

# MAJOR GENERAL JOHN F. O'RYAN



Born New York City, August 21, 1874  
Enlisted as Private in Co. G., 7th Inf., N.G.N.Y., March 12, 1897

Commissioned Second Lieutenant, Second Battery, F.A., N.G.N.Y. December 6, 1900 (?)  
Commissioned First Lieutenant, April 9, 1904  
Captain, First Battery, F.A., N.G.N.Y., May 10, 1907  
Major, Second Battalion, F.A., N.G.N.Y., September 19, 1911  
Major General, Commanding N.G.N.Y., April 16, 1912  
Appointed by President Wilson as Major General, National Army, August 5, 1917

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His military decorations were the following:  
Distinguished Service Medal (U.S.)  
Knight Comdr., Order of St. Michael and St. George Comdr., Victorian Order (Gr. Brit.)  
Comdr., Legion of Honor, Croix de Guerre with Palm (France)  
Comdr., Order of Leopold and Croix de Guerre w. Palm (Belg.)  
Comdr., Order of St. Maurice and Lazarua (Italy)

*This biographical sketch of General John F. O'Ryan was provided by Josephine, Richard and William D. O'Ryan, Jr., cousins to General O'Ryan. It is based on research by their father William D. O'Ryan.*

## **JOHN FRANCIS O'RYAN**

### **1874 - 1961**

John F. O'Ryan was born 21 August 1874, the first of four children of Francis O'Ryan and Anna Barry (*editors note: sisters Anna, Jane and Helen*). His family was living on 32nd Street in Manhattan at the time, although they later moved to Fulton Avenue in Morrisania, which was then practically a country village in Westchester, now a section of the Bronx. His father, Francis, was an Irish immigrant. Francis and his brother Philip were both well educated and taught the classics at Seton Hall University.

From his early boyhood John showed an interest in training and a penchant for discipline. Later in life he recalled that as a boy he loved to devote his time to training his dogs and horses, and, at fifteen, in the New York Public Schools, he was chosen captain of a school military company. He later entered the College of the City of New York where he found himself constantly in difficulty with the faculty and in general made a poor scholastic showing. He did not complete the college course, but instead obtained his academic training in the atmosphere of his father's home instruction. He then attended New York University from which he took the degree of LLB in 1898, intending to follow a legal career.

His biographer, General Robert Lee Bullard, describes how Francis O'Ryan early encouraged John's interest in military history, recounting to his son his recollections of the Civil War period of American history, which had taken place shortly after the family had come from Ireland. Together they visited the Civil War and Revolutionary War battlefields, and together they studied the campaigns of Napoleon. While John was still a student at New York University he enrolled as a private in the 7th New York Infantry, then considered the finest of New York's

National Guard regiments. He later told Bullard that he was shocked at the time to find in this unit inadequate training, lack of discipline, and inattention to military preparation, particularly at a time when the campaign of the Spanish American War was exposing publicly the extent of U.S. National unpreparedness.

In April 1901 he married Janet Holmes of New York City and also joined the law firm of Corbin and O'Ryan. That same year (*editors note: some sources state 1900*), seeing more opportunity for promotion, he transferred to the Second Battery, New York Field Artillery in which he was commissioned as second lieutenant, and then during the years from 1900 to 1912 he rose from second Lieutenant to Major. In 1912 he was appointed Major-General and Commander-in-Chief of the New York National Guard\*. General Bullard gives an interesting description of the role of General O'Ryan in this important period between the Spanish-American War and the outbreak of World War I:

*"Determined to improve the military effectiveness of his unit he advocated most rigid training under whatever conditions could be found to approximate most closely actual combat. For years he enforced rigid training and then advocated a tightening of military training and discipline in public speeches and in published articles. This eventually led to the concept of 'live' combat training with 'live' ammunition of which J.F. O'Ryan was the pioneer champion but it was not until the months immediately prior to the entry into World War I that he succeeded in convincing the War Department and the skeptical U.S. public that this was a sound training principle. His men liked the strenuous training schedules and developed a spirit of pride in their effectiveness and loyalty to their unit. These methods attracted much newspaper exposure, and with the general public dissatisfaction following the exposure of our ill-preparedness in the Spanish-American War, these ideas of O'Ryan received loud public acclaim. He made frequent public addresses to urge the improvement and strengthening of the National Guard to conform more nearly to the standards and methods used by the regular army, and in time this program achieved the desired result."*

His methods were often spectacular. Bullard recounts the incident when O'Ryan was marching his troops through Spartanburg, South Carolina, at the request of the city to support and assist their Liberty Bond drive. He became amazed at the listless and inattentive attitude of the citizens while the Star Spangled Banner was being played. He therefore ordered his band to play Marching Through Georgia, and although this caused resentment and protest he felt that he had succeeded in gaining the desired result.

His speeches and his writings, together with his spectacular moves, made him the object of attack and controversy, but he succeeded in converting his National Guard unit into a fighting force, and aroused a strong spirit of loyalty and pride among the men serving under him. He was associated with General Leonard Wood in advocating the Plattsburg plan for preparing leading young men from civilian life to form the corps of an officer reserve in the event of war. Most of his ideas and philosophy of military training and organization are contained in the book published by him at this time entitled *The Modern Army in Action* to which General Wood wrote the introduction.

