

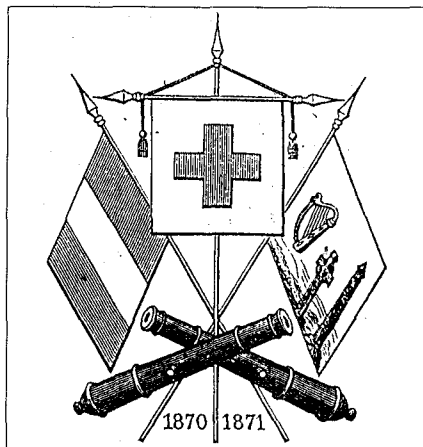


THE FRANCO-IRISH AMBULANCE BRIGADE 1870-71

The Franco-Irish Ambulance Brigade was a volunteer corps set up in Dublin in 1870 to help France in its war with Prussia. It consisted of surgeons, medical students and ambulance drivers - about two hundred and fifty people in all. The nationalistic fanfare which had surrounded the outbreak of the war apparently struck a responsive chord in Ireland, where memories of 'Old France', going right back to Sarsfield and the Wild Geese, were still widespread. This is not surprising considering that nearly half a million men died in the service of France between the years 1691 and 1745.

In July, 1870, France declared war on Prussia. For years relations between the two countries had not been good, primarily because Germany was in the ascendant and France, led by the ailing Napoleon III, was being outplayed by the Prussian Chancellor, Otto Von Bismark. Matters came to a head in the summer of 1870 on the question of succession to the Spanish throne. In September of the previous year, Queen Isobella had fled into exile, and a number of candidates had lined up to take her place. One of these was a relation of the King of Prussia, Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. The French, contending that Leopold's accession would mean further substantial gains in prestige and material benefit for Prussia, demanded the withdrawal of his candidature. Under intense diplomatic pressure, the prince did so. The French breathed a collective sigh of relief, but wanted guarantees that the candidature would not be renewed. King William refused the guarantees, but in his own diplomatic way 'decided the matter closed'. Not so Bismark, by all accounts. He wanted war so that he could bring the South German states into unity with the Prussian-led North German Confederation and to build a strong German Empire. So, he bitterly deplored the king's mild behaviour, and, when informing Prussian embassies of events, worded the telegram (the famous Ems telegram) in such a way that it appeared the king had peremptorily rebuffed the formal demands of the French government for guarantees. France was outraged: national honour was at stake. And so the ill-advised Napoleon, thinking that a victory would restore his declining popularity in France, declared war on Prussia on July 19, 1870.

BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY



Drawing on the flyleaf of the book, 'Reminiscences of the Franco-Irish Ambulance 1870-1871' by M. A. Leeson.

The Irish were quick to respond. On 13 August, *The Nation* newspaper noted that a subscription list had been opened for the relief of wounded French soldiers.

On 7 September, a seventeen-man committee, headed by the Dominican, Reverend Fr. Tom Burke, was set up. The committee had the rather ungainly title of the 'Committee for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded of the French Army and Navy'. The headquarters were at Talbot Street, Dublin, later moving to Lower Sackville Street.

By the beginning of October, funding and recruiting were sufficiently advanced to enable the following notice to appear in the *Irish Times*:

Order for Departure

Volunteers for the Irish Ambulance Corps who have passed the final examination as to eligibility, are required to present themselves at the office, 16 Talbot St., on Saturday, 8th Oct., between the hours of 10 a.m. and 12 noon, where they will be mustered into service and marched to the steamer for embarkation.

No man will be allowed to fall out of the ranks subsequently, without leave, any man who does so, or who otherwise is



The Franco-Irish Ambulance Corps, from the National Library of Ireland.



Barricade overturned at Châteaudun, 18 October, 1870.

guilty of disobedience, irregular or disorderly conduct, will at the last moment, be liable to objection by the officers on board.

