

# BOY MURPHY – A TEAK-TOUGH OLYMPIAN

After serving 40 years with An Garda Síochána, William 'Boy' Murphy finally stepped down in 1966. However, the tall, former Olympic boxer wasn't quite ready for a rocking chair and a cupán tae – not a chance – writes Christopher Warner.



*Royal Munster Fusiliers (RMF) in India.*

Whether hopscotching around the world, battling in the ring or simply patrolling his beat, William 'Boy' Murphy's entire life had been spent in motion. In the end, tucking into retirement would become his greatest challenge.

William John Murphy, Jr. was born in the Punjab province (modern-day Pakistan) on 4 September 1903. His parents – William and Bridget (née O'Connor) Murphy – were married in Cobh Cathedral, Co. Cork in 1902. The couple then set sail on a long voyage to colonial India, where William Sr. served in the Royal Munster Fusiliers (RMF), a line regiment in the British Army. The Murphy clan eventually expanded to six boys and a girl, making their home in various military garrisons.

During his youth, William played a wide variety of sports in faraway locations such as Khartoum, Alexandria, Cairo and Rangoon.

However, as the oldest sibling, he also assumed familial responsibilities following the outbreak of WWI and the RMF's mobilisation in August 1914. The unit would engage in some of the fiercest combat of the war,



*The Murphy Family Photo*

including the Gallipoli Campaign, the Somme and the muddy quagmire of Passchendaele.

**FOLLOWING IN FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS**  
In the Spring of 1918, at the tender age of 14 years, 267 days, William followed in his father's footsteps and enlisted in the RMF. The subsequent armistice later that year spared the teenager from the carnage of 'The Great War' – but the strapping young lad saw plenty of

fighting – albeit inside a boxing ring.

While stationed in North Africa, he was crowned Middleweight Boxing Champion of Egypt, the first of many titles for the hard-hitting slugger. Around this time, he became known as 'Boy Murphy' – a moniker that stuck with him all his life.

He returned to Ireland in 1922 as the country erupted into Civil War. Like thousands of soldiers in his former regiment, Murphy had been unable to fight in the War for Independence, but soon joined the newly raised Irish Free State National Army.

He initially posted to Victoria Barracks (later re-named for Michael Collins) in Cork and then became a dispatch rider for the signal corps at Portobello Barracks (now Cathal Brugha Barracks) in Dublin.

**BOXING CLEVER AT OLYMPICS**

The 1924 Olympic Games marked the first time in which Ireland competed as an independent nation. In all previous Olympiads, athletes from the Emerald Isle were forced to represent Great Britain.



*The Army Boxing Team in Portobello Barracks in 1924.*

All that would change in Paris when the Irish team proudly marched under the tricolour with shamrocks on their vests. A total of 27 nations, represented by 181 boxers, competed across eight weight categories. The fighters were coached by Scotsman James 'Tancy' Lee, a former British fly and featherweight champion and holder of a Lonsdale Belt.

Murphy, who had won the Irish Middleweight Championship earlier in the year, scored a first-round KO against Eugene Nowak of Poland before losing to Canadian Leslie Black in the quarterfinals. Despite going home empty-handed, Murphy and his fellow teammates laid the foundation for future success.

#### IRELAND'S BOXING MEDALS

Irish boxers have gone on to claim more Olympic medals (16 and counting) than in all other sports combined – a feat made possible by that inaugural squad nearly a century ago. Additionally, the tournament produced one of the most bizarre incidents in Olympic history involving a Frenchman, a Bobby and accusations of cannibalism.

Harry Mallin, a London policeman and the reigning Olympic Middleweight champion, faced Roger Brousse of

France in a preliminary bout. At the end of the fight, Mallin showed the Belgian referee several bite marks on his chest. But his complaints were ignored and Brousse was declared the winner on points, 2–1.

A subsequent inquiry resulted in the decision being reversed, and that's when all hell broke loose in the French capital. Angry crowds had to be restrained by the Gendarmes, resulting in calls for an end to the competition for having stoked the flames of nationalist tension. Mallin went on to defeat fellow Briton John Elliott and defend his title.



*Garda William John Murphy.*

#### A CAREER IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Upon returning to Ireland, Murphy continued to augment his well-earned reputation as one of the most stylish boxers of his era. He also embarked on a new career path, taking the oath as a member of the Gardaí [Reg. No. 7408].

Although Murphy's decision to enter law enforcement eschewed any chance of turning professional, he long remained active in the sport as a fighter, coach and referee.



*Gardaí Jim Murphy and Boy Murphy at the Garda Depot in 1927.*

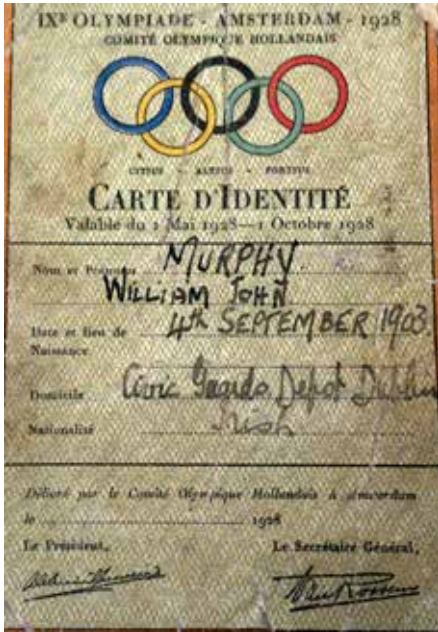


*The Garda Boxing Team pictured at Dublin's Phoenix Park Depot in 1927.*

By the time the next Olympics rolled around, Garda Murphy had moved up in class to the light heavyweight (aka Cruiserweight) division. Held in Amsterdam, he opened the account in similar fashion as the previous Games, knocking out his man in the opening round.

