

UNTOLD STORIES

WHEN INDIAN AND IRISH FREEDOM STRUGGLES FOUND COMMON GROUND

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Two tricolours, one dream

For their fight for independence, India and Ireland found common ground in the Dagshai hills

BY PRATUL SHARMA/Dagshai, Himachal Pradesh

SANJAY AHLAWAT

The hills around Dagshai were far barer a century ago than they are today. It would see pine come up later, seeded and nurtured by units of Scottish regiments who served in the region under the British. In 1920, the slopes were still sparse, the cantonment stark against the ridge above the old Hindustan-Tibet road. Sparse they might have been, but the hills knew how to hold their silence. On the morning of November 2, 1920, they stood still as it rained bullets near the walls of the military jail.

A few minutes earlier, a young Irish private, James Joseph Daly, had

walked into the yard with a green silk handkerchief around his neck. A doctor had asked whether he wanted morphine. Daly had refused. Moments later, the Royal Fusiliers—infantry regiment of the British Army—had opened fire. As his body fell, the priest stepped forward to administer the last sacrament and nearly took a stray bullet. Daly's comrades gathered his remains and handed them over for burial in the Catholic cemetery—grave number 340.

Daly was 52 days short of his 21st birthday. His death made him the last soldier to be executed by the British Army for a military offence. He and other Irish soldiers—many of

them world war veterans—had mutinied in protest against the violence in Ireland by the English. It mattered little that they were 7,000km from home, stationed with the Connaught Rangers regiment at Solan in Himachal Pradesh. It was not the first time soldiers in India had turned against their British commanders; Indian sepoys had done so in 1857.

In a letter to his mother written days earlier, Daly explained himself plainly: "What harm it is all for Ireland! I am not afraid to die, but it is thinking of you I am." His mother was informed of his execution through a telegram on December 31.

The first act of Irish mutiny came



COURTESY ANAND SETHI, CURATOR, DAGSHAI MILITARY JAIL MUSEUM

IN REMEMBRANCE

James Joseph Daly was the last soldier to be executed by the British Army for a military offence; (left) visitors at Dagshai Jail

200km from Solan—on June 28, 1920, at Wellington Barracks in Jalandhar, a group of Connaught Rangers refused to take orders. The soldiers sang songs, and even hoisted their tricolour. Some accounts also mention the influence of Sinn Féin, a party active in the Irish War of Independence. Two mutineers travelled to Solan to spread the word.

At Solan, the protest remained peaceful until the evening of July 1. And then the soldiers mutinied, incarcerating their English officers and seizing the armoury. The guards opened fire, killing two men—Peter Sears and Patrick Smyth—and wounding another. A relieving

column was rushed from Ambala, which quelled the mutiny. Then a court martial was hurriedly convened at Dagshai on August 20. Sixty-one soldiers were convicted. Fourteen received death sentences. Thirteen were reprieved. Daly alone was executed.

A telegram sent by the commander in chief two days before the execution stated: "Reprieve was not entertained in one case only because the prisoner was the ringleader throughout and maintained a spirit of flagrant defiance for more than twenty-four hours." For the British, sparing him risked weakening military discipline not only among Irish

troops but across the Indian army. Daly's execution was intended as a message for two nationalities held under the control of its gun—Ireland and India.

The story of Daly's final days would have faded were it not for the old jail above the Hindustan-Tibet road and for the man who restored it. The Dagshai Jail Museum stands in the same stone building where Daly spent his last weeks. The cantonment itself sits above the same road, earlier called National Highway 22 and what is now NH-5. It is a steep climb from the highway, a few kilometres before Solan. Most travellers pass it for nearby Kasauli. If Kasauli offers the comforts of a hill station, Dagshai asks visitors to slow down, to notice, and to remember.

The restoration of the jail and its legacy owes much to Anand Kumar Sethi, an IIT alumnus who arrived in Dagshai nearly 20 years ago. His father had been the first cantonment executive. When he found the jail, a Military Engineer Service yard, he began clearing it out. When his wife's relative became brigade commander here, Sethi gained access to turn the abandoned structure into a museum. Then began a humongous task of restoring not only the jail, but also the cemeteries and even the gothic-style St Patrick's Church.

Inside the jail, the teakwood floors creak underfoot. The 8ftx12ft cells have almost no natural light, there is a ventilator in the walls though. The one reserved for those with heavier punishment allows only standing room. There is even one cell titled P&T cell, which, Sethi found out, stood for 'Punishment and Torture' cell. Not just mutineers, even Mahatma Gandhi and his assassin spent a night here, though nearly three decades apart.

As the jail museum is under the control of Indian Army, Sethi has