

## REMEMBERING THE SOMME

## from Home Rule crisis

**STEADFAST:** Ulster Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson

**O**N September 3, 1914, William Hanna emerged from his medical examination to become the first member of the Ulster Volunteer Force to sign up as a soldier in the 36th (Ulster) Division. The 44-year-old veteran of the Boer War smiled broadly as he greeted the waiting Press at Belfast's Old Town Hall.

Earlier in the day Hanna, along with his colleagues in the North Belfast Regiment of the UVF had proudly paraded before Sir Edward Carson, who had told them:

"You may have many difficulties - you will have many difficulties - you will have plenty of suffering and sacrifice before you, but from what I know of you I am confident that you will acquit yourselves as Irishmen in the field, and above all, as Ulstermen, proud of your British connection."

The Ulster Division was well and truly on the road to the Somme, but the men of Carson's UVF had already travelled a long way to reach this point. For close to 30 years the Liberal Party at Westminster had been trying to return a form of limited self-government to Ireland, a move bitterly resisted by unionists.

While the first two attempts had been repelled by parliamentary means, the Third Home Rule Bill of 1912 had brought about a constitutional crisis in Great Britain and raised the possibility of a civil war or confrontation between the people and the authorities.

Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, by using his Westminster majority and the support of the nationalist MPs and the forced cooperation of the House of Lords, pushed the Bill through its stages in the face of fierce unionist and Conservative opposition.

In Ulster a series of anti-Home Rule rallies

were held to show the strength of public feelings but Sir Edward, ably assisted by Sir James Craig, realised that opposition would have to be harnessed into a form which would be an asset otherwise it could evolve into potentially sectarian violence. The result was the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, made up of men who had signed the Ulster Covenant and organised into regiments across the nine counties of the Province.

This civilian army, some 90,000 strong by 1914, openly trained on the streets and countryside of Ulster, largely in ordinary clothes though attempts were made at standardising a form of uniform, and "armed" with dummy rifles.

In April, 1914, however, the shortage of weapons was solved with the arrival of some 25,000 rifles and three million rounds of ammunition bought in Germany by Belfast businessman and long-time gun smuggler Fred Crawford.

He sailed them into Larne in the Clyde Valley, sending others to ports in Co Down. All the weapons were unloaded that evening by the UVF which, using the guise of a mobilisation training exercise, spirited them away.

The authorities, aware that something was going on, concentrated their efforts in Belfast where squads of Royal Irish Constabulary officers and UVF volunteers gently ribbed each other at the

quayside until the arrival of dawn confirmed they would be no weapons seized that night.

Many of those serving in the UVF were former soldiers, and sympathy to the unionist cause was equally strong among serving Army officers.

A month before the guns were landed in Ulster what became known as the Curragh Mutiny had occurred, during which almost 60 officers, including Brigadier-General Herbert Gough of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, had offered their resignations rather than

**SERVICE:** members of the Ulster Volunteer Force

be sent north to coerce Ulster.

By August 1914 the Third Home Rule Bill was nearing the completion of its passage through Parliament, with the Government and unionist people of Ulster set on a collision course.

The outbreak of war, however, changed the political picture overnight. The News Letter reported on August 6, 1914:

"Yesterday afternoon unprecedented scenes were witnessed in Dungannon, when some thousand Nationalists escorted to the railway station a number of Irish National Volunteers who had been called on to rejoin the colours.

"The local Nationalist flute band, playing the 'Marseillaise,' headed the procession, and a large party of the Irish National Volunteers, wearing bandoliers, marched behind.

"On arriving at the railway station the band and Volunteers, assembled on the platform, and as the afternoon mail train steamed off loud cheers were raised for the departing reservists, the band playing 'The girl I left behind me' and 'Auld Lang Syne'.

"All the leading officers of the Dungannon Battalion Ulster Volunteer Force have also been called up, including Viscount Northland, Major Alexander, CMG; Major E. Milnes-Gaskell, and Mr Percy Mallet, battalion instructor

"A large number of Unionist Volunteers assembled on the railway platform to bid farewell to Mr Mallet, battalion instructor, and Mr David Williamson, and Mr Stevenson, second in command, presented Mr Mallet with a purse of sovereigns."

The Home Rule Bill was passed into law but suspended for the duration of hostilities. It was ultimately to be overtaken by events with its measures never applied.

After further talks to ensure that the men would not be betrayed in their absence, it was agreed that the men of the UVF would serve together as the 36th (Ulster) Division.

It wasn't only unionists, however, who went to war. John Redmond, leader of the Irish parliamentary party, after attempting unsuccessfully to persuade the Government to allow the Irish Volunteer Force - formed in direct response to the UVF - to form a home guard, gave the nod for them to enlist.

Many did and went on to form the basis of the 16th (Irish) Division, among whose ranks were substantial numbers of Ulster nationalists from the likes of west Belfast. Redmond's call was not universally popular, however, and led to a split in the Irish volunteers, with many of those who stayed behind taking part in the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916