

A  
Monument  
of Their  
Own



# Hundreds Gather in Brooklyn Cemetery to Honor Irish GIs Slain in Korean War



*At Green-Wood Cemetery, members of the Cork Association of New York, left to right: Connie Doolan; Joe Murphy; Korean War veterans Dan O'Neill, Mike Cronin, Denis Forde, and Sean Driscoll are on hand for the unveiling of a monument honoring the 28 Irish-born GIs slain during the Korean War, including four men from Cork.*

53 years after an uneasy truce left divided the Korean peninsula, comrades, family, and supporters unveil monument to 27 Irish-born soldiers and one Marine who didn't make it back.



The year 1953 brought an uneasy truce to the Korean peninsula, leaving North and South Korea divided and wary of each other to this day. More than 50,000 American military personnel died in the three-year war, along with more than 2 million others. Twenty-eight of these American fatalities were Irish nationals.

Sandwiched between World War II and the Vietnam War, less exalted than the former and less controversial than the latter, the so-called Korean Conflict gained a reputation in the West as “The Forgotten War.” And those who fought it have had to scrap to gain the recognition that their sacrifices deserved, including American citizenship for the foreign born.

Hundreds of Irish-born immigrants filled the ranks of the 500,000 U.S. military personnel serving in Korea, fighting under the United Nations flag with forces of 16 other nations. Upon their return, just like all other immigrants then, they had to wait a mandated five years before becoming eligible for U.S. citizenship.

1953’s Public Law 86, though, cut a break for those immigrants who would serve in the regular U.S. military. Going forward, they wouldn’t need to serve in a declared war nor have to wait the statutory five years, only between 90 and 180 days.

However, the new law did not include a grandfather clause, nor include reservists, so the war’s Irish GIs had to wait for the old requirements to be met, and the dead had to wait for John Leahy. On Oct. 14, a resplendent and warm day, a monument was unveiled in honor of the 28, and Korean War veteran Leahy had a chance to consider anew his accomplishment and that of his allies, the granting in 2003 of U.S. citizenship to the 28.

Many of those who helped were among the 250 people gathered under a powder blue sky at Green-Wood Cemetery, in New York City’s borough of Brooklyn. Green-Wood, founded in 1838, encompasses 478 acres and four lakes, and is among the most

beautiful and historic cemeteries in the world. Leahy, a native of Lixnaw, County Kerry, was one of several speakers at the unveiling of the two-ton, gray granite slab that bears the names of the 28, along with a Celtic cross and epigraph.

Leahy told the throng: “Today is possibly the proudest day of my life. These 28, just after crossing home plate, they’re now in a beautiful clubhouse and have a monument of their own.” He went on to eulogize his fallen comrades, while noting that the memorial is about 60 feet from the final resting place of Matilda Tone, widow of Theobald Wolfe Tone, an enduring symbol of Irish republicanism.

Leahy, a sergeant with the 82nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion during the war, pushed for 27 years to gain citizenship for his fallen comrades. He had received a citation for capturing a spy in Korea, and chuckled dryly when reflecting on the impact of his immigrant status then: “I got a citation for catching a spy and couldn’t get (work in) the Post Office upon coming back!”

Mayo native John T. Jennings, a medic with the 32nd Infantry

Division in Korea, said, “We had to be three years in the service and five years in the country before we qualified (for citizenship). You couldn’t even sweep the street with a broom without being an American citizen.” He called the monument “long overdue” and was visibly pleased that his fallen comrades had finally received this recognition.

Irish Consul General New York, Ambassador Tim O’Connor, the Korean Consulate’s Kim Wan-joong, and Brendan O’Caollai, Deputy Consul General of Ireland, were only a few of the dignitaries who addressed the throng, flanked by U.S. Army soldiers bearing flags and rifles. Kim thanked the Irish-Americans for their serv-

*“These 28, just after crossing home plate, they’re now in a beautiful clubhouse and have a monument of their own.”*



*Kerry-born GI John Leahy, a veteran of the Korean War, and his wife Eileen worked to erect this monument to Irish-born GIs slain in Korean War. Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn.*





ALEX FETHÈRE

Keynote speaker Ray O'Hanlon, senior editor at the New York-based Irish Echo: "There's something about stone, and today we have stone, we have permanence, enshrined memory and legacy."



