



Father Gerard Barry

Born: 26.3.1911 (Liverpool). Resided: Liverpool (St Michael & Sacred Heart).
Son of John and Bridget (nee O'Keefe) Barry of Liverpool.

Ordained at St Joseph's Seminary by Archbishop Downey 22 May 1937.
A priest in Liverpool diocese served at St Mary Magdalen, Penwortham to 1939;
All Souls, Vauxhall, Liverpool to 1940; St Aloysius, Roby Liverpool to 1942.

Joined the Royal Army Chaplain Department, Chaplain 4th Class: Army no 244139

Postings : 30.9.1942 : South East Command.

18.6.1944 : Embarked with the Royal Artillery for NW Europe: Normandy landings.

31.7.1944 : 8th Battalion, The Royal Scots, 44th Infantry Brigade, 43rd Division.

COURAGE AND SACRIFICE

This is a true story of a remarkable priest.

Father Gerard Barry

He became an Army chaplain during the second world war

He took part in the Normandy landings in 1944 when British and American forces invaded France to end the fighting with Germany.

Father Barry joined the Royal Scots Regiment on 16 July 1944 when they were advancing from the French city of Caen towards the border with Belgium. He was killed in action at Geel in Belgium on 14th September 1944.



Front row :

Mr John Barry snr Fr Tom Barry Mrs Bridget Barry and Fr Gerard.

This group at the ordination of Fr Tom Barry.

The pamphlet was compiled with help from source material supplied by Helen Barry, Father Gerard's niece and Gil Geerings, who is a young Belgian historian.

The early years and the family

Gerard Barry was one of twins, born with his brother Francis on 29th March 1911 in Liverpool. They had three elder brothers Jack, Fred and George who were all born close together. Jack being the eldest was only 5 years older than the twins.

Gerard's mother and father had 11 children in all but three of Gerard's sisters died in child birth or were very young. Their mother, Bridget was a resolute Irish lady and their father John, a hard working carpenter and joiner, who set up his own business. The family were brought up by their parents in the Catholic faith. Bridget attended daily Mass and her children were led with example by their parents.

Perhaps it was always likely one of the sons would consider joining the priesthood. In fact two brothers, Gerard firstly and later by a younger brother Thomas. One of the problems facing the family was that as a child, Thomas was a victim of polio.

Ordination and curacy

At age 13, Gerard attended St Joseph's College, at Upholland near Wigan and later joined the Seminary. He played an active part in its life during his training for the priesthood in what was a thriving community. He became editor of the magazine which provided him with an outlet for his witty sense of humour. He was ordained as a priest in 1937 by the Archbishop Downey, head of the Liverpool archdiocese.

His first appointment as a curate was in North Lancashire, to the parish of St Mary Magdalen in the small town of Penwortham, just south of Preston where he remained for 2 years. He was assigned then to an inner city parish between Liverpool and Bootle, close to the docks, at the beginning of the 2nd World War. The church of All Souls in Vauxhall was later bombed and was demolished.

The evacuees

It was at that time, he was given a role for which he would have been eminently suited during what was known as the "Blitz". The German bombers were targeting the major British cities with factories and docks when it was decided that children in particular should be sent to the countryside to escape the threat of heavy bombing attacks.

The Archbishop made this the task for Father Gerard to take on, to provide counselling and practical guidance to help evacuees from displaced families.

A familiar sight in railway stations were lines of children with their meagre possessions leaving their distraught mothers as they boarded trains out of the conurbations. Father Gerard was an inspired choice to ease the anguish and torment of both parents and children. His jolly jokes and disarming sense of humour would have relaxed their nerves and would bring smiles back on to their anxious faces.

