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Patrick Joseph Read

Irish Anarchist in Spanish Civil War

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20th January 2008

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This article could not have been written without the help of Matt White, who supplied notes on Pat and some articles, so he has my thanks and acknowledgement. One problem with

writing this piece is that Pat Reads name has appeared in several different versions, so to simplify things, I have used the spelling Read throughout this article, but you should be aware that his name appears in places as Reid, Read and

Reade.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

20th January 2008

Emmet O'Connor, *Reds and the Green*, University College
Dublin, Dublin, 2004.
Frank Ryan, *The Book of the XV Brigade*, (reprinted by) Frank
Graham, Newcastle, 1986; 68
Robert Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939*;
Manchester University press, Manchester, 1999; 187–8
The Volunteer, newsletter of ALBA.

And, though they go sans bed and board,
They blaze at last an open road.

Uncertain, weary, oft alone,
They build it hardly, stone by stone;
They write in blood its unknown charts,
And pave it with their broken hearts.

And they who speed in after years
Where, lonely, toiled the pioneers,
They reckon not the price they paid,
The rebels that their parents bayed.

They scorn, yet fear, the daring few
Who still the Race's dream pursue;
Who in the war on Slavedoms fall,
Crying 'life and liberty for all.'

We salute his memory.
Ciaran Crossey,
Belfast, 15th January 2008

Sources

Peter Carroll, *Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion*, Stanford University Press, USA, 1994; 165–6
Harry Fisher, *Comrades*, University of Nebraska, 1998; 23, 27–8, 67, 119
Fearghal McGarry; *Irish Politics in the Spanish Civil War*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1999; 70, 248
Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1984, p67-9; Moscow Archives: National Archives of Ireland; P10/55
Steve Nelson, *The Volunteers*, Masses and Mainsteam, NYC, 1953 and then with Seven Seas Books, Berlin, 1958.

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He died on Sunday November 16th, 1947 of a cerebral haemorrhage, receiving an IWW organised funeral on the 18th. His obituary goes onto end that: “The thinking of the labour movement is richer, and the fires of revolt burn the brighter, because Pat Read lived and wrote and fought.”²¹

The *Industrial Worker* carried this short piece of poetry in commemoration:

The Pioneers In Memoriam Pat Read

By Covami²²

The minds that seek, though they despair,
Futility cannot ensnare;

As an independent union, MESA was active in several Cleveland war-production plants, and conflicts with its then-rival CIO and strikes led to the military seizure of some plants. Major Cleveland war-material manufacturers were at risk in March 1942 when MESA leader Matthew Smith threatened to call out the area’s 42,000 war workers in order to obtain the union’s admission to local WLB negotiations and representation on the board. Plants such as Cleveland Graphite Bronze were also affected by a series of strikes based on local issues and wages, work demands, and work rules. After the war, MESA’s militant tactics were modified as the union redefined strikes as incidents that momentarily disrupted worker peace rather than battles to the death, and their officials signed the Taft-Hartley non-communist affidavits without incident. By 1954 the union merged with the Metal & Machinery Workers of America, representing 1,500 workers in 3 Cleveland plants. Later that year, after more than 100 representation fights with the CIO, MESA affiliated with that body and brought 12,000 local workers into the CIO fold.”

Encyclopedia of Cleveland History at ech.case.edu Accessed 14th Jan 2008

²¹ *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 22, 1947 Back to the Text

²² The poet here is properly known as Covington Hall. He was a poet, organizer and agitator who participated in the IWW’s battles in the Alabama timber industry, which organized blacks and whites together in the heart of the Jim Crow South. The IWW was also strong among black longshoremen in Philadelphia, Baltimore and elsewhere.

seems to show that Read was telling the truth. Matt was able to tell me that Thompson was the person that strong-armed Pat out of the editorship of the *Industrial Worker* just as he had done the same to Ralph Chaplin, the composer of “Solidarity Forever”, in 1936 for the same reasons.¹⁹

Read definitely had ties to other unions at his death but especially MESA which was a “non-political” industrial union in the Midwest.²⁰

spearheaded the effort to get the Charles H. Kerr Company back on its feet in the 1970s). Here are lively accounts of his career as a teenage socialist in Canada during the World War I; adventures as a hobo on the road; hard years in San Quentin; organizing for the IWW — Colorado miners in the 1920s, Detroit auto-workers in the early ‘30s, Cleveland metal-workers in the ‘40s; encounters with the mysterious Wobbly philosopher, T-Bone Slim; teaching at the IWW Work People’s College; and much more. From cover to cover, this book bristles with the characteristic humour and wisdom of a self-taught working-stiff, esteemed by intellectuals as diverse as George Rawick, Studs Terkel, and Archie Green as one of the great men of our time.” Taken from website www.akpress.org Accessed 14/1/8

¹⁹ Ralph Chaplin Chaplin was active with the I.W.W., serving in Chicago as editor of its newspaper, the *Industrial Worker*, from 1932 to 1936.

He is credited with designing the now widely used anarcho-syndicalist image, the black cat. As its stance suggests, the cat is meant to suggest wildcat strikes and radical trade unionism.

en.wikipedia.org, Accessed, 15th January 2008

²⁰ While Matt seems to be critical of the political leadership of this union, it doesn’t appear to have been a right wing body.