ALEX FETHÈRE

Kitty Thornton and Maureen O'Dea Filip, both from the Mayo Society of New York, at the unveiling of a new monument honoring the 28 Irish-born soldiers and Marines who died in American military service during the Korean War.



U.S. ARMY

Troops of the 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, fire the 4.2 mortar against the invading North Koreans. 6 August 1950.





American soldier reading mail, Korea.

ices and sacrifice, then went on to say, "In particular, we owe the current economically prosperous and politically democratic Korea so much to the 28 Irish-Americans who gave their lives in the war."

Ray O'Hanlon, senior editor at the New York-based weekly Irish Echo, sounded a similar note during his keynote address when speaking of John Toland's book "The Forgotten War," saying: "The Koreans and the Irish are very similar people. Indeed, Toland described the Koreans as the Irish of East Asia. We have a very similar outlook on life, very similar temperaments, very similar habits."

Both countries have been dominated and divided, as well, but this went unmentioned in the day's spirit of international camaraderie.

O'Hanlon congratulated Leahy, along with deceased Vietnam War veteran Brian McGinn, and the committee that had worked for posthumous citizenship and, subsequently, the memorial. "There's something

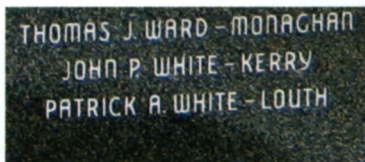
about stone," O'Hanlon said, "and today we have stone, we have permanence, enshrined memory and legacy."

The local Mayo, Leitrim, and Cork societies helped raise money and awareness of the need for a memorial, and representatives were present to celebrate the occasion. "We have to commend those 28 that died – our

hearts go out to them, I'm glad they're finally at rest and properly remembered. God bless America and God bless Ireland," said Mike Regan, past president of the Mayo Society. Many from the County Leitrim Society of New York, more than a century in existence,

turned out, including their Vice President Helen Lavin. She is the niece of Patrick J. Lavin, a private from Leitrim whose name is etched in the first column of the memorial stone.

Tigue Murphy, treasurer of The Irish Korean War Memorial Committee, said the Committee raised \$18,000 and was gifted with







Gun crew of the 64th Field Artillery Battalion, 25th Infantry Division, fire a 105-mm howitzer on North Korean positions, near Uirson. 27 Aug 1950.

\$10,000 from the Irish government, “Whatever we had left over we gave to Green-Wood Cemetery, for perpetual care. They paid for this (reception), they paid for the (monument’s) foundation, they put the shrubbery around, and didn’t take any money (for any of these).”

Murphy said that the memorial had been shopped around to various venues, including Arlington National Cemetery, whose officials indicated “they needed the space to bury soldiers.” For a while the Committee was so desperate that “we were seeing who was putting up a flagpole, so we could put their names on it.” Eventually, Green-Wood approached the committee, Murphy said.

Green-Wood President Richard J. Moylan said in a written statement: “America has been made strong by the contributions of both our military and hard-working immigrants. Throughout the cemetery’s history, we have always honored our war dead, dating back to men who lost their lives in the American Revolution and the Civil War. So it was fitting that Green-Wood Cemetery honor these brave Irish-born soldiers who died so that generations to come might enjoy the freedoms of this great country.” ■

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More than 200 individuals turned out Oct. 14 to honor the 28 Irish-born GIs who were slain in the Korean War. The throng unveiled this 2-ton monument, which lists each of the 28 by name and county of origin.

ALEX FÉTHIÈRE