

= Michael John O 'Leary =

Major Michael John O 'Leary VC (29 September 1890 ? 2 August 1961) was an Irish recipient of the Victoria Cross , the most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces . O 'Leary achieved his award for single @-@ handedly charging and destroying two German barricades defended by machine gun positions near the French village of Cuinchy , in a localised operation on the Western Front during the First World War .

At the time of his action , O 'Leary was a nine @-@ year veteran of the British armed forces and by the time he retired from the British Army in 1921 , he had reached the rank of lieutenant . He served in the army again during the Second World War , although his later service was blighted by periods of ill @-@ health . At his final retirement from the military in 1945 , O 'Leary was an Army major in command of a prisoner of war camp . Between the wars , O 'Leary spent many years employed as a police officer in Canada and is sometimes considered to be a Canadian recipient of the Victoria Cross . Following the Second World War he worked as a building contractor in London , where he died in 1961 .

= = Early life = =

O 'Leary was born in 1890 , one of four children of Daniel and Margaret O 'Leary , who owned a farm at Inchigeela , near Macroom in County Cork , Ireland . Daniel O 'Leary was a fervent Irish nationalist and keen sportsman who participated in competitive weightlifting and football . Aged 16 and unwilling to continue to work on his parent 's land , Michael O 'Leary joined the Royal Navy , serving at the shore establishment HMS Vivid at Devonport for several years until rheumatism in his knees forced his departure from the service . Within a few months however , O 'Leary had again tired of the farm and joined the Irish Guards regiment of the British Army .

O 'Leary served three years with the Irish Guards , leaving in August 1913 to join the Royal Northwest Mounted Police (RNWMP) in Saskatchewan , Canada . Operating from Regina , Constable O 'Leary was soon commended for his bravery in capturing two criminals following a two @-@ hour gunbattle , for which service he was presented with a gold ring . At the outbreak of the First World War in Europe during August 1914 , O 'Leary was given permission to leave the RNWMP and return to Britain in order to rejoin the army as an active reservist . On 22 October , O 'Leary was mobilized and on 23 November he joined his regiment in France , then fighting with the British Expeditionary Force , entrenched in Flanders .

= = First World War service = =

During December 1914 , O 'Leary saw heavy fighting with the Irish Guards and was Mentioned in Despatches and subsequently promoted to Lance Corporal on 5 January 1915 . Three weeks later , on 30 January , the Irish Guards were ordered to prepare for an attack on German positions near Cuinchy on the La Bassée Canal , a response to a successful German operation in the area five days before . The Germans attacked first however , and on the morning of 1 February seized a stretch of canal embankment on the western end of the 2nd Brigade line from a company of Coldstream Guards . This section , known as the Hollow , was tactically important as it defended a culvert that passed underneath a railway embankment . 4 Company of Irish Guards , originally in reserve , were tasked with joining the Coldstream Guards in retaking the position at 04 : 00 , but the attack was met with heavy machine gun fire and most of the assault party , including all of the Irish Guards officers , were killed or wounded .

To replace these officers , Second Lieutenant Innes of 1 Company was ordered forward to gather the survivors and withdraw , forming up at a barricade on the edge of the Hollow . Innes regrouped the survivors and , following a heavy bombardment from supporting artillery and with his own company providing covering fire , assisted the Coldstream Guards in a second attack at 10 : 15 . Weighed down with entrenching equipment , the attacking Coldstream Guardsmen faltered and

began to suffer heavy casualties . Innes too came under heavy fire from a German barricade to their front equipped with a machine gun .

Michael O 'Leary had been serving as Innes 's orderly , and had joined him in the operations earlier in the morning and again in the second attack . Charging past the rest of the assault party , O 'Leary closed with the first German barricade at the top of the railway embankment and fired five shots , killing the gun 's crew . Continuing forward , O 'Leary confronted a second barricade , also armed with a machine gun 60 yards (55 m) further on and again mounted the railway embankment , to avoid the marshy ground on either side . The Germans spotted his approach , but could not bring their gun to bear on him before he opened fire , killing three soldiers and capturing two others after he ran out of ammunition . Reportedly , O 'Leary had made his advance on the second barricade " intent upon killing another German to whom he had taken a dislike " .

Having disabled both guns and enabled the recapture of the British position , O 'Leary then returned to his unit with his prisoners , apparently " as cool as if he had been for a walk in the park . " For his actions , O 'Leary received a battlefield promotion to sergeant on 4 February and was recommended for the Victoria Cross , which was gazetted on 18 February :

= = = Michael O 'Leary song = = =

In 1915 , Jack Judge recorded Michael O 'Leary , V.C. , a song about O 'Leary 's role in the war effort .