*Signed by order of the Committee
Patrick McCabe Fay
A.E. Lesage Hon.. Secs
Edward MacMahon*

An interesting point about the date of departure is that by then the war was, to all intents and purposes, over. Within a few short weeks of the declaration of war, the cumbersome French army, lacking decisive leadership and clearly no match for the superior and highly mobile German war-machine, cracked and split. Marshal MacMahon (of Limerick descent) commanded the main French army in Alsace, and Marshal Bazaine commanded a field army in Lorraine. MacMahon was wounded and defeated at the battle of Worth, so he withdrew his forces. Bazaine and his army of 200,000 were encircled at Metz by the Germans. MacMahon, accompanied by Napoleon, attempted to relieve Bazaine, but was also surrounded. After a number of attempts to break through the German lines, MacMahon and Napoleon were forced to surrender on 2 September. A month later, Bazaine, did likewise. Paris, however, where a republic had been proclaimed and where Gambetta had announced a 'war to the bitter end,' was still withstanding the efforts of the Germans to take it. The only possible hope for the French lay in the organisation of a new army which might relieve Paris. Perhaps this slender hope was enough to warrant the Irish expedition. At any rate, they mustered on 8 October.

Thousands of Dubliners gathered on that Saturday morning to view the 250 volunteers with their five ambulance waggons and horses as they prepared to march from the Rotunda Gardens to the

North Wall. The Nation described the waggons:

They are of two sizes, one to be drawn by a pair of horses to carry twelve men, the

other a single horsed vehicle to carry six. The larger vehicle is about 13 feet long by 5 feet six inches high; each side is composed of two boards about a foot deep and placed about two feet apart, the intervening space being covered with strong canvas curtains which can be looped up to permit a free circulation of air. These boards fall outwards on hinges, to admit of the wounded being placed sideways in the waggon. Within four inches of the floor and halfway between the floor and the roof are two tiers of moveable beds on stretchers arranged parallel with the length of the waggon. Each consists of a wooden frame six feet six inches long by twenty inches broad covered with a network of strong webbing. These stretchers run upon iron rollers fixed into the sides of the waggon and can be removed and replaced with the greatest facility. The top is covered with a tilt of white water proof canvas and the equipage bears conspicuously on sides and roof and back the red Maltese cross. The small waggons, which are about seven feet long by five feet broad, are intended to carry six men each. Their fittings are precisely the same with this exception, that the beds are inserted from the end. Two of the wagons have been



Wounded from the front entering Paris, November, 1870.

chosen for the corps, and while some decided to go home to Dublin by steamer, the majority elected to form a fighting force under the leadership of a Galwayman, Martin Waters Kirwan, formerly a lieutenant in the Glamorgan-shire Light Infantry Militia. This little band fought with tremendous courage and bravery during the war and its distinguished record is well documented in Kirwan's own account *La Compagnie Irlandaise; reminiscences of the Franco-German War* (1873) and by another anonymous member of the corps in *The Irish Fireside* (1885). Before moving on with the Ambulance Corps, another interesting point should be noted—the formation of a second Irish Ambulance Corps in London, which had travelled to Caen but was returned to Louecon, as no arrangements had been made for it in France.

After a few days rest at La Havre, the corps received orders to proceed via Rouen to Evreux. There the corps was attached to the army of Colonel Mocquart, which was resisting a German force that had pushed westward into that area from the armies around Paris. Almost immediately, the Irish got their first real taste of active service. An engagement had just taken place between the French and Prussians at the little village of Pacy, about fifteen miles from Evreux. One of the field workers with the corps, M.A. Leeson, whose book *Reminiscences of the Franco-Irish Ambulance Brigade* (1873) (upon which this article is largely based), described the scene:

The war of cannon and mitrailleuse gre w louder, as also did the cries of the wounded and expiring yells of the dying. The Germans of the infantry and artillery seemingly got into disorder, for they ran 'pell mell' over the bodies of their fallen comrades, and their place was again taken up by cavalry, who tried in vain to force the barricade, and were rewarded by suffering dreadfully. At length a retreat was sounded, which was willingly obeyed by the German troopers. As each wagon received its complement of the wounded, it was despatched, and it was not until 11-30 o'clock that night, that we were at liberty to return to Evreux. Early on the morning of the 27th October, we reached that town exhausted — almost worn from the fatigue of the previous thirty-six hours; retiring to rest at five o'clock that morning, we were not disturbed during the day and night following.

