The Great War, Battle of Ginchy: From the Perspective of Patrick Joseph Ahern
The ‘Decade of Centenaries’ Irish History Competition 2021

Introduction & Background (1875-1890)
My name is Damien Delaney. In the following essay I will be speaking about my great-great-grandfather, Patrick Joseph Ahern. I will be giving a background and taking you through his journey to war with an emphasis on his role in the Battle of Ginchy during the Battle of the Somme in September 1916.

Patrick Joseph (P.J.) Ahern was born on the 22nd of March 1875, in Thurles, Co. Tipperary. His family were relatively well off, and he studied at Mount St. Joseph Abbey, a private boarding school on the outskirts of Roscrea, Co. Offaly. P.J. was a big man, a strong man – a man who had set his sights on enlisting in the army at a young age. The age at which he did this was also premature, like most young men going into war he wasn’t of age. At age 15, PJ escaped Mount. St. Joseph Abbey to arrive at the Crinkill Barracks in Birr. He walked this journey, which would have been just over three hours – that’s if he didn’t get lost along the way. He enlisted into the army in 1890 at age 15 on the 3rd of September. He lied on his service papers saying he was 18 years old.

Service Before WW1 (1890-1912)
PJ served 21 years as a professional soldier, reaching the rank of Sergeant Major. He served in the Second Anglo Boer War and received the Queen’s South Africa medal. He also received the 1911 Coronation Medal for attending the coronation of George V and his wife Mary as king and queen of the British Empire and the United Kingdom on the 22nd of June 1911 which took place at Westminster Abbey in London. This was quite prestigious and would’ve been a great honour to be selected to attend such an event. He was discharged from the army in December 1912.

Intermediate Years (1912-1914)
The majority of Patrick’s time spent during the intermediate years was spent training the National Volunteers. As an ex-Sergeant Major, he was very familiar with training and various drills. He was qualified in musketry (which was the technique of handling a musket), army signalling and army physical training.
Leinster Regiment
The Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians) was formerly known as the 100th Regiment of Foot and 109th Regiment of Foot. The Leinster Regiment, a British infantry regiment, was raised in 1857 to serve in India. The Regiment served in places such as Canada, England, Gibraltar and Malta. It wasn’t until 1881 when the Regiment was reformed. The 100th Regiment of Foot was retitled 1st Battalion, the Prince of Wales Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians) and the 109th Regiment of Foot was renamed 2nd Battalion, the Prince of Wales Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians). During World War One, the Regiment raised 2 Battalions. It had already consisted of 2 regular battalions and 3 reserve battalions. During the Great War they won a total of 32 battle honours and 4 Victoria Crosses, with 1,980 soldiers at the cost. The 7th Battalion, the Battalion at which Patrick Joseph Ahern fought with in the war was disbanded at Tincourt on the 14th of February 1918, with troops going to the 2nd Leinster Battalion and 19th Entrenching Battalion. However, as you will soon find out, Patrick Joseph Ahern didn’t live long enough to see this disbandment.

7th Battalion: Leinster Regiment (1914-1915)
Patrick Joseph Ahern was involved in setting up the 7th (Service) Battalion, Leinster Regiment in Fermoy, County Cork. He was with them from their formation as it was raised in October 1914. This was part of Kitchener’s 47th Brigade, 16th (Irish) Division. moved to Kilworth Camp, not far arrived in England in September of England, they went to Blackdown, their final training. Their last stop Southampton on the 16th of December 1915 at 7am the on the coast of France. The group some food before moving North. training at Choques at 9:40pm on marching on foot to Gosnay, the same day. They arrived in December 1915 after travelling by P.J. celebrated his final Christmas billet. At 10:15am that morning church parade at Gosnay. Over the next few days, the Philosophe, Gosnay, Verquin, held at 3pm in Verquin on the were further laid out and more should know and be able to do. motorcars, transport, books, arms being key information from the ahead of these soldiers, totally oblivious of what they had really gotten themselves into and what was about to go down. It wasn’t until September of the following year where a great
victory came for the Battalion, a victory that came at a great cost, a price that included the life of Lieutenant Patrick Joseph Ahern.

**Battle of Ginchy**

The Battle of Ginchy was a battle that took place during the Battle of the Somme on September 9th, 1916. It was launched in advance of the main September offensive, the Battle of Flers-Courcelette to push the British front line nearer to the main German defences. The 7th Battalion left it until late afternoon before making their advancement, a serious push was met with a heavy response of artillery. The battlefield had become a blood bath, with Patrick Joseph Ahern in the centre of the action. Below I talk through the movements of the 7th Battalion, Leinster Regiment, a log of movements that for some, were a final journey.

**September 1916 (Battle of Ginchy, Battle of the Somme)**

1st of September
At this stage, the Battalion had arrived at Guillemon. They had secured a significant area of the trenches, and nothing of further importance was noted on this day.

2nd of September
The Battalion remained in a secure position in the trenches. They received orders for the attack on Guillemon for the 3rd of September, the next day. The message had been received from the 16th Divisional Commander stating, “The Divisional Commander sends his best wishes to the officers and men of the 47th Brigade and knows that their actions tomorrow will go down in history.” The message was from Major General Sir William Hickie, a man native of Terryglass in Co. Tipperary, a place not far from Crinkill Barracks where P.J. Ahern’s journey as a soldier began at the tender age of 15 in 1890. When he said the events about to unfold would go down in history, he wasn’t wrong.