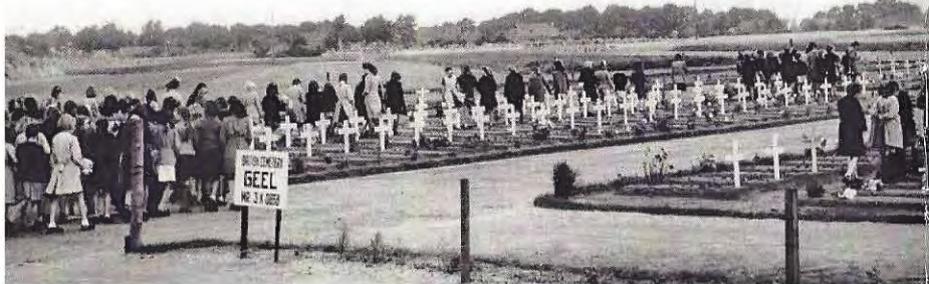
Caring for young parishioners

This was a brief assignment, when the evacuation was completed, the hierarchy then gave him another challenging post. He was sent to St Aloysius Church which was alongside the sprawling housing estates built in Huyton-with-Roby to provide homes for the overcrowded inner city dwellers from Liverpool. The new residents would have been delighted with their new homes but had lost their extended family ties and links with the close knit communities to which they belonged.

Within a short time the younger generation would be bored and causing trouble through being involved in petty crime and vandalism. The lack of facilities in these new towns left a gap to be filled. Father Gerard was an organiser for the Young Christian Workers Association to draw in older youths. For the younger age group, he took over the leadership of the local Boy's Scouts movement based in his church.

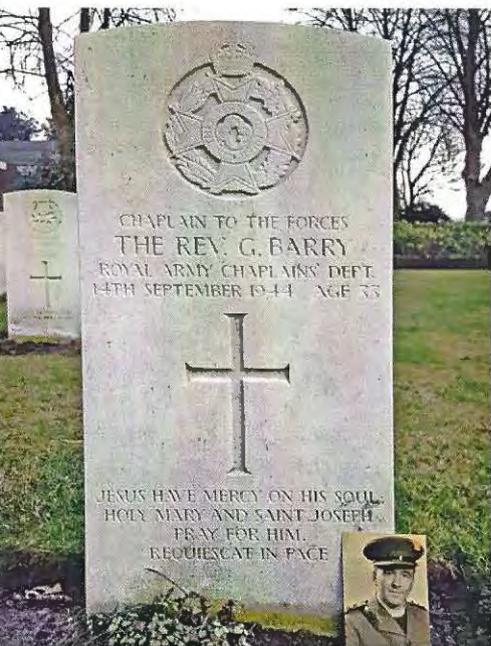
Going to war

The War was progressing and his older brothers were now serving in the Armed Forces. Jack was a non-commissioned officer in the RAF, Fred was serving overseas in the Army and George was in the Royal Navy. His twin brother Francis was also called up in the Army, with Bernard, the youngest soon to follow in the Navy. Marie, his only surviving sister, went into nursing. It was in Gerard's nature to want to participate by following the example of his siblings. The War was then in its third year and Gerard enlisted in the Royal Army Chaplains' Department. He would later be taking part in the Normandy landings.



Geel Military Cemetery, Antwerp, Belgium 1945 & later 2017.

Fr Gerard Barry's tombstone II A25 and last year children laying flowers.



Jack's wedding

The War in Europe had been waging for nearly 4 years by the middle of 1943. The Americans had entered on the side of the Allies and there was cautious optimism about the prospects of winning against the Axis powers. There was a joyful occasion in the Barry household because the eldest son, Jack was to be married to Patricia Marr. The wedding took place in St Michael's Church with Father Gerard officiating and assisted by brother Thomas newly ordained. Jack looked resplendent in RAF uniform and with his beautiful bride beside him for this happy event.

In spite of the war-time restrictions, Mr and Mrs Barry held the reception for the newly weds at their home in Newsham Park and gave everyone a warm and friendly time with popular songs, Irish music and laughter the order of the day. Jack was based at RAF Squires Gate as an instructor. The sailors in the family, George was home on leave and Bernard was allowed time off from training. George sadly was murdered in New Orleans while ashore some time later. Fred and Frank were still on military service. Finally, Father Gerard, in his Army padre's uniform, re-joined his artillery unit in the south of England.