The Irish corps was, in fact, given plenty of time to rest. So much so, that Dr. Baxter felt his men were not being employed to their full extent. He complained to the authorities about the enforced inactivity. Almost at once, things began to happen. For a start, the corps was split in two — the Northern contingent which would service the army of General Mocquart, and the headquarters of the ambulance which would



Wounded soldiers round the fountain at Versailles, November, 1870.

serve the army of the Loire to the south. Leeson enumerated the breakdown in personnel:

HEADQUARTERS:

De Chanzy, — General-in-Command Loire Army.
C.P. Baxter — Surgeon-in-command Irish Ambulance.
M. Picard, Director.
M. Myles, Adjutant.
G. Wilkinson, Sergeant-Major.
R. Burges, Master of the Horse.
M. O'Loughlinn, Paymaster.
P. A. Ryan, Special Correspondent.
— Moore, Orderly Sergeant.
— M. Keane, Orderly Sergeant.

FIELD DEPARTMENT:

Byrne, J., Dublin.	Kelly, P.J., Dublin.
Balfe, J., Dublin.	Lawlor, P., Dublin.
Bell, T. C., Dublin.	Leeson, M.A., Dublin.
Cunningham, T. T., Boyle.	Maguire, P., Dublin.
Craven, P.J., Dublin.	Molony, D., Dundalk.
Conlon, M., Dundalk.	Montgomery, A., Dundalk.
D'Arcy, M., Dundalk.	M'Carthy, J., Dublin.
Doherty, R., Dublin.	M'Grane, J., Dublin.
Dillon, J., Dublin.	M'Mahon, J., Dublin.
Fennessy, Kilkenny.	O'Neill, B., Dundalk.

Farrell, Dublin.	Smyth, J.A., Dublin.
Greely, J., Dublin.	Shiels, T., Dublin.
Hopkins, Wm., Dublin.	Sleator, E., Dublin.
Hayes, D., Charleville.	White, P., Dublin.
Kelly, P., Dundalk.	Winslow, W. Dublin.
Kavanagh, J., Dundalk.	

MEDICAL DEPARTMENT

Surgeon Ryan.	Assist.-Surgeon M'Elevy.
Surgeon Widdup.	Assist.-Surgeon M'Keon.
Surgeon Thompson.	Assist.-Surgeon O'Flynn.
Assist.-Surgeon Brown.	Assist.-Surgeon Ryan, J.
Assist.-Surgeon Baxter, J.	Assist.-Surgeon Scarry.
Assist.-Surgeon Carolan.	Assist.-Surgeon Woodlock.
Assist.-Surgeon Campbell.	
Assist.-Surgeon Cassidy.	Attendants of Surgeons
Assist.-Surgeon Clarke.	and on Hospital Duty.
Assist.-Surgeon Delaney.	— Clancy.
Assist.-Surgeon Dobbins.	D. Foran.
Assist.-Surgeon Geraghty.	P. M'Cann.
Assist.-Surgeon Healy.	J. O'Connor.
Assist.-Surgeon Hayes.	J. Walshe.
Assist.-Surgeon Henley.	
Assist.-Surgeon Kelly,	Nuns, Lady
Dundalk.	Volunteers, and
Assist.-Surgeon Mulligan.	Convalescent Mobiles.
Assist.-Surgeon M'Carthy, J.	



'The Theatre of War – the Epilogue', from a drawing at Beaugency by Sidney Hall, 1870.

**NORTHERN CONTINGENT
WITH COL. MOCQUART'S FRANCS-TIREURS,**

Mocquart, *General-in-Chief.*
Maguire, *Surgeon-in-Chief.*
O'Scanlon, *Director.*

FIELD DEPARTMENT.

Allan, J., Dublin.	Kerr, A., Dublin.
Carter, J., Dublin.	Meade, L., Dublin.
Daly, J., Kanturk.	Quinn, J., Dublin.
Doyle, M., Dublin.	Webb, H., Kanturk.
Gaffney, H., Dublin.	

MEDICAL DEPARTMENT.

Surgeon Cremin.	Assist.-Surgeon M'Carty.
Assist.-Surgeon Connolly.	Assist.-Surgeon M'Cullagh.
Assist.-Surgeon Farrelly.	Assist.-Surgeon O'Carroll.
Assist.-Surgeon Geraghty.	Assist.-Surgeon Ryan, R.

The two units of the corps were not to meet again until ten weeks later. As information on Dr. Maguire and his Northern contingent is rather limited, we can follow the story of the larger group, which headed south for the town of Chateaudun on 9 November. Three days later, they arrived there in the middle of a savage bombardment by the Prussians. After a few anxious hours for the corps when they were caught in crossfire, the French eventually claimed victory and the Irish were billeted in the chapel of St. John.

