

The Connaught Rangers Mutiny in India: the Derry connection

The end of the Great War in November 1918 did not bring peace. The following month (December) saw a UK General Election which resulted in a massive victory for Sinn Féin in Ireland committed to establishing an independent Irish Republic. This they did in January 1919 when the First Dáil met in Dublin. Shortly afterwards the war of independence (or the Tan War) began as Britain tried to crush the newly independent country leading to conflict throughout the island, including Derry. In the summer of 1920 the war spread outside of Ireland. 5000 miles away on the subcontinent of India, a small conflict was to break out which left several people dead and many facing long prison sentences. There is a Derry connection.

It began on Monday, 28th June, 1920 in the town of Jullundur (known as Jalandhar today) in the Punjab, some 200 miles north of Delhi. On that day at 8:00 am in the morning, a group of four soldiers in the C Company of the 1st battalion, Connaught Rangers, announced they were refusing to obey orders. They said that this was to show solidarity with the struggle for independence which was going on at that time in Ireland and as a protest at the brutality of the Black and Tans, a regiment of ex British soldiers recruited to fight the IRA.

They were led by a man called James Hawes from County Clare.

Later that day they were joined by members of B Company so that as evening fell there were up to 300 soldiers openly defying the military authorities. By nightfall the bungalow where the mutineers were based was flying the Irish tricolor and not the British union jack.

James Hawes who initiated the mutiny was later to write: *“When I joined the British Army in 1914, they told us we were going out to fight for the liberation of small nations. But when the war was over, and I went home to Ireland, I found that, so far as one small nation was concerned, my own, these were just words.”*

On the 30th June, the mutiny spread to Solon, about 50 miles away in the foothills of the Himalayas and where other members of the Connaught Rangers were based. They were led by James Daly, aged 20, from Ballymoe, County Galway. He was already known as a Republican sympathizer.

This was when the mutiny took a fatal turn. Aware that other British Army regiments were on their way to quell the rebellion, a group of soldiers led by James Daly attempted to seize a cache of arms. In the ensuing melee, two mutineers were killed, Peter Sears from Co. Mayo and Patrick Smyth from Drogheda.

One of the Mutineers who was subsequently arrested was James O’Hea. He came from 221 Bishop Street, Derry. O’Hea was only 19 and had joined the British Army in July 1918 in Shipquay Street, just as the Great War (1st World War) was coming to an end. He was a fitter by trade.

While he was in military custody he contracted gastric flu from which he never fully recovered. Like the other men held he was denied everything except basic food and water.

One of the men held in custody did die. He was Private John Miranda from Liverpool. In fact a number of the mutineers were English. Sergeant Woods, who had earned a Distinguished Conduct Medal while in France, explained his reasons for joining the mutiny to the Court Martial, “These boys fought for England with me, and I was ready to fight for Ireland with them.”

A number of mutineers, including Hawes and Daly managed to escape for a while in order to get additional requisitions for the rest of the men held in custody.

On Monday, 30th August, the court martials began. 59 of the mutineers were given sentences of up to 15 years and 13 were sentenced to death. Of those 13, only Private James Daly was executed (on Tuesday, 2nd November) at Dagshai Jail.

Those sentenced to prison sentences were transferred to England. One of them, James Davis, actually escaped from Woking Jail and returned to Ireland where he immediately joined the IRA and became active in the Sperrin Mountains in the North.

The rest were released in January 1923 and returned to an Ireland already divided by partition.

James O'Hea returned to Derry. He had not been amongst those court martialled which was to impact of him later. In 1936 after a campaign which had lasted several years, the Irish Free State Government decided to award a small pension to those who had participated in the mutiny. Unfortunately for O'Hea, he was not given a pension because it was limited to those court martialled and subsequently jailed.

In 1970, the body of James Daly, the last man executed for mutiny in the British Army, was returned to Ireland as were the bodies of Sears and Smythe. Only the body of John Miranda, the lad from Liverpool, who had no relatives in Ireland, remains in India.

For further reading:

<https://independentleft.ie/connaught-rangers-mutiny-1920/>

The Derry Mutineers.

By the 3rd July, 1920, the Connaught Rangers Mutiny had come to an end. Between three to five hundred men had refused to obey orders in protest at the brutality of the Black and Tans in Ireland. Two of the mutineers had been shot dead by soldiers loyal to the Crown.

Of the men who had mutinied, two came from Derry. Private James O'Hea and Corporal Jim Davis. Of the two only Jim Davis was to be court martialled. He was one of the leaders of the Mutiny.

The court martials began at the end of August and continued through most of September, 1920.

The story of Jim Davis has been largely forgotten, in Derry at least. Yet it is an extraordinary story of a British soldier who was imprisoned for mutiny against the Crown in protest at the atrocities being committed by the Black and Tans, and who later escaped from jail and joined the IRA during the war of independence.

Some of Jim Davis's story is readily available. He had taken part in the Mutiny at Jullundur (known as Jalandhar today) at the end of June, 1920. On the first night of the mutiny he had been elected to the Committee of Seven by his fellow mutineers. This committee was given responsibility for the leadership and organisation of the mutiny and to negotiate on the men's behalf. Back in Dublin after his release from prison, he became Secretary of the Connaught Rangers Mutiny Association. He died in 1948 in Dublin.

There is a monument in Glasnevin Cemetery (see below) to those who participated in the mutiny and were subsequently court martialled. If you look closely at the names on the memorial you will not see any James Davis recorded. Instead, near the top, you see the name Francis Owen Davis.