Return to duty

The beginning of 1944 was dragging through the Spring, planning was progressing slowly for the eventual invasion of Europe. Father Gerard was now stationed in Plymouth keeping in touch with his family, in particular his brothers serving around the world in the services. Until June uncertainty about where the invasion would take place remained. The orders came to embark and his unit set sail for the beaches of Normandy.

Landing in Normandy and advancing

The British and American forces landed in an immediate war zone with fierce resistance from the German army intent on driving them back once they were ashore. A few weeks after landing in Normandy, the Chaplain-General attached Father Gerard to the Lowland Division and he joined the 8th Battalion, Royal Scots near Caen. The fighting was heavy and his division was unable to advance at first until there was a breakthrough and the enemy forces were driven back.

While some of the allied armies headed south towards Paris, the Scottish regiments with the Canadian divisions advanced north towards the Belgium border. Many German prisoners were taken and the prospect heightened of the early end to the war as the enemy soldiers showed their despair and were keen to escape from further fighting. However, Father Gerard recalled how the SS, Hitler's elite troops put up ferocious resistance. Any hopes of the conflict coming to a sudden conclusion were premature.

What lay ahead with 8th Royal Scots

Father Gerard was closely involved with the spiritual welfare of the troops to whom he administered. Many would have been young soldiers and his regiment would have had a large group of Glasgow Catholics. The Scottish regiments had proud traditions, formed centuries ago, many of their soldiers regarded serving as an honour and with comradeship part of their strength. It was this ethos that the padre was required to be as courageous as the men alongside him.

The battalion was making progress across the north of France in close contact with other Army units. At one stage, they met a forward unit in which his twin brother, Francis, was serving. It must have been a evocative moment when they parted after exchanging news from home and maybe the usual banter together they had shared for a lifetime.

Crossing into Belgium

The sense of winning the War began to dawn on the British troops as well as the the enemy forces withdrew but when Father Gerard's battalion reached the Albert Canal they met their stiffest opposition so far. Attempting to cross the canal in boats resulted in many casualties before they successfully reached the other side. The obstacles were now going to prove more costly with main objective to capture the port of Antwerp. Before that they were faced with the next town under German occupation.

False hopes

The Northumbrian Division had occupied the town of Geel and the 6th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry (DLI) had reached the town centre to the delight of the local population. The children's first holy communion procession took place on the Sunday morning and there was air of hope around the Church of St Dymphna, named after an Irish saint.

However, the next day the German panzers and infantry mounted a counter attack forcing the DLI to retreat. The citizens watched in horror as British prisoners were taken and all the male residents over age 13 were rounded up. They were marched towards Tan Aard, close to the north side of the canal.

Proceeding into Geel

The British commander decided that the exhausted soldiers of the Northumbrian Division would be replaced by the Scots in the front line. At midnight, the hand-over was made and the whole Division took up new positions

The Royal Scots moved forward towards the town centre. The medical officer told Father Gerard he would establish a regimental aid post in an abandoned house near the canal which would be his point of contact. The streets were littered with debris from the bombardment as Father Gerard and two stretcher bearers followed the advancing Scots into the town. There was light resistance as the enemy forces fell back once more, leaving only snipers to delay their advance.

Meeting Father van Alphen

Two soldiers were wounded, Father Gerard went to attend to the most seriously hurt and was kneeling to give him the last rites. At that moment several people appeared from the ruined buildings where they had been sheltering. A tall man dressed in clerical clothes approached with a small clutch of women. He addressed Father Gerard, "Are you an English Roman Catholic priest?" "Yes, I am Padre Barry and this is one of my soldiers".

He called for the stretcher bearers who were attending to the other wounded soldier. In the meantime one of the women raised the dying soldier's head and placed a pillow under him, while another brought some water for him to drink.