The corps wasted little time in getting organised. Within three days, Drs. Baxter and Ryan had sixty beds ready in a number of centres. The Red Cross flag, which had been presented to the corps by the people of Dundalk, had hardly been raised when the nearby battle of

Orleans took place. Leeson has related:

After they had marched to their positions-west, south, and north-west of Orleans, an officer brought an order to our Surgeon-in-Chief, the result of which was that we moved to within twelve yards of the lines, when the stretchers were taken from the waggons, medicine and surgical instruments, and chests, placed near to the surgeon's tent, where the members of our medical department were ready to carry on their operations.

The field-men distributed themselves 'à discretion', and wherever our men were seen to group, there also would the waggon be driven . . . Our men worked well that day, and though the wounded were few, considering the galling fire under which the troops advanced, it was arduous, dangerous work to carry these soldiers from the place where they fell, even to the waggons. Yet we did not 'bemoan our fate, or sigh, or wish to get to bed'. The musketry fire now grew deafening, many of the infantry were compelled to fling away their heated rifles, and take up that of a fallen brother.

Our surgeons were kept busy until an advanced hour that night; but the duty of the field-men was over at eight o'clock that evening, at which hour they commenced to make themselves happy. In this there was no difficulty; for let them appear in any place through town, the people invariably pressed them to accept of the hospitality which they have always at hand for the Irish.

The French claimed victory at Orleans and the Ambulance Corps returned to Chateaudun. Within a few days, Dr.

Baxter was handed the following order:

Ste. Jean, 21st November, 1870 (No. 673).

A M. le Chef de l'Ambulance Franco-Irlandaise à Orleans.

[Translation.]

Be kind enough to retire on Bucy. The distribution of your men lies with yourself, but I would advise you to make Bucy head-quarters 'pro tem', as it is possible I will be compelled to retire on that village before night. You may, in the meantime, despatch as many of the medical staff and volunteers as you deem proper to Patay, as there the struggle will certainly be.