He then pummelled Germany's Ernst Pistulla in the quarterfinals, flooring

him twice. The judges, however, saw things differently and awarded a highly questionable decision to the German. Pistulla was later killed in action fighting on the Eastern Front in WWII.



*William J. Murphy's Olympic Games card in 1928.*

#### MENTORING YOUNG BOXERS

Meanwhile, in a different arena, a medical student from County Cork struck gold with a hammer. According to legend, hammer throwing began in Ireland around 2000 BCE, when Cú Chulainn whirled a chariot wheel by its



*Wedding photo of William J. Murphy and Alice Corbett in 1951.*

axle, heaving it farther than anyone in the land.

The sport would go through various iterations over time and naturally, became dominated by Irish-born athletes. On the afternoon of 28 July 1928, Pat O'Callaghan added to this pedigree by capturing Ireland's first Olympic title. Murphy, who counted 'Doc' as one of his best friends, burst with pride upon seeing the Irish flag raised and hearing 'Amhran na bhFiann' fill the stadium.

The promotion of sport within An Garda Síochána – especially boxing – developed some of Ireland's finest athletes and played a significant role in earning respect from the public.

For his part, Murphy worked tirelessly to support physical fitness wherever he was stationed, including Dublin, Limerick, Claremorris, Tralee, Cavan, Kilkenny, Clonmel, Newcastle (Co. Tipperary) and Waterford.

In most of those towns, he helped establish boxing clubs and mentor young fighters, providing invaluable



*Daughter Maura O'Sullivan proudly holds the 'Boy' Murphy Trophy.*

guidance by a two-time Olympian, Tailteann Games Champion and winner of five Senior Irish titles.

#### TRUSTED PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY

While in Newcastle, a freak accident would ultimately lead to unexpected good fortune for the veteran Garda. Near the small village of Knockeen he met his future wife, Alice (nee Corbett), whose family took him in and gave him tea after he fell from his bike.

The towering policeman soon became a regular caller to the house. He and Alice were married at the Grange Church in 1951 and shortly afterwards they moved permanently to Waterford City. Four years later, the couple received a special Christmas present with the birth of their daughter, Maura, on 25 December 1955.

Murphy frequently patrolled the quays of the former Viking seaport, interacting with everyone he met along the way. His physicality and notoriety as a world-class boxer allowed him to defuse most disturbances and restore order with little resistance.

As a trusted pillar of the community, he freely dispensed advice and offered a sympathetic ear on delicate matters such as domestic strife. Not surprisingly, restless juveniles often found safe harbour at the local boxing club.

#### DAUGHTER'S CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

His daughter Maura, now Maura O'Sullivan, is a former Civil Servant and mother of two children. Growing up in

Waterford, her childhood memories are inextricably linked to her father's service on the Force.

She recently shared her experiences with 'Síocháin' magazine. "The first time I saw him on point duty, I was seven years of age, but the image has stayed with me down through the decades. I was in the back seat of a neighbour's car. They had kindly invited me, as they often did, to go to the beach with their daughters.

Returning from Tramore, the traffic was heavy as the August race meeting had just ended. As we approached Bunker's Hill, my friends suddenly squealed with excitement. They pointed out my dad in the middle of the junction, controlling the traffic. There he stood tall, as they all were in those days, commanding, directing all he surveyed.

To me, he seemed Godlike as all the drivers obeyed his hand signals. I suppose every little girl hero-worships her dad, but I was very proud of mine all those years ago as tall and majestic with a kindly smile, he walked the beat in Waterford City."

#### NEW GARDENING ENDEAVOURS

After retiring from the guards, Murphy worked as a security officer at Clover Meats for several years. He eventually took up the hobby of gardening and embraced the new endeavour with the same zeal as a jab-hook combo.

The tougher than leather ex-fighter could be found meticulously tending



*William J. Murphy pictured in the garden.*

to his prized vegetable garden and fruit trees. Every spring, his yard came alive with an array of colourful flowers, which he provided to neighbours as carefully arranged bouquets. Murphy passed away on 25 November 1979 and was buried in Rathcooney Cemetery, Co. Cork.



*Boy Murphy.*



*Pictured on duty in Waterford City.*

**About the Author:** Christopher Warner is an American actor and freelance writer. He wrote several articles for 'Síocháin' in 2020, while his other articles have appeared in magazines and websites across multiple genres, including Military History Matters, Portland Monthly, Fly Past, WWII Quarterly, Aviation History, and Irish America. He currently resides in Co. Kerry with his wife, Maureen, and their brood of cats.