

# SIX LOCAL HEROES

BY GRIFFITH WYLIE

For many of us, today, the events of World War II are increasingly hazy memories and for the younger members of our community the epic events of that time are little more than an hour or two's entertainment in the cinema, or an exciting adventure on their television screen. For some local families, however, the memories of that time are fresh and undimmed. For them, a father, a brother, a son or a loved one involved in that great struggle, would never return. The six young local men remembered in this article, who served and died in the forces during the war, were (in the order of their deaths):

**Thomas Harcourt Harvey,**  
Railway Street, Poyntzpass;  
died North Africa, 6th April 1941 aged 21.

**Robert Fisher,**  
Aughlish Cottages, Scarva;  
died in the Mediterranean Sea, 15th December 1941  
aged 21.

**Daniel Patrick McAleese,**  
Terryhoogan, Scarva;  
died Hamburg, Germany, 8th December 1942 age 22.

**John Joseph Duffy,**  
Lissummon, Jerrettspass;  
died Fernando Po Island, Spanish Guinea, West Africa,  
3rd June 1944 aged 27.

**Charles Malachy Murray,**  
Acton, Poyntzpass;  
died Poznan, Poland, 31st August 1944 aged 27.

**John Gartland,**  
Dromantine, Jerrettspass;  
died Colombo Ceylon,  
29th December 1945 aged 24.

## Second Lieutenant

### **Thomas Harcourt Harvey (1920 – 1941) Royal Tank Regiment.**

Harcourt Harvey was the son of Robert Harvey and his wife Mary Elena (nee Harcourt). He was born at Moyglass, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh but the family moved to Poyntzpass, when his father was appointed Principal of Poyntzpass Primary School in Railway Street, in 1932. Following his education in Poyntzpass and at Dundalk Grammar School, Harcourt joined the army in 1938 and was assigned to the Royal Tank Regiment. He had attained the rank of Second Lieutenant at the time of his death in 1941.



*Harcourt Harvey (right) pictured on leave in 1940*

He served as Regimental Signal Officer with the 6th Royal Tank Regiment in North East Africa in 1940 when the allied forces, under General Wavell, made a spectacular advance to Benghazi, during which much enemy equipment and 130,000 Italian prisoners were captured. However, despite this success, the scene in the desert was one of confusion. Many allied tanks were obsolete and unsuited to the conditions, supplies were often inadequate and communications unreliable at best. The arrival of the German Afrika Corps changed the scene dramatically. In March 1941 the Germans, under Rommel, unexpectedly counter-attacked and the allies were forced to hurriedly retreat. It was during this withdrawal that Harcourt Harvey was killed.

A flavour of the difficulties encountered during this retreat and the events surrounding Harcourt Harvey's death can be gained from entries in the 'Diary of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment' for 4th – 6th April 1941. On April 4th, the diary records that the retreating Regiment was the target of an intense attack by nine low-dive enemy bombers. The sustained attack destroyed several vehicles and some equipment but fortunately no casualties were sustained. Water and fuel were in short supply and tanks and trucks, which broke down or were deemed unlikely to complete the journey, had to be abandoned and destroyed, after fuel and water were salvaged from them. Transporting the crews of these abandoned vehicles further added to the problems.

The following extracts from the 'Diary' for April 5th graphically illustrates the straits they found themselves in:

*'Progress of "C" Squadron was seriously hindered due to engines overheating caused by a following wind and the fact that it was a very warm afternoon. Although no enemy movement was seen, dust of light vehicles appeared periodically on both flanks. There were also two enemy air attacks at this stage. .... C Squadron still had M13's going but these had to be abandoned owing to lack of fuel... At approximately 1530 Hours the engine of the Commanding Officer's tank blew up. The vehicle was destroyed and the Commanding Officer transferred to the last remaining tank of the R.N.Q. About 45 minutes later, this vehicle also broke down owing to overheating...'*



**Harcourt Harvey in N. Africa in 1941**

During the day contact with the struggling "C" Squadron was lost and on the morning of April 6th, an attempt was made to re-establish contact. The Commanding Officer dispatched two lorries under the command of Captain H.B. Ball with Harcourt Harvey as navigator. Their orders were to move 10 miles south hoping to establish contact and to assist their struggling colleagues of "C" Squadron with transport. The regiment was to remain in position for three hours at which point the retreat north to join the brigade would continue. The Commander did in fact wait nearly five hours before ordering the move to commence. Just as they were moving off, the party led by Captain Hall and Lieutenant Harvey returned. They had been unable to contact "C" Squadron, although considerable dust of vehicles was spotted in the south and west.

