

Ireland

Sweetie Bev and I recently returned from a 10-day MSUM Alumni sponsored tour of Ireland. It was wonderful, had a great time, met some interesting Irish folks, drank some Guinness beer and learned a lot about the Emerald Isle. At one of our tour stops (Carnlough harbor) we saw a plaque honoring Paddy, an Irish carrier pigeon who had been awarded the Dickin Medal dubbed the animals' "Victoria Cross", after being the fastest pigeon to arrive back in England with news that the D-Day invasion had been successful. Paddy is the only animal in Ireland to be awarded this medal which reads "For the best recorded time with a message from the Normandy Operations, while serving with the RAF in June, 1944." Paddy flew 230 miles across the English Channel in four hours and fifty minutes. I think this qualifies Paddy as a WWII Veteran. One of our fellow tourists told me that she had two uncles who fought in and survived WWII, both of them in the Norwegian Brigade. The Norwegian Brigade was a group of men who spoke Norwegian and were specially trained in winter combat in the US and fought in several battles in Europe.

Another famous WWII Veteran of Irish heritage and well liked in Ireland is former US President John F. Kennedy. JFK is the only US President to visit Ireland, while in office. There is a plaque in Galway memorializing the location where he gave his speech to the Irish people. Audie Murphy, the most decorated American soldier during WWII is also of Irish heritage. John Kelly, the current White House Chief of Staff, was born to an Irish father and Italian mother.

I thought I knew a lot about Irish history, but was amazed at what I didn't know. The island of Ireland is actually two countries, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland which is part of the UK. We crossed the border twice, saw no wall and didn't have to stop for customs. Travel is free between the two countries. Religion has played an important role in Irish history, starting from the old religions of the original people to the forced Christianization by the Roman Catholic priests, to the forced conversion to the Anglican Church of England to what they are today. The Irish people have long fought the people of England and Scotland. Ireland was invaded by the Vikings who established settlements in Ireland. The Republic of Ireland became an independent country in 1922 and is part of the EU.

St. Nicholas Church in Galway, in my mind, represents the changes in religion over the years. It was built in 1320 by Catholics, was used as a stable by the invading Normans, and became an Anglican church after Henry VIII established his own church because the Pope would not give him a divorce. The church is now part of the Church of Ireland, closely aligned with the Catholic Church. They performed the first same sex marriage in 2002. Now they have offered worship space to the Eastern Orthodox religion, both Russian and Greek. Because of Ireland's trouble past, much because of fighting between religions, I applaud this approach.