Father Gerard rose and shook hands with his fellow priest whose face glowed at his presence and responded tentatively. "My name is Jan van Alphen, I am the local priest here and I cannot tell you how happy we are to see you". The women smiled and embraced him too. The two stretcher bearers took the most seriously injured soldier to the aid post. Father Jan offered to help the padre to carry the other soldier to the White House where the aid post was located.

Father Jan then invited the padre for a meal at his presbytery and they spent the evening discussing their experiences. The Belgian priest offered Father Gerard a place to sleep the following night before he returned to the aid post for his night duties.

The Geel Bridgehead

The morning of 14th September was misty as it drifted across from the nearby Escaut Canal. In the regimental aid post the medical staff and the padre assisted the wounded to prepare for the ambulances to take those with the most critical injuries back to the rear lines. There was a lull in the fighting, explosions and gunfire were a safe distance away. Trucks trundled up loaded with boats for crossing the Geel bridgehead.

Later that afternoon, as the boats were launched, the enemy opened fire with rockets and artillery. The White House was targeted with mortar shells. They struck with devastating force: two stretcher bearers were killed outright; the medical officer was badly injured; and the padre, Father Gerard Barry was mortally wounded by the explosion that hit him in the chest. Soldiers rushed to their aid but too late for those who died from the immediate impact. They had paid the ultimate sacrifice, described by a correspondent as, "Murder on the Escaut".

Sequel

Father Barry was amongst over 200 casualties of the Royal Scots who were killed action during the Geel bridgehead. Following his tragic death, the pipe-major called on Father van Alphen the next day. They arranged for his body to be handed over to the Catholic Church for burial. His remains were interred in the graveyard at St Dymphna and were later re-interred in the Geel Military Cemetery.



Fr van Alphen is the tallest man in this photograph. When he heard what happened to the padre, he wrote to his mother on the death of her son in an impassioned letter, which concluded:

Dear mother, you gave your dearly son to the Holy Church and to your Country but both have taken him entirely for themselves, not only his good work and his mind but also his life. God accepted your gift in order to make him like his Holy Son, given his life for his brothers. that his good work and glorious dead haven't been worthless, the souls of many of his brothers he has lead to God.

CITY PRIEST KILLED

VICAR-GENERAL'S TRIBUTE TO "GREAT CHAPLAIN"

Father Gerard Barry, the first Liverpool Roman Catholic priest serving as chaplain to the Forces to be killed in action, was killed on September 14. A native of Liverpool, Father Barry was educated for the priesthood at Upholland College, where he was ordained in 1937.

He had served at Penwortham and All Souls' Liverpool and, after a period with evacuated children, at St Aloysius Roby. He was keenly interested in the Scout movement.

Father Barry was one of a family of eight sons, seven of whom joined the Forces. One brother is Father Thomas Barry, of St Edmunds' Waterloo. His parents reside at 19 Belmont Drive, Newsham Park.

Archbishop Downey has received a message from Monsignor Coghlan, the Roman Catholic Vicar-General of the British Army, informing him of Father Barry's death. "You have lost a great priest," he says, "and I have lost a great chaplain."

Extract from the Liverpool Echo - Sep 1944.

From the Catholic Herald 29 September 1945

Pioneer of the Young Christian Workers' organisation in the great new housing area of Huyton, Fr. Gerard Barry was also well-known in Scouting circles as Scoutmaster of the St. Aloysius Troop —now to be named "Fr. Barry Own," by direction of the Scout Commissioner.

A Solemn Requiem Mass, with military honours, was offered in the church of St. Aloysius, Roby, on Wednesday, by Fr. Thomas Barry, the brother of Fr. Gerard. British and American troops mounted guard. The panegyric was preached by Fr Cyril Taylor, and the service concluded with the sounding of the Last Post. A memorial to Fr. Gerard Barry will be erected, taking the form of shrine to St. Aloysius, patron of youth.