath. The horses bolted and vanished in the darkness, and the troops did likewise."

Portobello Barracks was home to the 3rd Battalion Royal Irish Rifles. One of its officers, Captain John Bowen-Colthurst, was court-martialled for one of the most notorious events of the rising. He led a patrol to uncover a group of rebels suspected to be harbouring in a local shop. The patrol included an Australian soldier who later described the incident in a letter home, which was then anonymously published in the *Melbourne Age* in July 1916. He wrote:

*Near the barracks we saw three men. The captain wanted to know their business, and one answered back, so the captain just knocked him insensible with the butt of his rifle. The other two ran and one shouted something about "down with the military" and the captain just shot him dead.*


At the shop, the Australian threw a bomb through the front window, allowing the men to charge in.

*There was a light showing from a room downstairs. I went down carefully, and told the people there to put up their hands, just allowing them to see a bomb I was holding. This had the right effect, and I went down and found five men and three women. They were marched to the barracks. Two were let go. The three others turned out to be head men of the gang and were shot.*

It was later revealed that the three men were journalists, including the well-known Dublin eccentric Francis Sheehy Skeffington. Colthurst had fabricated the story that they were insurgents.

The published letter provoked a strong reaction, particularly from Irish-Australian Catholics already outraged by what they saw as Britain's brutal suppression of the rising. Socialist activist D.P. Russell later republished the letter in a pamphlet, posing the question: "Did Australia's sons in Dublin add lustre to the deeds of the heroes who fought and died in Gallipoli for the 'Rights of Small Nations'?"

Russell's question remains. What do we say about the deeds of these Australians? Furthermore, did they have any qualms about fighting Irish insurgents? Davis was certainly not happy about what he was asked to do. After all, he had joined up to fight the Germans. He later wrote: "We were in a very unenviable position, for we personally had no quarrel with the rioters." As a pragmatic Australian soldier, however, he did what he was lawfully ordered, "making the best of a bad job".

To this day we expect no less of our soldiers than to do their duty regardless of their personal views. But with Australian soldiers increasingly being deployed to areas of civil unrest, the story of the diggers in Dublin serves to remind us of the difficulties that doing one's duty in such situations can involve. 



**Facing page top:** Trinity College and College Green, where Private Michael McHugh was positioned. Image courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, a12023 H42532/73

**Facing page main:** Australian and New Zealand soldiers board a donkey cart for a trip to Killarney Lakes, AWM H19291

**Above:** The result of British bombardment of a Sinn Féin position during the 1916 Easter uprising, AWM A00067

#### AUTHOR

Dr Jeff Kildea is writing a book on Australian soldiers and Ireland during the First World War, to be published in early 2007. This article was researched with assistance from the Australian Army History Research Grants Scheme