The evidence they are one and the same person is found in the records from the Military Service Pensions Collection in Dublin. Here he is recorded as being Jim Davis up until the time of his death. The records then suddenly begin to refer to him as Francis Owen Davis.

But they provide no information about why he has two different sets of forenames. There is no information either in these records as to where Jim Davis was born. If he had been born in Derry, as had been suggested by one secondary source, surely there would be a birth certificate to prove this?

Yet there is no reference to a James Davis or a Frances Owen Davis amongst the relevant birth certificates or census records of that period. Just to complicate matters, British military records have his birth year as 1881, whereas Irish military records have his birth year as 1887. In fact they are both wrong!

So who then was this man, James or Francis Owen Davis, who clearly existed but about whom so little background information appears to exist?

The truth about James Davis and why he had two sets of forenames is found in a small article published in the *Derry Journal* on the 7th April 1952.¹ The article was written by the editor of the paper, Frank McCarroll, who used the nom-de-plume "Onlooker". Frank McCarroll died in 1994

The key fact recorded in this article is that "James Davis" is not the mutineer's real name, but an alias.

His original name was Francis Owen Lafferty and he does have a birth certificate. He was born in Derry's Bogside in Rossville Street on the 7th June 1883. As it happens, his address in Rossville street, now demolished, is very close to the location of the Museum of Free Derry. His father was Patrick Lafferty, a cattle dealer and his mother Rose Lafferty, née Doherty.

The reason he changed his name is interesting. It would be almost impossible for this to happen today. Francis Owen Lafferty originally joined the Royal Navy in 1898 (aged 15) but after three years he went AWOL² and

¹ My gratitude to Stanley McWilliams, late of Muff now of Bunrana, Donegal, for providing me with this information.

² Absent Without Leave

returned to Derry. Shortly afterwards (December 1901) he decided to join the British Army and so was born "James Davis", a name which effectively gave him a new persona. He enlisted with the Royal Munster Fusiliers and served with them until he was transferred, as a full Corporal, to the Connaught Rangers in September 1919.

Corporal Jim Davis played a key role in the Mutiny. As the first day of the mutiny (28th June) came to an end, he was one of seven men elected to lead the mutiny. As one of the Committee of Seven he was given the responsibility to secure and ultimately to hand in the weapons of the mutineers. They were subsequently transferred to an internment camp where Davis was again elected by the men to lead one of the four companies which they established. At one stage Jim Davis along with some of the others came within a whisker of being shot for refusing to obey an order. They were saved by the last minute intervention of a priest.

Jim Davies was one of the first men to be court-martialled. He was sentenced to a two year prison term which was low considering what many of the other soldiers got. One of them, Private James Daly, was executed.

Indeed the court martials were seriously lacking in basic human rights compliance. Modern lawyers today would have had a field day! In his indictment, Davis is accused of having "attended meetings" of the mutineers. He got two years. Another soldier, Private Alfred Hayes, was "*one of the earliest to volunteer for the Guard room, but did not otherwise take a prominent part*". This soldier got a 10 year sentence. Another soldier, Joseph Hawes, actually the man who started the mutiny. His indictment read "*attitude to the CO was very subordinate; smoked a cigarette while the CO was speaking to him.*" He was sentenced to death, though eventually it was commuted to life imprisonment.

This lack of consistency was noted at the time. In a document written by a civil servant in the War Office, he states "*. . . in other cases it is rather difficult to see why the Court differentiated in punishment when the men with whom*

they were dealing appear on the face of the proceedings to have committed exactly the same act. But probably they were largely influenced by the appearance and demeanour of the prisoners at their trial.”

But Jim Davis' story does not end there.

Transferred by boat to England, he was sent to the military prison in Woking. From here he escaped at the end of 1921. On his return to Ireland he enlisted with the Northern Division of the IRA as a Training Officer. As an IRA volunteer he was later captured by the RUC during an operation in which he and two others tried to seize arms from a British Army Store in the Sperrin Mountains. He was sentenced to another 5 years at Omagh Assizes. This time he was sent to Peterhead in Scotland where he stayed until his release at the beginning of 1927.



The only photograph I have been able to obtain of Jim Davis. Sitting, far right, looking away from camera. The rest are IRA men jailed at Peterhead.

Back in Ireland and now living permanently in Dublin, he worked for awhile in the canteen of McKee Barracks, before becoming a builders labourer in the Four Courts.

He was elected the Secretary of the Connaught Rangers Mutiny Association. This Association was made up of those who had participated in the Mutiny. Having broken their ties with the British Army, they wanted to secure a pension similar to the one received by those who had fought with the IRA during the war of independence. There would be the occasional news report in the papers which mentioned him or a letter published under his and the Association's name.

In 1937 Jim Davis eventually secured the pension he was entitled to. It was the grand sum of 2 shillings and nine and half pence per week.

He died on 16th November 1948, aged 65, and is buried in Deansgrange Cemetery, Donnybrook, Dublin. In the news reports of his death and burial he is named as James Davis. At his funeral was a Mr T Gracie (nephew) and two cousins, Mr J and N Doherty. His widow, Sarah, was also present. She died 24th December 1974. They had no children.

I would like to thank the following for advice, information and photographs about the Connaught Rangers Mutiny. They are members of the Connaught Rangers Mutiny India 1920 Memorial Group which has a Facebook page:

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