

## **SOUTH AFRICAN IRISH REGIMENT**

(Source: SAIR Website)

The South African Irish Regiment was founded during September 1914. Prior to this, however, a number of Irish regiments of the British Army had seen service in South Africa, starting in 1795 with the 86th Regiment of Foot (later to become the Royal Irish Rifles and thereafter to be reconstituted as the Royal Ulster Rifles, with whom the South African Irish Regiment was affiliated in 1949).

During the latter half of the 18th century the Irish military tradition was continued in South Africa by the formation of the Cape Town Irish Volunteer Rifles in 1885 and who are recognised as the first predecessor of the South African Irish Regiment, in so far as it was the first Indigenous South African unit with a distinctive ethnic Irish component (It is interesting to note that this regiment had the same motto as the South African Irish Regiment; "Faugh A Ballagh" - Clear The Way). Other Cape regiments had Irish components within their strengths usually companies that were referred to as the "Irish companies" namely: Cape Town Rifles (The Dukes) – H Company Prince Alfred's Guard - C Company.

During the Anglo - Boer War, 1899 - 1902, the Driscoll Scouts, a second predecessor to this Regiment was formed to fight on the British side. This unit comprised some 500 Irish men of all ranks and saw action at the siege of Wepener and operations in the Lindley and Fouriesburg districts. During this same conflict and resulting from opposition to Britain from Irish and American Catholics, the "Irish Brigade" was formed and fought on the Boer side, seeing action at Modderspruit, Nicholson's Nek and Colenso.

At the outbreak of World War 1 in August 1914, three Officers met at the Irish Club in Johannesburg with the view to raising an Irish Regiment from amongst the citizens of Johannesburg. These Officers were Lt Col F.H. Brennen VD, Maj G. Twomey and Capt J. Jeffreys DCM. Resulting from this meeting, and a subsequent request to Defence Headquarters to form a Regiment, authority was granted by Defence Headquarters for the formation of the South African Irish Regiment and Lt. Col Brennan was appointed as Commanding Officer. The Regiment saw action against the Germans in South West Africa under General Botha and in German East Africa under General Smuts. At the outbreak of World War II the Regiment was remobilised, trained at Barberton to form, together with 2nd Regiment Botha, 3 Bn Transvaal Scottish and 3 Coy, Regiment President Steyn, the 5 SA Infantry Brigade. The Regiment saw action: in the East African Campaign before moving to North Africa for service; in the Western Desert during the Crusader Campaign. During this Campaign on Sunday, 23rd November 1941 the Regiment took part in the Battle of Sidi Rezegh.

During this Battle (known to the Germans as "Totensonntag") the entire 5th Brigade was decimated by Rommel's Afrika Korps. The Brigade sustained nearly 3,400 casualties, the majority of them prisoners. The Regiment lost over 400 men, including 32 dead, who lie today in Knightsbridge War Cemetery near Acroma, Libya. In remembrance of these men the Regiment wears a knot in their lanyard. A further 13 men died when the prisoner of war ship, carrying the surviving prisoners to Italy was mistakenly torpedoed by an allied submarine. Annually a Drumhead commemoration service is held to remember those who were lost during that and other battles. As a result of the grievous losses the Regiment was deactivated. Some of the survivors were posted back to South Africa to join other units, but many were posted to 11 Battery, 4 South African Field Regiment. Known as the "Irish Battery", with shamrocks painted on their 25 pounder gun barrels, these Irish fought on through the North African and Italian campaigns with 6 Division.

In April 1946 the Regiment was reformed as the 22nd Field Regiment, SAA (SA IRISH) and remained as an Artillery Regiment until January 1960 when it reverted to an Infantry Regiment. (The Regiment acknowledges this period of service by wearing an Artillery button on the left cuff of their tunics)

The period from 1960 to 1974 saw the Regiment entrenching its traditions as an Infantry Regiment and during this period received the Freedom of the City of Johannesburg (Nov 1966), and their Regimental Colours (Nov 68). During this period the Regiment formed and trained "The Hunter Group", a volunteer special force unit, which was the precursor to the Reconnaissance Regiments. In 1966 and 1971 the Regiment participated in the 5th and 10th respective anniversaries of the Republic. In 1971 members of the Regiment and Regimental Association started the annual visit or "raid" to Barberton.

The period from 1974 to 1988 saw the Regiment being part of 72 Motorised Brigade and being re-established as a conventional force. During these years the Regiment saw active duty in Angola during Operations Savannah and Protea as well as undertaking operational duties during the Border war, together with internal security duties within South Africa; and exercises at the Army Battle School, e.g. Quicksilver and Thunderchariot. In 1987, the Regiment underwent conversion from a motorised infantry Regiment to a mechanised infantry Regiment.

In 1979 the Regiment was granted the Freedom of entry to the City of Barberton because of the WW II training period and the frequent "raids" to the town. In 1984 the Regiment, as part of 72 Motorised Brigade, participated in the parade celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the Brigade's Formation.

In 1989, due to the reorganisation of the forces within the conventional force Brigades, the Regiment was transferred to 81 Armoured Brigade. This year was also the 75th anniversary of the formation of the Regiment and this event was celebrated by a battalion parade in Barberton.

During 1991 the Regiment organised the National 50th anniversary of the battle of Sidi Rezegh Parade in Johannesburg. In the same year, due to further restructuring of the conventional forces the Regiment was transferred to Northern Cape Command and reverted to a motorised Infantry Regiment. During this period the Regiment successfully completed township unrest camps as well as training exercises at the Army Battle School.

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The Regiment received its Colours from the State President, Mr JJ Fouche, on 23 November 1968 together with the following Battle honours:

South West African 1914-15

East Africa 1940-41

Mega

Western Desert 1941-43

Sidi Rezegh

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