In 1914 he had graduated from the Army War College. In 1916 when the Regular Army and the National Guard mobilized on the Mexican border, the New York National Guard of about 18,000 men went to the lower Rio Grande region under the command of O'Ryan, and during this period he took the opportunity to train his men under the same conditions which were at that time prevailing in the war in Europe. In 1917 when the National Guard unit returned to New York his unit was reorganized into the regular army as the 27th Division under his command and on 5 August 1917 he was appointed Major General in the regular Army. This division arrived in France on 10 May 1918 and first went into action on July 9 of the same year in the Dickebausch sector in Belgium, extending from Boormeziele to a point northwest of Mont Kemmel. Subsequently the 27th Division can be found in Bullard's biography but the full details can be best located in O'Ryan's own book The Story of the 27th Division, which Bullard describes as not only a history of the Division with the fullest possible details of the exploits of the men in it, but also a scholarly treatise on training, psychology of military operations and all its attendant ramifications of military strategy and tactics. The exploits of the 27th Division in France should be read in detail by students of military strategy to be fully appreciated.

By the end of the war O'Ryan was the last of the National Guard generals converted to the regular army who remained in command. His conduct of warfare, his strict adherence to discipline, and the extraordinary loyalty of his men led Pershing and the regular army to overlook the unorthodox principles and practices of its commander. In this too they were no doubt influenced by his success on the battlefield. All of these factors, plus the fact that O'Ryan returned the Division to New York after the War triumphant left in his men a spirit of loyalty in the post war years which is still discernible after forty years whenever a veteran of this division speaks out. *(editors note: This biography was compiled and written in the early 60's)*

After the war General O'Ryan held a series of posts in the public notice. From 1922 to 1926 he was New York State Transit Commissioner; in 1923 he was Chief Council for U.S. Senate Committee investigating the U.S. Veteran's Bureau; from 1926 on he was prominent in the development of the commercial aviation industry which began to develop out of the experiences of the war. For a time he allied himself with Juan Trippe as a partner in what subsequently became the Pan American Airways. The partnership was short lived, however, and when it terminated, O'Ryan became president of the Colonial Airways which initiated flights from New York to Chicago and other eastern cities. In 1934 he was appointed by Mayor Laguardia as New York City Police Commissioner after he withdrew his candidacy for the mayor's post as Republican Party candidate. He remained only a few months in the commissioner's post when he retired over disagreements with Laguardia.

After retirement as Police Commissioner he resumed his work in the law firm,

now Loucks, Cullin, & O'Ryan with offices at 120 Broadway. He held no further public positions until he accepted an appointment as New York State Civil Defense director during World War II. After the war he retired to live at his home in South Salem, New York.

General O'Ryan died in January, 1961 at the age of 85 at the Brookside Convalescent Home in North Salem, N.Y.

John F. O'Ryan and Janet Holmes had four children: Dorothy, Janet, Helen, and John Holmes

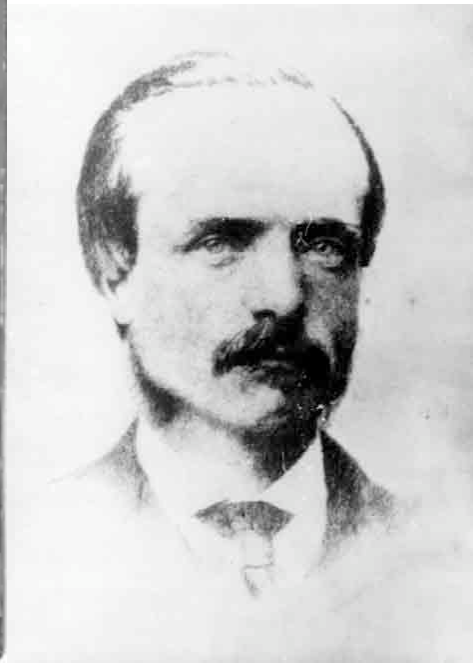
**NOTE:** \* *Such a rapid rise, being promoted ahead of many senior officers, and his reputation as a reformer naturally created many enemies for O'Ryan within military and political circles in NY State. NY Governor John A. Dix had O'Ryan declared "supernumerary" and dismissed him. Dix' successor, Gov. Sulzer restored him to his command (1912).*



*These images were provided and used with the kind permission of the O'Ryan Family*



ANNA BARRY O'RYAN



FRANCIS O'RYAN



**General O'Ryan with A.D.C. Lt. Joseph D. Eddy and Major J. Leslie Kincaid, Division Judge Advocate**





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HE VISITED, HE INTIMATED HE WOULD GIVE HIS  
DEFINITE ANSWER ON HIS RETURN TO NEW YORK.  
PHOTO SHOWS HIM AT CHICAGO'S WORLD'S FAIR.

**General O'Ryan at the Chicago World's Fair in July, 1933**



**General O'Ryan in later years**

His speeches and writings as well as additional information on General O'Ryan may be found in the following sources:

The following addresses of John F. O'Ryan were published and may be found in the Library of Congress:

Disarmament

The Fighting Fourteenth (1916)

The Maintenance of World Peace (1923)

Fighting with Fire (1933)

There is also available in the Library of Congress a typewritten manuscript prepared by him at the Army War College, 1913-1914, entitled The Military Geography of New York and its Approaches.

He is the author of The Modern Army in Action, McBride Nast & Co., New York, 1914, and The Story of the 27th Division, Wynkoop, Hallenbeck Crawford Co., New York, 1921.

General O'Ryan is also featured in General Robert Lee Bullard's book Fighting Generals, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1944, pp. 285 to 292, which features sixteen photographs of General O'Ryan in different phases of his military career.



### ***GENERAL O'RYAN'S HELMET***

The following photographs are **EXCLUSIVE** to this web site. The helmet is in the private collection of Mr. Dennis Jackson and we owe him a huge debt of gratitude for allowing us to use these photos. Thanks also to Bill Baldwin for arranging to get them to me.



**This is a private purchase helmet made for General O'Ryan by "BATES HATTER, 91 JERMYN ST, ST JAMES'S, LONDON". As you can see from the photos the liner was made to be easily removable. This is also the only documented 27th Division helmet done in camouflage.**