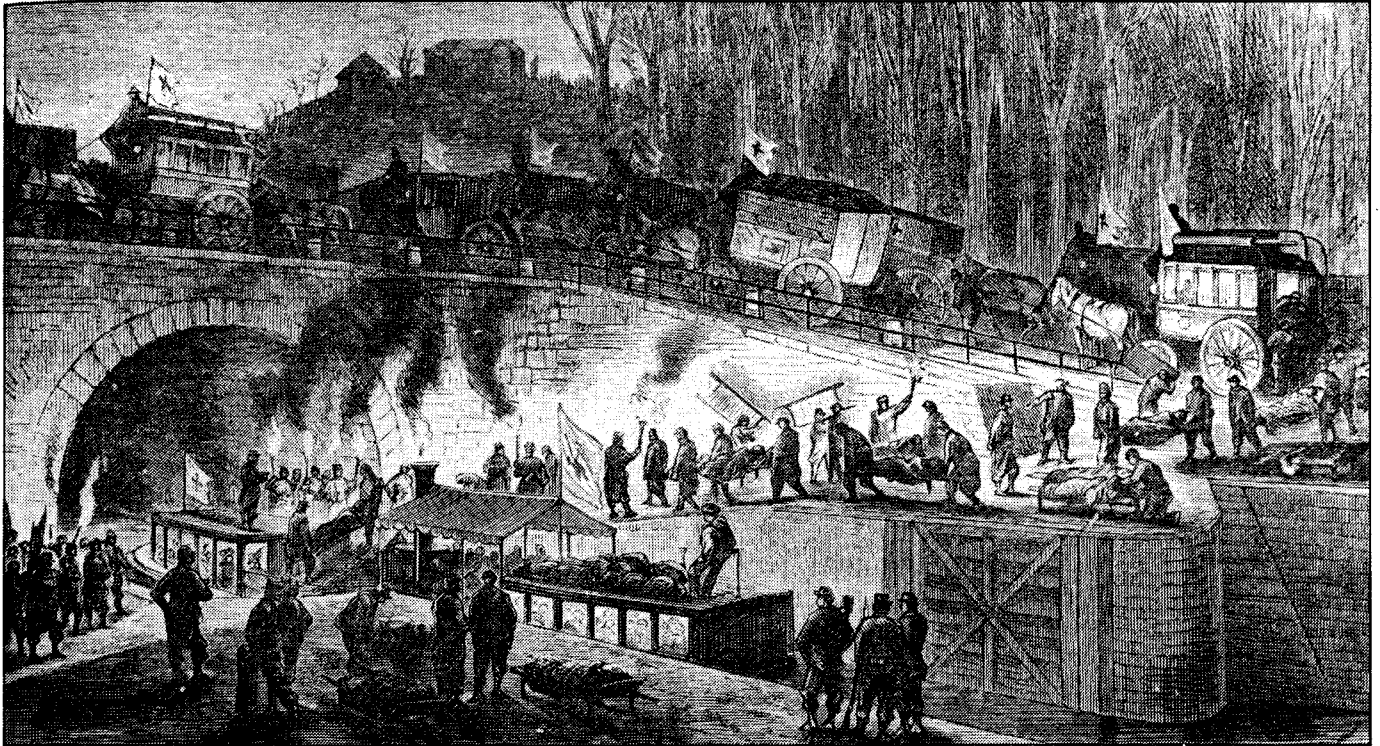
Pres le Commandant,

B. S. Persigny.

On the morning of 22 November, the waggons rolled into Patay. A fierce battle ensued the French claimed victory. The corps removed hundreds of wounded to Chateaudun. On the following day, the centre of battle moved to nearby Montereau. Leeson again graphically described the scene:

The Bavarians attacked in force and though they had to storm natural redoubts, they came on unflinchingly to the task, while batteries of Mitrailleuse and Gatling guns poured in showers of bullets on them, creating desperate havoc among their ranks. At three o'clock in the afternoon the battle became general along the line. The continuous roar of cannon on our left proved the Prince Frederick had attacked that wing of the Loire Army. As the evening advanced the combat grew desperate in the extreme; the combatants advanced towards each

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Transporting the wounded by river steamers, on the Canal de la Marne, to Paris ambulances, 1870.

other, and carried on the contest at the point of the bayonet. It was then the old French elan proved itself – the Germans were actually lifted from their feet on the point of the cutlass, and pitched on to their rere. As six the French bugles sounded victory, the remnant of the Germans were in retreat, leaving their numerous dead and wounded on the field.

During the time taken by the troops to attain this signal victory, the men of our Ambulance worked hard at the stretchers; and though snow fell heavily they could not think of putting on their great coats; for the stretcher practice was so severe that the men engaged in it felt by far too warm; and it was not until the battle ceased, that they got time to rest their weary limbs. But their toil was not yet to end; the wounded, whom they had carried during the contest to the tents of the surgeons, were again to be transferred to the waggons and sent on to Beaugency, Blois, and even to Chateaudun; only the more desperate cases were to be sent into Orleans, as the hospitals of the Ambulance de la Presse there were almost full with both German and French wounded. To work again; when vehicle after vehicle received its burthen, and was despatched; at twelve o'clock, midnight, the last batch of the poor sufferers was sent off, and only then were our labours at an end.

At least, for that day. But the Corps was running out of steam, just as it was running out of money. Dr. Baxter was forced to pay the volunteers their 2.50 francs a day out of his own pocket. But the Brigade stuck to its task. On 2 December, 40,500 French and 35,000 Germans faced each other at Loigny.

Nine thousand men died. The Ambulance exceeded itself in caring for the wounded. A few days later the Germans took the town of Chateaudun, but evacuated it shortly afterwards, as General Wittich did not think he had enough troops to hold it. On 18 December, he returned, having been joined by thousands of Bavarians from Chartres and Prussians from Orleans. The French defended stoutly. Again Leeson reported:

Over those roads the Germans advanced in force, but their columns had not reached the limekiln on the upper road, nor the mill on the lower road, when this well-managed battery began to play. The cavalry in the 'van' of the invaders were thrown into confusion, their well-trained infantry were staggered; for once the obedient Germans used to advance, and so filled were they with consternation, surprise, and alarm, that for some minutes they remained motionless under the terrible fire of our revolving guns. Not in hundreds, but in thousands, did they suffer themselves to be mowed down before they decided on carrying out the attack, and when they advanced they only came on to the slaughter; fast and hot was that death-dealing shower – that leaden shower poured down upon them; terrible was their situation, destruction was their lot. Another effort – a desperate effort – wherein they concentrated all their strength – all their strategy proved unavailing, and a retreat was sounded. Chateaudun (that town of heroes one; might say martyrs, for not only were her sons fighting in the sacred cause of country, but in that more sacred one of religion – the Germans desecrated their altars, imprisoned their priests) proved

