

# Why Irish soldiers who fought Hitler hide their medals



John Stout: "I feel very betrayed about how we were treated, it was wrong"

Written by John Waite  
BBC Radio 4, Face the Facts

**Five thousand Irish soldiers who swapped uniforms to fight for the British against Hitler went on to suffer years of persecution.**

One of them, 92-year-old Phil Farrington, took part in the D-Day landings and helped liberate the German death camp at Bergen-Belsen - but he wears his medals in secret.

Even to this day, he has nightmares that he will be arrested by the authorities and imprisoned for his wartime service.

"They would come and get me, yes they would," he said in a frail voice at his home in the docks area of Dublin.

And his 25-year-old grandson, Patrick, confirmed: "I see the fear in him even today, even after 65 years."

Mr Farrington's fears are not groundless.

He was one of about 5,000 Irish soldiers who deserted their own neutral army to join the war against fascism and who were brutally punished on their return home as a result.

They were formally dismissed from the Irish army, stripped of all pay and pension rights, and prevented from finding work by being banned for seven years from any employment paid for by state or government funds.

A special "list" was drawn up containing their names and addresses, and circulated to every government department, town hall and railway station - anywhere the men might look for a job.

It was referred to in the Irish parliament - the Dail - at the time as a "starvation order", and for many of their families the phrase became painfully close to the truth.

## **Treated as outcasts**

Paddy Reid - whose father and uncle both fought the Japanese at the battle of Kohima Ridge - recalls a post-war childhood in Dublin spent "moving from one slum to another".

Maybe one slice of bread a day and that would be it - no proper clothing, no proper heating.

"My father was blacklisted and away all the time, picking turnips or whatever work he could get. It's still painful to remember. We were treated as outcasts."

John Stout served with the Irish Guards armoured division which raced to Arnhem to capture a key bridge.

He also fought in the Battle of the Bulge, ending the war as a commando.

On his return home to Cork, however, he was treated as a pariah. "What they did to us was wrong. I know that in my heart. They cold-shouldered you. They didn't speak to you.

"They didn't understand why we did what we did. A lot of Irish people wanted Germany to win the war - they were dead up against the British."

It was only 20 years since Ireland had won its independence after many years of rule from London, and the Irish list of grievances against Britain was long - as Gerald Morgan, long-time professor of history at Trinity College, Dublin, explains.

"The uprisings, the civil war, all sorts of renege promises - I'd estimate that 60% of the population expected or indeed hoped the Germans would win.

"To prevent civil unrest, Eamon de Valera had to do something. Hence the starvation order and the list."

Ireland adopted a policy of strict neutrality which may have been necessary politically or even popular, but a significant minority strongly backed Britain, including tens of thousands of Irish civilians who signed up to fight alongside the 5,000 Irish servicemen who switched uniforms.

## **Confidential list**

Until I showed him the list - the size of a slim phone directory and marked "confidential" - John Stout had not realised his name was included.

But after the war it quickly became apparent that he could not get work and was not welcome in Ireland - so he returned to Britain.

"I feel very betrayed about how we were treated, it was wrong and even today they should say sorry for the problems we had to endure. We never even got to put our case or argue why it was unjust," said Mr Stout.

And the list itself is far from accurate, according to Robert Widders, who has written a book about the deserters' treatment called *Spitting on a Soldier's Grave*.



Eamon de Valera inspects his country's neutral army

"It contains the names of men who were to be punished but who'd already been killed in action, but not the names of men who deserted the Irish army to spend their war years as burglars or thieves," he said.

In recent months, a number of Irish parliamentarians have begun pressing their government to issue a pardon to the few deserters who remain alive.

"What happened to them was vindictive and not only a stain on their honour but on the honour of Ireland," TD Gerald Nash said.

But for those nonagenarians who helped win the war but lost so much by doing so, time is of the essence, and it is running out fast.