The 'Diary' entry for April 6th describes what then took place:

*'Commander 6th R.T.R. decided to move northwards to Marua on the main Derna road. Orders were issued to Sergeant Watson who was in charge of the three-ton lorries, carrying personnel, to follow on and similar orders were issued to 2nd Lieutenant T.H. Harvey to pass to Captain Ball. The lorries conformed and followed but Captain Hall and 2nd Lieut. Harvey, who had started to make tea, did not...'*

The everyday chore of tea making was to cost Harcourt Harvey his life. While they were having their tea, they were surrounded by German troops. In an exchange of fire Captain Ball was seriously wounded and Harcourt Harvey was killed. Captain Ball was taken prisoner. While a prisoner-of-war he was allowed to communicate with the Harvey family. He promised to meet them after the war but, sadly, he died of his wounds while still in captivity. The whereabouts of Harcourt Harvey's grave is unknown but his name is inscribed on the Memorial at El Alamein.

### **Able Seaman Robert Fisher (1920 – 1941) Royal Navy.**

Bobby Fisher was born in 1920 at Aughlish Cottages ('Pot Stick Row') Scarva, the only son of Robert and Sarah Fisher. He attended Scarva Primary School and, while still in his teens, enlisted in the Royal Navy.

When war broke out Bobby Fisher was a crewman aboard the cruiser *HMS Galatea* stationed in the Mediterranean Sea. In 1940-41 the *Galatea* saw considerable action in the North Atlantic and was involved in hunting the *Bismarck*. In July she joined the Mediterranean fleet via the Red Sea and was thereafter based in Malta, operating against Axis supply convoys to North Africa.



**The Naval War Memorial Plymouth**

On December 14th 1941, just before midnight, *Galatea* was torpedoed and sunk by the German submarine *U-557* off Alexandria, Egypt. A total of 469 officers and crew were lost, among them Able Seaman Robert Fisher. Around 100 survivors were picked up by the destroyers *HMS Griffin* and *HMS Hotspur* and a few others by

fishermen from the surrounding area.

Robert and Sarah Fisher were informed that their son was *'missing and feared dead'* but they clung to the hope that he was one of the lucky ones picked up by Egyptian or Greek fishermen and that in due course he would be found.

Some time, in the spring of 1942, Sarah Fisher was standing in the doorway of her cottage at Aughlish, when she noticed a young man walking down the road from the direction of Scarva station.

She became excited as he approached, for he was a sailor, and 'the cut of our Bobby'. She watched with bated breath as the sailor approached the crossroads but was greatly disappointed when he turned away towards Poyntzpass. Such was Sarah's grief and disappointment that she fainted in the doorway. Later that evening, her husband, Robert, collapsed and died.



***Bobby Fisher's name among thousands commemorated at Plymouth***

Bobby Fisher's body was not recovered. His name is inscribed on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, and on the war memorial in Banbridge.

### **Flight Sergeant Daniel Patrick McAleese (1920 – 1942) RAF.**

Daniel McAleese, the son of Daniel and Mary McAleese, was born at Terryhoogan, Scarva in 1920. He attended Ballyargan Primary School but, because of difficulty finding work locally during the depression of the 1930's, he went to live with relatives in Leeds, shortly after leaving school. Daniel's Aunt Cecilia had married a member of the Tate family of Leeds, who owned a large engineering business in the Yorkshire city. Through this

family connection, Daniel got work there and served his apprenticeship and became a highly skilled motor mechanic. In September 1940, he enlisted in the Royal Air Force and was assigned to 149 Squadron. Initially he was involved in maintenance but following a period of training he was promoted to the rank of Flight Engineer. Combining the roles of Flight Engineer and rear gunner, Daniel took part in many raids and operations over Germany and had just been promoted to the rank of Flight Sergeant when he met his death on Tuesday December 8th while on a reconnaissance mission over Hamburg in Germany.