= = = Later war service = = =

Returning to Britain to receive his medal from King George V at Buckingham Palace on 22 June 1915 , O 'Leary was given a grand reception attended by thousands of Londoners in Hyde Park on 10 July . He was also the subject of much patriotic writing , including a poem in the Daily Mail and the short play O 'Flaherty V.C. by George Bernard Shaw . Tributes came from numerous prominent figures of the day , including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who said that " No writer in fiction would dare to fasten such an achievement on any of his characters , but the Irish have always had a reputation of being wonderful fighters , and Lance @-@ Corporal Michael O ? Leary is clearly one of them . " and Thomas Scanlan who said : " I heard early this week of the great achievements of the Irish Guards . All Ireland is proud of O ? Leary . He fully deserves the high honour that has been conferred upon him . Ireland is grateful to him . " His reception was repeated in Macroom when he visited Ireland , with crowds turning out to applaud him . Daniel O 'Leary was interviewed in a local newspaper regarding his son 's exploit but was reportedly unimpressed , commenting : " I am surprised he didn 't do more . I often laid out twenty men myself with a stick coming from Macroom Fair , and it is a bad trial of Mick that he could kill only eight , and he having a rifle and bayonet . "

O 'Leary was further rewarded for his service , being advanced to a commissioned rank as a second lieutenant with the Connaught Rangers , and he was also presented with a Russian decoration , the Cross of St. George (third class) . Despite his popularity with the crowds in London and Macroom , he was jeered by Ulster Volunteers at a recruitment drive in Ballaghaderreen during the autumn of 1915 . This treatment caused such a scandal that it was raised in the Houses of Parliament in December .

In 1916 , O 'Leary travelled to Salonika with the 5th battalion of the Connaught Rangers to serve in the Balkans campaign , remaining in theatre until the end of the war , following which he was stationed in Dover with the 2nd battalion until demobilised in 1921 . During his service in the Balkans , O 'Leary contracted malaria , which was to have severe negative effects on his health for the rest of his life .

He was in the same regiment as the British actor Stanley Holloway and both served together in France . After the war ended , they both remained close friends and Holloway often stayed in The May Fair where O 'Leary later worked as a concierge .

= = Later life = =

Leaving his wife Greta and their two children in Britain , O 'Leary returned to Canada in March 1921 with the purported intention of rejoining the RNWMP , newly renamed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police . For unknown reasons , this plan came to nothing and after some months giving lectures on his war service and working in a publishing house , O 'Leary joined the Ontario Provincial Police , charged with enforcing the prohibition laws . In 1924 , with his family recently arrived from England , O 'Leary left the Ontario police force and became a police sergeant with the Michigan Central Railway in Bridgeburg , Ontario , receiving £ 33 a month .

In 1925 , O 'Leary was the subject of several scandals , being arrested for smuggling illegal immigrants and later for irregularities in his investigations . Although he was acquitted both times , he spent a week in prison following the second arrest and lost his job with the railway . Several months later , the municipal authorities in Hamilton , Ontario loaned him £ 70 to pay for him and his family to return to Ireland . Although his family sailed on the SS Leticia , O 'Leary remained in Ontario , working with the attorney general 's office .

With his health in serious decline , the British Legion arranged for O 'Leary to return to Britain and work in their poppy factory . By 1932 , O 'Leary was living in Southborne Avenue in Colindale , had regained his health and found employment as a commissionaire at The May Fair in London , at which he was involved in charitable events for wounded servicemen . With the mobilisation of the British Army in 1939 , O 'Leary returned to military service as a captain in the Middlesex Regiment . O 'Leary was sent to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force but had returned to Britain before the Battle of France due to a recurrence of his malaria .

No longer fit for full active service , O 'Leary was transferred to the Pioneer Corps and took command of a prisoner of war camp in Southern England . In 1945 , he was discharged from the military as unfit for duty on medical grounds as a major and found work as a building contractor , in which career he remained until his retirement in 1954 . Two of O 'Leary 's sons had also served in the military during the war , with both receiving Distinguished Flying Crosses for their actions . As a Victoria Cross recipient , O 'Leary joined the VE day parade in 1946 , but at the 1956 Centenary VC review his place was taken by an imposter travelling in a bath chair . With his health again declining , O 'Leary moved to Limesdale Gardens in Edgware shortly before his death in 1961 at the Whittington Hospital in Islington .

O 'Leary was buried at Mill Hill Cemetery following a funeral service at the Roman Catholic Annunciation Church in Burnt Oak which was attended by an honour guard from the Irish Guards and six of his children . His medals were later presented to the Irish Guards , and are on display at the Regimental Headquarters . He is also remembered in his birthplace , the macroom @-@ online website listing him as a prominent citizen and states that " while many might consider he was fighting with the wrong army , in the wrong war , he was nevertheless a very brave , resourceful and capable soldier [sic] who deserved the honours bestowed upon him . "