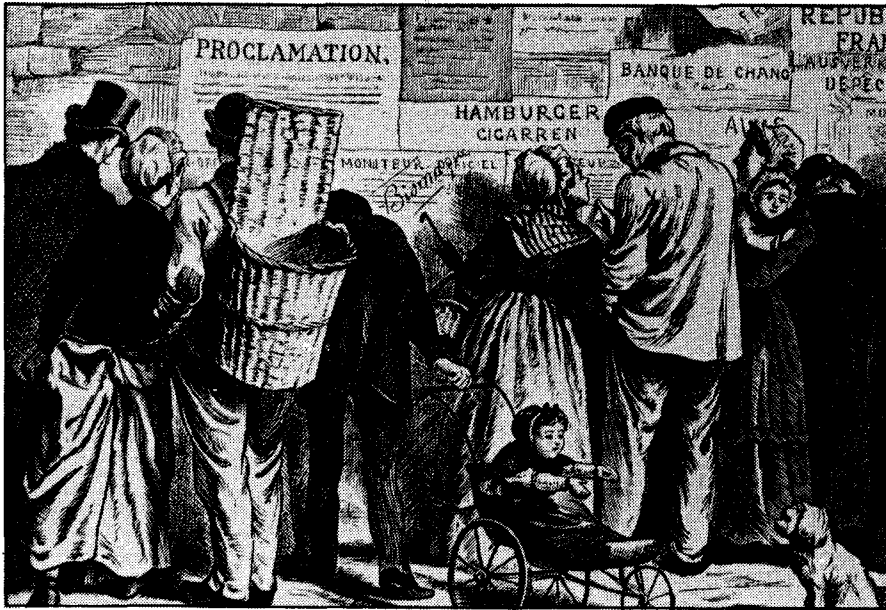
itself; an hour of vengeance offered itself, and well was it availed of. Victory was theirs indisputably, and proud might they be of their success. There was no mean subterfuge, no ruse de guerre to the achievement of it. It was the bold, upright stand of right against might, for the Germans had broken their plighted truth in waging a war against a people which they proclaimed to wage only against an empire, and for their base lies they suffered.

In recognition of the heroism of its inhabitants, Chateaudun was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honour in 1877 by Marshal MacMahon, then President of the Republic.

The French army had barely evacuated Chateaudun when the Duke of Mecklenburgh, who was accompanied by the Brandenburger Corps (3rd), the 10th Corps of the Alvensleben, and the 8th and 48th regiments of the Prussian infantry, moved in. The Duke himself arrived to the accompaniment of bands and colours. The Irish reportedly enjoyed the spectacle, but could not delay, so they followed in the wake of the retreating French.

For the next few weeks, the corps was engaged in servicing a French army that just could not hold out any longer. The battle of Vendome left the Irish very dispirited and dejected. Besides, the severity of the French winter was also taking its toll of their strength. Yet, they managed to attend to hundreds of wounded and persisted in their mission.

Christmas Day, 1870, saw them back in Chateaudun, and, in spite of circumstances, a party was held to mark the day. M.P. Kelly, of the field department, was elected chairman of the



News of the war, Versailles, 1870.

after-dinner proceedings, and gave the premier toast of the evening:

'To our Holy Father Pope Pius IX.,' and while we drink it with the profound respect which is its due, let us resolve that, when he required willing, faithful volunteers, we shall not be seen at home – we must be in the field!

This toast recalls another toast, recounted by Leeson, earlier in the war, which gives an interesting insight into the mind of the corps and to the times in which they lived. The scene was Mdlle. Gerliss's Cafe d'Or in Chateaudun: when a group of the Ambulance Corps and some French troops were having a celebration, an Italian, who had fought with Garibaldi, was also in the cafe. At some point in the evening, he rose and interjected:

Gentlemen, I have the honour of being here among you, of enjoying your hospitality, and partaking of your pleasures. You are Irish and French, I am Italian. Most of you fought against me in former days, perhaps conscientiously, and I say emphatically that that was wrong. You fought against men who were fighting for the liberties of their country—you made battle against them, and acted as hirelings to an unworthy master.'