***Daniel McAleese***

There is a degree of uncertainty about the purpose of the mission on which he died. Hamburg, the great deep-water port at the mouth of the Elbe, had a vital role in the German war effort. It was used by very large ships and so it was heavily guarded by both the Luftwaffe and numerous anti-aircraft batteries. It appears that Daniel McAleese and his colleagues had been sent to take aerial photographs of the city in preparation for a major offensive planned for the following spring. To do so effectively they had to go in quite low and in broad daylight, a very risky mission. Their plane was hit by one or other of the city's defences and crashed nearby. Daniel McAleese's body was the only one recovered. His grave is in the vast Ohlsdorf Cemetery in Hamburg. Ohlsdorf Cemetery is perhaps the most extensive in Europe, stretching for over two miles from east to west. It contains casualties of both World Wars and is also a public cemetery.



**Daniel McAleese's headstone in Ohlsdorf Cemetery, Hamburg**

There are 1,466 Second World War allied graves in the cemetery and one of them is that of 22 year-old Daniel McAleese. Members of the McAleese family visited his grave in 1997.

### **Flight Sergeant**

### **John Joseph Duffy (1916–1944) RAF.**

John Joe Duffy was born in Lissummon, Jerrettspass on 27th November 1916, the eldest of the four children of James and Bridget Duffy. He was educated at Lissummon Primary School and, while still in his teens, went to find work in England. There he worked as a landscape gardener, eventually setting up in business on his own. On Boxing Day 1939 he married Dorothy (Dorrie) Dalaston and they set up home at Rugby in Warwickshire. The following December, he enlisted in the R.A.F. He was trained as a wireless operator and air gunner before being assigned to Coastal Command. In February 1941 his son Roger was born and, shortly thereafter, Dorrie and their baby son came to Lissummon to live with John Joe's mother for the duration of the war.

During the next three years he saw a great deal of action. He served in the Far East and was awarded 'The Burma Star' and with Coastal Command took part in numerous missions in the Sunderland Flying boats. Throughout his time in the RAF, it seems that the crew, of which he was a member, remained largely unchanged and a great bond of friendship grew between them. In 1943 their plane



**John Joe Duffy**

came down in the sea, off Portugal, whether through mechanical failure or enemy action is not clear. Although they suffered injuries all were rescued and in time recommenced their service. On December 21st 1943, possibly from hospital, he wrote the following to his mother.

*"Dear Mother,*

*I was very pleased to hear from you and Mary yesterday. Was sorry to hear you were all so upset about me but don't worry mother, I'm feeling tip-top again. I feel a lot better now that I've got my letters coming through. It took them quite a while to catch up with me.*

*I had to know you are all well at home and that you all like Dorrie and Roger. Thanks a million, mother, for having a Mass said for me also prayed for. It has meant a lot to me. I was glad to hear Tom Savage was enquiring about me. I shall be very pleased to hear from him. Give my kind regards to all at home. I hope to see you all very soon. God bless you all.*

*Your loving son*

*John Joe."*



**John Duffy (front right) with crew members**

In April 1944, Dorrie gave birth to their daughter Marlene. John Joe was given compassionate leave and spent some time back home in Lissummon with his family before returning to his squadron.

Shortly thereafter the family learned, much to their relief that his crew were to be posted to East Africa, as this was largely out of the main war zone. While the reason for the posting is not known, it was seen as a reward for a crew who had, together, come through so much in the previous three years.



**Dorrie, with Roger and Marlene**

In order to avoid flying over mainland Europe and North East Africa, the flight path they were directed to take was that they follow the west coast of Africa, south to Nigeria, before heading east across the continent to their destination in Uganda. However they were never to make it, for while crossing the Gulf of Guinea, they flew into a very severe tropical storm, which caused their plane to crash-land on the little island of Fernando Po. There were no survivors. Fernando Po was then part of Spanish Guinea. (Today the island is called Bioko).

