

A MONTH FOR BRAVERY

by Mike McCormack

On September 13, the members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians celebrate one of the major holidays of their Order - Commodore John Barry Day. It is not a day unique to that Order, for it has been commemorated on the American national calendar more than once. There were even statues erected in his honor back in the days when Americans remembered with gratitude the contributions of this dedicated man. Today, few remember his deeds. The American Heritage dictionary doesn't even list his name, and his statue in front of Independence Hall, Philadelphia, is just a platform for pigeons unnoticed by passers-by. It is truly unfortunate that so few remember because, during his lifetime, Barry gave so much to America at a time when she needed it most. It has even been said that had it not been for John Barry, the American Revolution would have been lost. Dr. Benjamin Rush said in his eulogy at Barry's grave side, "He was born in Ireland, but America was the object of his devotion, and the theater of his usefulness." A sea captain in colonial America, he seemed destined for a prosperous career in the colonies, but his integrity and sense of justice led him to risk all in the patriot cause. With nine years experience as a seagoing Captain, and five successful commands to his credit, the young Irishman was warmly welcomed, and given command of a ship under the authority of the Continental Congress. Eight months after the first shots were fired at Lexington, Captain John Barry took the helm of a new 14-gun vessel aptly named, Lexington. He quickly trained a crew, and began the task of supplying and supporting Washington's ground forces.

He captured British ships and took their cargo for the patriots. He captured an armed British vessel when ammunition was scarce, and a supply ship when food was at a premium, he then came to Washington's aid when the leader was planning to cross the Delaware. He organized seamen and joined the land forces which crossed the river in boats supplied by his friend, Patrick Colvin. Barry was held in such high esteem that Lord Howe made a flattering offer to Barry to desert the patriot cause. "Not the value or command of the whole British fleet," Barry replied, "can lure me from the cause of my country which is liberty and freedom." The last sea battle of the American Revolution took place as Barry was returning with a shipload of bullion from Havana, and was set upon by three British ships. He destroyed one and outdistanced the other two, returning with the precious cargo which was used to establish a National Bank for the new nation. Even after the war, this courageous seaman assisted America by transporting Virginia tobacco to Holland to repay America's war debts.

In recognition of his experience and bravery, Washington asked the popular naval hero to form and train a class of midshipmen, who would form the nucleus of the new American Navy. Barry himself was named the ranking officer, and granted Commission number one making him Father of the American Navy. He died on Sept 13, 1803.

Years later, in 1920 to be exact, another Barry bravely fought the Brits. This time in Dublin during Ireland's War of Independence. On Sept 21, a British lorry, heavily guarded by armed soldiers, was being loaded with supplies as a voice from the street called, "Drop your rifles and put up your hands." It was a group of Irish Volunteers. Suddenly, one of the soldiers fired, then a fusillade erupted as Volunteers and soldiers duelled with revolvers and rifles. When it was over, one soldier was killed and four wounded, and the Volunteers fled. The British spotted one young man hiding under their lorry and pulled him out. They threw him into the back with their wounded and sped off. An official statement that day from British HQ stated that, "One of the aggressors had been arrested."

The aggressor, as it turned out, was an 18-year old medical student named Kevin Barry. Kevin had joined the Irish Volunteers when he was only 15. His job was to cycle to various parts of the city delivering orders and correspondence between officers of the movement. In his position as

courier, young Kevin knew all of the leading figures, and the British knew they had a prize catch in young Barry. Questioning and persuasion began in earnest: Kevin refused to betray the movement. He was offered amnesty and freedom, yet he refused. He was tortured for days on end, and still he refused. Finally, he was charged with murder and sentenced to death by hanging.

Late at night, Kevin was taken to see the scaffold that would end his life the following morning. With incredible cruelty and mental coercion, he was again pressured to reveal the names of his officers and comrades. In return he was promised a full pardon, his tuition paid at any Medical school in the world, and a pension of 2,000 Pounds Sterling a year for life. Kevin, visibly shaken, listened to the officer in silence, then glanced up at the beam from which hung the noose. "Yes," he said, "I think that should hold my weight."

On November 1, at 8 AM, his hands tied behind him, a slender 18-year old boy was led to the gallows at Mountjoy Jail where his short life was ended. Later Father Albert, one of Kevin's last visitors, reported that Kevin's last words were, "Hold on to the Republic."

In this month of September, as we are reminded of two Barrys and Bravery, we are also asked to remember the bravery of those whose stories – unlike the Barrys – may never be known. They lie forever in the rubble of the Twin Towers that were destroyed on September 11. We'll never know how many Irish died in that horror, but we do know that in the rubble were found close to six hundred Claddagh Rings. Remember them all in your prayers.