Here the Italian was interrupted; the Zouaves sprang to their feet – one of them was about strangling him, when he was prevailed upon to desist, and the Italian was allowed to proceed. he said: 'Whether you have done this through your love of rapine, or, what is worse, subservience to your Romish priests, I will not question, but whatever your motives were they were of the darkest hue. Enough for my wrongs, and here is the toast, 'Viva la Republique rouge à bas le Papé!'

The Italian escaped once, but now he said a few words too many to escape a second time. A number rushed on the fanatical

'Red' and before outsiders could know of the occurrence his dead body was dragged into the garden.

'After a storm comes a calm'. Every one was silent for a few moments, until Bob Clinch of the 'Francs-Tireurs de l'Amerique' rose to give his judgement. He said, 'Gentlemen, I have looked on calmly at the tragedy just been enacted. If I did not coincide with the acts of the Irish, and hold the sympathies of the majority present, I would be the first to avenge the death; as it is past, let it be thought no more.

Reportedly, the party continued as if nothing had happened. This incident and many other lesser ones would seem to indicate that the corps would have little sympathy for what was then happening in Paris and which the defeated Marshal MacMahon was attempting to overthrow.

General Chanzy made his last stand against the Germans at Le Mans on 12 January. The Ambulance Corps, loyal to the end, laboured with him:

Legs and arms lay about in such heaps that one would be impressed with the idea of an army having passed through the ordeal of amputation and yet numbers of the wounded were to be deprived of legs or arms or ears as the case might be before our skilled surgeons could think of retiring.

But the French were routed completely. The army of the Loire no longer existed, and so the official duty of the Ambulance Corps was at an end.

On 13 January, the men of the corps were called on parade and, after a brief order was read out directing them to return to Chateaudun, the following letter was also addressed to them from the French authorities:

La Fleche, 13th January, 1871.

To the Chief, Director, and Men of the Franco-Irish Ambulance Corps.

"It is with deep unfeigned sorrow I am

now compelled to write you on a subject alike galling to French and Irish in every clime. You are men who have witnessed our gigantic efforts to drive back the unscrupulous German from our fair land. You have been present with us in the hour of our distress, and know of the last and desperate stand made by our youthful provençals against the well-trained troops of Germany—in fine, you saw the last of that new army which has battled with some success against superior numbers and organisation, and of which you have been zealous members. The army of the Loire exists no longer. Your duty, to France and Ireland, was ended with its defeat. Therefore, you are at liberty to retire from the field where, for months, you have laboured with untiring energy, leaving your memory to be dearly cherished by the soldiers and citizens of France, who hope to have an opportunity of showing their gratitude at no distant date. Your western island will be ever foremost in their thoughts. In conclusion, I ask of you to accept the gratitude of your General, forget the present misfortunes, and look to better days to regenerated France.

Some of the corps decided to return to Chateaudun to meet the Northern contingent which had gone to serve under General Mocquart, while others decided to head for Le Havre and the boat for home. There were also those, however, who decided to remain in France, having accepted posts in the French army. Surprisingly, only one of the corps died during the expedition – a William Hopkins from Dublin. He is buried in St. Joseph's Cemetery, Chateaudun. Before departing, in a ceremony attended by the French and Germans, the corps placed a headstone over his grave with the plain inscription, 'Hopkins' on it. A few days later, they set out for Dublin and received a marvellous welcome home.

The Duty Book of the corps contains an unidentifiable newspaper cutting dated 23 September, 1875, written by an anonymous correspondent, and it is an apt postscript to the venture of the Irish:

I have seen large stacks of piled corn and green fields of fine potatoes and was told that they were 'du blé et des pommes de terre d'Irlande' from seed sent from Cork in April 1871. In Patay, Loigny and Chateaudun I have heard anxious enquiries made for Dr. Baxter and l'Ambulance irlandaise and heard grateful mention of 'la bonne ville de Cork'. In Chateaudun you will often meet a peasant who, four years ago, carried a sword or musket and who will tell you that he owed his life to the 'bons docteurs irlandais.'

The assistance sent from Ireland and the labours of the Irish Ambulance are spoken of everywhere with gratitude – what we got from Ireland came from a country that sympathised with us from the day the war began and came from the heart.