The family were informed of the loss but had no other details. The 'Tom Savage' referred to in John Joe's letter to his mother had become a priest and, in her distress, in an attempt to find out details what had become of her son, Mrs Duffy turned to Tom Savage for help. Fr Savage recalled what had happened at the time:

*"Early in 1944, I was sent to a parish in Edinburgh and while there I received a letter from Mrs Duffy telling me the sad news of John Joe's death and asking if I could do something about finding*

*out about it. I discovered where Fernando Po Island was, and that it was part of Spanish Guinea and that the language spoken there was Spanish. One of my duties in Edinburgh was to attend prisoners in the prison and as it happened there was a Spaniard there. With his help, I wrote a letter and addressed it to 'The Parish Priest, Fernando Po Island, Spanish Guinea.' I thought I would never hear of it and that I might as well have written to 'The Parish Priest, America!' but lo and behold, two months later a letter duly arrived from 'The Parish Priest of Fernando Po.'"*

The Duffy family have treasured the quaintly worded letter all these years. It reads:

*"The reference you received concerning your friend Mr Duffy is true by misfortune. The storm that broke when an English aeroplane was flying over this island caused it to fall down dying in the same instant the men (about ten) that were in it, except the one that was the cook who survived for an hour and by him we learnt certain details of the plane. There was nobody near the place where this catastrophe took place in this stage it was not possible to give these unfortunate men spiritual assistance....*

*Judging your well known Mr Duffy that he took in the main trip of his journey he was a good Christian; among said documents we found one that assures he had fulfilled with parish cathedral of Lagos confessing and receiving Holy Communion for the Easter. Moreover he took there crucifixions, some medals and one prayer book....*

*.... Knowing the undersigned all these details and wanting to give more embossment to the event being that it was treating of a catholic so excellent denote all his documents I ordered the Rev Fr Parson of the cathedral to display all his items for the burial of the late Mr Duffy and was done according to my orders. .... The ceremony was very solemn and grand it has been few in this capital.... After the ceremony was done... they were carried to the cemetery by the great multitude.... You may be tranquil trusting that our heavenly father in his infinite mercy has reserved a place for him in heaven...."(sic.)*

In May a letter from the Squadron Leader arrived containing John Joe's gold wedding ring. A letter from the Air Ministry later in the year gave more details of the funeral and enclosed photographs of the funeral in Santa Isabel (the capital of Fernando Po):



**The funeral of John Joe Duffy in Santa Isabel, Fernando Po Island**

*“The funeral was conducted by a Roman Catholic priest and two Methodist Ministers, as no Church of England priest could be found. The cortege formed up outside the cathedral and proceeded to the cemetery. The pallbearers were all British Africans and military honours were accorded by a detachment of Marines. Wreaths were received from the Spanish Guinea Government, various government departments, British Africans, a number of business houses, the British Consulate and from the African Staff of the Consulate. Each wreath was inscribed ‘In honoured memory of a member of the Royal Air Force.’ The town council of Santa Isabel has ceded, to His Majesty’s Government, the land in the cemetery where your husband and his comrades lie.”*

A few years ago, a nephew of John Joe’s was able to visit Santa Isabel on Fernando Po. (Santa Isabel is now known as ‘Malabo’) The graves of his uncle and the other crew members are perfectly kept.

### **Flight Engineer Charles Malachy Murray (1917–1944) RAF.**



**Charlie Murray**

Charles (Charlie) Murray was born in Acton village in February 1917, the second son of Patrick and Emily Murray. He attended school in Poyntzpass where he was remembered as a bright mischievous pupil full of life and energy. On leaving school he trained as an electrician and working with his elder brother Paddy, set up the successful electrical firm of ‘Murray Brothers.’

His brother Terry recalls that from a very early age, Charlie displayed a great interest in aeroplanes.

His room was decorated with pictures of aeroplanes cut from newspapers and magazines and as a boy he even went so far as to build a wooden structure, which he called his aeroplane although it never left the ground.

In 1936 he applied to join the Royal Air Force and, when in November of that year he received news that he had

been accepted, it was a dream come true. Having finished his initial training at Henlow, he was assigned to 6 Squadron and posted to the Middle East where he was stationed in Palestine and Egypt before the outbreak of war. At the time he was mostly involved with biplanes, which were quickly becoming obsolete. He specialised in Hardy Kestrels and Variants but later trained to work on Lysander, Gladiator and Hurricane aircraft.