3rd of September
The events that Sir William Hickie had mentioned a day earlier were about to unfold, history was happening, the plan was on paper but now the plan was in action. The Battalion moved into its assembly trenches at an early start of 4am. At 12 noon, the attack commenced, and the Battalion achieved its first objective to reach Brompton Road. At 12:40pm the Battalion moved forward towards their second objective, reaching Green Street, which it also made good with little to no problems. They had done particularly good work pushing forward through their own barrage and clearing the village. They got as far as the Crossroads, East of Guillemon. It is noted that Captain HF Downing was killed at approximately 1pm by Rifle fire. The Battalion, here, held onto its position with “comparative ease”. Great difficulty, however,
was experienced in the evacuation of the wounded. A great number of fatalities are listed here. The village of Ginchy was captured, but a great list of fatalities soon emerged after a German counter-response to the takeover caused a pushback out of the village.

4th of September
Unsafe to move, the Battalion remained in its position at Guillemont. It was after undergoing heavy pushbacks, while they persevered, many men died. To avoid further major casualties, the Battalion remained in its position awaiting relief, due to come the next day before giving it all they had and pushing in to finally capture the village of Ginchy and push out the Germans.

5th of September
As planned, and with reassurance, the Battalion was relieved at 6am by the 7th Royal Irish Rifles and proceeded into Garnoy. They were complimented by the Brigadier commanding the 47th Brigade for their action at Guillemont. Casualties during this amounted to 10 officers and 219 other ranks.

6th & 7th of September
The Battalion remained where they were with quote “very fine weather”. The Battalion moved to La Briquerie and Major H.W. Gaye assumed command of the Battalion.

8th of September
The Battle of Ginchy, a suicide mission for some, was becoming a reality. As time crept forward, the Battle as we know today was about to take place. What P.J. and the troops didn’t know was that they weren’t going to be pushed back by the Germans anymore and they would take control of the village. Unfortunately, this would come at a great cost, with a huge amount of men of the 7th (Service) Battalion, Leinster Regiment to lose their lives. Among them would be Patrick Joseph Ahern, whose story we follow. The Battalion moved up into the line and dug itself into the East of the Cemetery on the East side of Guillemont. They arrived in the position at 10:30pm. Presumably exhausted, the men finished this work at 5am on the 9th of September.

9th of September
The 9th of September 1916 had arrived, unknown to these men what would come of the day, plans were set in action and a final push was about to follow. The Battalion was in the Local Reserve. In a brilliant plan, the Battalion left it until late afternoon before they would advance.
This gave the Germans the idea that they were waiting out and weren’t going to perform the advancement that day. It also meant, that by waiting out until later in the evening, the Germans would have little time to react and counterattack the advancement being made by the 7th Batallion. It left its assembly trenches at 4:45pm and moved to take over the line held by the 8th Royal Munster Fusiliers in the trenches East of the Crossroads which were situated East of Guillemont. These trenches had been evacuated by the Battalion at that time. The 8th Royal Munster Fusiliers who were unable to move were joined by the 7th Leinsters in the trenches. The advance was checked by heavy rifle and machine gun fire and the Battalion was unable to move. The Battalion Head Quarters remained in position at the cemetery.

**Conclusion**

At the age of 41, on the 9th of September, Lieutenant Patrick Joseph Ahern died in battle. He died as a patriot, a man of honour, a man of courage and a display of excellence to all he trained and guided. It was in the final push to capture the small village of Ginchy that Patrick lost his life. Not long after his death, two suited men turned up at the door of Mary Ellen Ahern, the wife of Patrick Joseph Ahern who resided in Townsend House in Birr. Devastated by the loss of her husband, Mary Ellen Ahern requested a combined photo of the two (see above). By this I mean she got a photo of herself, and a photo of Patrick and had it combined into one single photo. If you were unaware of this, it would seem as if the pair were in the same room when the photo had been taken. Grieving his premature departure, in his memory she received a collection of his materials from war such as his musket, his sword, his uniform and a collection of his writings all still in fantastic condition. She was able to add all of these to her already impressive collection of his books and such from the 21 years he spent travelling the world as a soldier prior to his embarkment in World War One after being a part of the creation of the 7th (Service) Battalion, Leinster Regiment. Patrick, while a soldier, loved English and loved poetry, it was something he had apparently done in his free time! With that, I conclude with the following poem I wrote.
Patrick Joseph Ahern
Schooled in Roscrea you didn’t care,
Heard of the army you wanted to be there.
Followed the path with a twist and turn,
We had our very own Sergeant Major Ahern.
Father to three children he was getting older,
He became a mentor to many-a-young soldier.
The Great War loom near you say goodbye,
You head down to the small town of Cork, Fermoy.
Battalion set up and over to France,
A fighter at heart, you took your chance.
9 months of treacherous warfare – was it just a dream?
Heaven gained a believer in September 1916.
With your family at home in total despair,
A life you lived, really nothing to compare.
A soldier knew you’d always be,
Patrick Joseph Ahern, we remember thee.

Bibliography

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