

# Proclaiming A Republic: Easter Rising Centenary 1916-2016

## Mementoes of the struggle for freedom

**Ballyheane native Josephine Moran reflects on the legacy of 1916 and what the centenary of the Easter Rising means to her family.**

Some time ago, when finally sorting through my deceased mother's personal possessions, I came upon an old, slightly battered cardboard box. It contained two medals wrapped in soft tissue. One medal hung from a faded red and white striped ribbon and bore the inscription: *Seirbhís Náisiúnta Ré na Práinne An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil 1939-1946*. The other hung from a black and deep orange ribbon and bore an imprint of an armed soldier. The wording on the medal simply read: *Éire, Cogadh na Saoirse*.

On seeing these medals, my mind was cast back years to a time previously when I had come across these mementoes and had questioned my mother with youthful vigour. Back then, she told me that my deceased father, Michael Higgins, was the officer in charge of the local Defence Forces during World War II or 'The Emergency' as it was known in neutral Ireland. My father was known as a military man having served in the Old IRA during the War of Independence.

I grew up in Ballyheane with two brothers and two sisters, Monica, Eileen, Jim and Pat Higgins. My mother, Kathleen Cruise, was 19 years younger than my father. She was born in 1922, in Knockbrack, Ballyhaunis to Nellie and James Cruise. She was the younger of three daughters. She was sent to England in 1939 at 17 years of age to become a nurse like her older sister Eileen in St James' Hospital in Leeds.

After the war, she met my father, Michael Higgins and they married in 1947 in Ballyhaunis. He had spent the war years in Ireland, giving loyal service to the Local Defence Force in Ballyheane. After the war, my father was presented



Josephine Moran displaying her father's medals.

with a service medal to go with the one received for his sterling work during the War of Independence.

That Independence medal was more intriguing in our house as my mother always insisted it was the important one! It was presented to my father because he was active in the Old IRA during the War of Independence. Seemingly he didn't take up arms on account of his youth but served as a runner, bearing messages between different IRA cells of the West Mayo Brigade, often at great personal risk. He and his brothers were known as athletes and hurlers at the time so he was well able to take on the role of a runner. He must have been busy because the West Mayo Brigade was very active in the latter stages of the War of Independence, staging a daring ambush at Carrakennedy, near Westport, that prompted huge numbers of British troops to scour West Mayo in search of them.

My father had been educated at St Jarlath's College in Tuam where he had first learned the skill of hurling which he duly passed on by forming and captaining the Ballyheane hurling team in 1925.

Michael Higgins was born in 1903 and was just 13 when the Easter Rising occurred in Dublin. The executions of the leaders ignited the flame of patriotism and Irish men and women began to seek political and economic liberty in earnest. They called for the recognition of the Republic that had been declared during the Rising. However, it was impossible to take on the might of the British Empire as the Irish were largely poor after 700 years of oppression and famine. They lacked weaponry and training. Other means of achieving independence were sought. One such method involved the burning of the then vacant RIC barracks in case the British reoccupied them.

Michael Higgins, along with other local IRA members, burned down the Ballyheane RIC barracks in 1920 on orders given by GHQ Dublin. He was only 17 at the time. At least 300 RIC barracks went up in smoke across the country around this time. It sent a clear message to the Crown Forces: The Irish were taking them on.

Afterwards, my father



My father, Michael Higgins was the officer in charge of the local battalion in Ballyheane of the Local Defence Force during World War II. This picture shows him on the extreme left in May 1945 with his battalion. Beside him is Thady Quigley, Lisnacurley; Mike Walsh, Derrew is next (at rear). Second from the right in the front row is Willie Basquill, Westland. Others in the picture include John McGovern, Cloonaghmore; Tom Walsh, Westland; John Francis Thomas, Clooncundragh and possibly Mike Quigley. I am grateful to Paddy Murphy, Johnny Fadden and Joe Flynn for their assistance in identifying those in the picture.

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fled across the fields like Finn McCool to his uncle Pat's farm in Magheranagay to avoid arrest. He had been working on a hayshed there and that's where he hid. The local IRA members knew the Castlebar RIC patrol, backed up by the dreaded Black and Tans, would come to investigate the burning of the Ballyheane barracks.

A person ran the risk of arrest, torture, imprisonment and ultimately execution if you became involved in the struggle for Independence. Most young Irish people ran

Michael Higgins and Kathleen Cruise on their wedding day.

that risk in those times, my father included. Public opinion and the clergy were largely opposed to the fight for political freedom by means of violence.

My father's uncle was parish priest of Castlebar and Auxiliary Bishop of Tuam from 1912 until his untimely death in the Parochial House, Castlebar in 1918. His aunt Mary Higgins was married to a by then retired RIC head constable, Tom Sheehy. While cognisant of this, my father was still sufficiently revolutionised to take up the cause for Irish freedom.

The courage, actions and undying spirit in the fight for freedom by our forefathers allow us today to live in the Irish Free State formed in 1922 and formally declared the Irish Republic in 1949.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anama.

Josephine Moran (nee Higgins) resides in Cregboy, Claregalway and is formerly of Ballyheane, Castlebar.