Early in the war, his squadron was involved in the North African Campaign providing air cover and, for his services, he was awarded the ‘Africa Star’. Following the allied victory at El Alemein, 6 Squadron was recalled to the United Kingdom. In October 1942, he was transferred to Coastal Command 228 Squadron. He flew many missions over the Atlantic in Sunderland flying boats, spotting German U-boats, which were ravaging allied convoys at the time. At different times he was stationed at Lough Neagh and Lough Erne. When at Lough Neagh he would sometimes travel to Acton, without leave, and have to be left back next morning before his absence was noted.



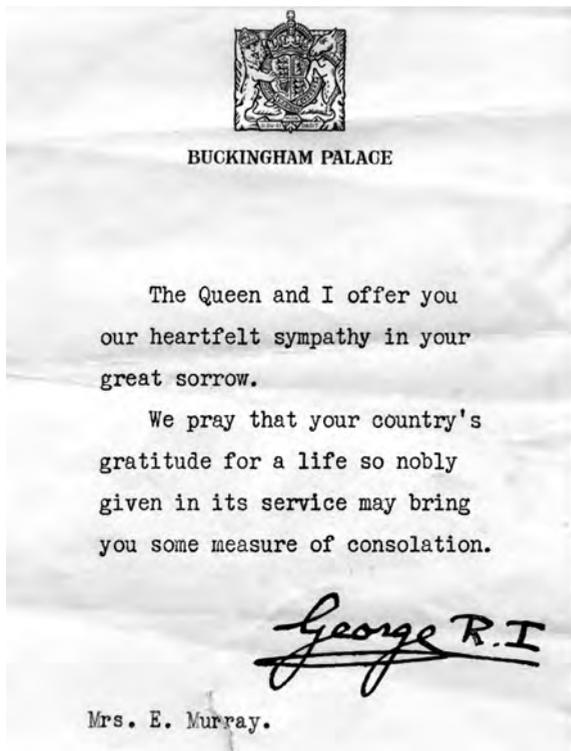
**Telegram informing family Charlie missing**

He was twice mentioned in dispatches for outstanding service. On the first occasion the citation read:

*“By the king’s order, the name of Leading Aircraftman C.F Murray was published in the London Gazette on January 1st 1942 as mentioned in dispatch for distinguished service. I am charged to record His Majesty’s high appreciation. Archibald Sinclair (Secretary of State for Air).”*

In March 1944 Charlie was transferred to 166 Squadron Bomber Command. As Flight Sergeant/engineer, he flew on many missions to mainland Europe and it was on one such mission on August 30 1944 that his Lancaster bomber was lost.

RAF records show that it was part of a huge bombing raid on the Baltic deep-water port of Stettin at the mouth of the River Oder. Before the outbreak of the war, Stettin had been part of Germany but, following the Potsdam agreement in 1945, it became part of Poland. Today it is known as Szczecin and has a population of 419,000. It was an important industrial centre with shipyards and heavy engineering works and, because of its importance to the German war effort, was regarded as a prime target for allied bombers.



#### **Royal message to Mrs. Murray**

The raids of August 29th and 30th were made up of 402 Lancaster bombers and one Mosquito. While Stettin was heavily defended, a considerable amount of damage was inflicted on the city and port and there were many casualties. However, a total of 53 Lancasters were lost during the raid which, nonetheless, was deemed to have been 'successful.' One of the Lancasters lost was that on which Charlie Murray was a crew member. It appears that while the Lancaster was hit during the raid, it was not immediately disabled and that it seemed possible that, by heading east, they might reach the Russian lines before landing. Unfortunately they didn't make it, crash-landing near Posnan in Poland. There were no survivors. The members of the crew were buried in Posnan Old Garrison Cemetery.



**Paul and Terry Murray at Charlie's grave in Posnan Old Cemetery, Poland**

As with all war casualties, news of Charlie's loss was delivered to his home by telegram. Apparently, his mother Emily was alone at home when the dreaded telegram was delivered. Neighbours recalled her poignantly going down Acton Street with the telegram in her hand, stricken with grief and shock.

In August 2001, Charlie's brother Terry, with his nephews Paul and Terry Junior, fulfilled a long-held ambition when they visited Charlie's grave in the cemetery at Posnan, Poland.



**Terry placing flowers on Charlie's grave**

#### **Able Seaman**

#### **John Gartland (1921–1945) Royal Navy.**

John Gartland was born at Ardee, Co Louth in 1921, the third of the eight children of Frank and Rose Gartland. Frank Gartland worked for the McKeever family of Ardee and when, in 1924, the McKeevers bought Dromantine Estate, the Gartland family moved to Dromantine too. Their new home was in the grounds of Dromantine House and, when the McKeevers sold the property to the Society of Missions to Africa, Frank Gartland was kept on as cow-man.

John, who was known as 'Doddy' to the rest of the family, attended Barr Primary School, where his teachers were Mr Trodden, Mr Conlon and Mrs Fegan. He was a bright good-natured boy, friendly and fond of a joke. When he left school he got occasional seasonal work with local farmers but during the great depression of the 1930's work was very scarce and he was often unemployed. At the age of 17, in 1938, and much to his mother's dismay, he enlisted in the Irish Army. He was posted to Sligo and was very unhappy there so, when he came home on his first leave, he never went back.



**John Gartland**

Following the outbreak of war, he was hired for six months by a farmer called Gilliland, at Dromore. Although the family treated him well and he was happy there he was unsettled and so when his time was done he left Gilliland's and, in the spring of 1941, he went by train to Belfast and enlisted in the Royal Navy. His mother was unhappy at this as she had been earlier but, while he had been very unhappy in the Irish army, he really loved the Navy.

He received his initial training at HMS Collingwood, a shore-based training centre at Gosport in Hampshire. He proved to be an excellent recruit and having finished his training was posted to Portsmouth. He was a very good correspondent and wrote weekly to his mother and other family members and to May Quinn, a neighbour's daughter in Dromantine, with whom he was very friendly.

In 1943, he was transferred to the Far East and he was there when hostilities ended in 1945. Thereafter he was based at Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and became a motorcycle dispatch rider, carrying messages between the bases on the island. It was while on such a mission, on December 29th 1945, that he met his death. Apparently, he swerved to avoid an old woman who walked out in front of him and was hit by an oncoming car. He died of his injuries.

The news of his death came to Jerrettspass Post Office on New Year's Day 1946. It seems that the person entrusted with the grim task of bringing the dreaded news to the family, couldn't bring himself to go directly to the Gartland home, opting instead to seek assistance from nuns who were at that time stationed at Dromantine House. Two nuns brought the telegram to the family home.



**John Gartland pictured in Ceylon shortly before his death**

The family members were shocked and distressed at the news. Mrs Gartland was naturally distraught and her grief was intensified when, two days later, a letter from John arrived. In it he wrote that he was in great form and enclosed the menu from the Christmas dinner he had enjoyed a few days before. He was so looking forward to coming home on leave in January. This led Mrs Gartland to hope that the telegram had been a mistake but, sadly, it was not.

May Quinn had written to John shortly before his death. On January 7th 1946, the Chaplain of the Royal Navy Barracks at Colombo returned her letter with the following rather curt note, strangely lacking in sensitivity,

*Dear Miss Quinn,*

*I deeply regret to inform you that A/B Seaman J. Gartland was killed on December 29th 1945, when the motorcycle he was riding collided with a car. He was buried on December 30th in the services Cemetery at Liveramatu.*

*I think you would wish your letter to be returned.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Leslie A. Dain*

*Chaplain R.N.V.R.*

As the chaplain's letter stated, John Gartland was buried in the forces cemetery Liveramantu, Sri Lanka, The celebrations, marking the end of the Second World War in 1945, were very muted in many households. For many there was little enthusiasm for rejoicing or partying in the streets and, while all were happy that the terrible conflict had ended, for six local families the price that they had been paid for victory was just too high. The graves of the six young local men remembered in this article lie far away from home, scattered over three continents.

## Map showing the final resting places of the six young local heroes



**1. Thomas Harcourt Harvey,**

Died North Africa, 6th April 1941 aged 21.

**2. Robert Fisher,**

Died in the Mediterranean Sea, 15th December 1941 aged 21.

**3. Daniel Patrick McAleese,**

Died Hamburg, Germany, 8th December 1942 age 22.

**4. John Joseph Duffy,**

Died Fernando Po Island, Spanish Guinea, West Africa,  
3rd June 1944 aged 27.

**5. Charles Malachy Murray,**

Died Poznan, Poland, 31st August 1944 aged 27.

**6. John Gartland,**

Died Colombo Ceylon,  
29th December 1945 aged 24.