“The Mechanic’s Educational Society of America (MESA) represented workers in the machine-tool, automotive, and steel industries as an independent union until it affiliated with the CIO in 1954. Founded in Detroit in 1933 for tool-and-die makers, MESA organized in Flint and Pontiac and then moved to Toledo and Cleveland, sites of automotive factories and job shops. Here, the union became the bargaining agent at a number of companies, including Cleveland Graphite Bronze, Eaton Axle, and S. K. Wellman, fighting for recognition of the special skills of machinists through better wages and working conditions. Within months of its founding, MESA staged a walkout of its entire membership, which gained it recognition as an industry wide bargaining agent, and in 1935 it merged with the Associated Automotive Workers of America.

“In the hour of rejoicing at victory, we will think of the regular guys who made the fight more worthwhile” – written by Pat Read, about Sept. 1937

Among the many men who fought in Spain but who don’t regularly feature in the history pages is Pat Read, and this is an attempt to give him his well deserved moment in history. Who was Pat Read who went on to become an important figure in the American anarchist movement in the 1940s and how does he relate to Irish involvement in the Spanish Civil War.

His family was from Dublin, but like tens of thousands of others they had decided to emigrate just before Pat was born. When Christopher Patrick Read, from Capel St, Dublin, and his wife Emma McKay, also born in Dublin, got on the Liverpool boat in February 1899 they didn’t expect that they would be joined so quickly on the trip as their child, Pat was born onboard on 25th Feb. 1899.

Early Years

His family settled in London for a period, then back to Liverpool until 1912 when they emigrated to Canada. They were only there for a few years as the family, except Patrick, moved back to Liverpool in 1915 Pat Read, aged 16, stayed behind in Canada and he very quickly joined the army.

He joined the Canadian Expeditionary Forces around 1915 and for three years he served until the end of World War One. He worked with transmissions unit and saw service on the Western Front. After the Great War he returned to Canada. According to his obituary in the *Industrial Worker*, while he was in France he got married and had a child who was later killed in WWII. [If anyone can provide information on this part of his life I’d be very grateful, cc.] Also around this time his obitu-

ary alludes to him starting a political relationship with French anarcho-syndicalists.

Post War.

After WWI he moved back to Canada after demobilisation moved into America. In 1919, according to his International Brigades file, he joined the *Industrial Workers of the World*, an anarchist trade union movement. In 1921 he moved to Ireland and took up residence in 'the Misses Ryan, at 2 Kings Terrace, Lower Clasmire Rd, Cork.'¹ He worked as a freelance journalist with the *Cork Examiner*. He joined the newly established Communist Party of Ireland and he also joined the Anti-Treaty Forces in the Irish Civil War. There is one account in the Irish National Archives that he served under Roderic Connolly, son of James Connolly, in the occupation of Bridgman's Tobacco Stores in O'Connell St, [Dublin.] Emmet O'Connor, an historian of the CPI, has said that the CPI military group, the Red Guard, consisted of 'a dozen or so, it could have little impact.'²

According to his obituary and reinforced by his articles in the *Workers' Republic*, paper of the early CPI, Read placed more importance on organizing at the "point of production"- industrial action over electoral or "political" action which was, "a small but necessary adjunct to the industrial struggle."³ Judging by his very in depth coverage of the IWW in the *Workers' Republic* it is to be assumed that he either maintained his membership or was always very sympathetic.

¹ National Archives of Ireland File — P10/55

² Emmet O'Connor, *Red and Green*, p66.

³ Mike Millotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984), p66

After Spain

When Read returned he became editor of the *Industrial Worker*. He wrote poetry, he wrote jokes, and he constantly espoused his opinions. The paper was about as anarcho-syndicalist as it ever was up until that point and probably until very recently. At some point Read went from being a follower of Connolly to a straight anarcho-syndicalist. Several people still consider his *Industrial Worker* to be the most light-hearted, artistic, and generally well-done *Industrial Worker* of all time. While writing for the paper he wrote with several pseudonyms. The name he used most was Con Dogan, but with appearances by Francis O'Donahue and Patrick O'Connell.¹⁶

During his time with the paper He also wrote a small IWW pamphlet entitled, "Chicago Replies to Moscow" condemning the Communist Party, which apparently ended up getting widely translated and circulated internationally.

Matt wrote to me saying that eventually Read was pushed out as editor as he was accused of setting policy and alienating some members of the union in various factories in Cleveland, Ohio who were Catholic. Despite this dispute, according to an IWW member by the name of Jenny Lahti Velsek, Pat Read was almost universally loved by the people he met.¹⁷

Near the end of his life, it was also assumed that his stories about being in the IRA and being the editor of the CPI's newspaper *Workers' Republic* were false by some but especially a man by the name of Fred Thompson.¹⁸ However, the record

¹⁶ Matt White, Wobblies in the Spanish Civil War, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, No. 42-43, Winter 2006.

¹⁷ Jenny Lahti Velsek (1913-2006) was born in northern Wisconsin to Finnish immigrant parents who belonged and were active in the *Industrial Workers of the World* (IWW). She lived in Chicago, Illinois for many decades and was married to Charles Velsek, secretary of the Czech American branch of the IWW. A close friend of Fred Thompson.

¹⁸ "Fred Thompson (1900-1987) socialist, Wobbly, organizer, soapboxer, editor, class-war prisoner, educator, historian, and publisher (it was he who

This letter reports an appeal for a passport for a Patrick Joseph Read ‘who has just terminated his period of service with the International Brigade in Spain.’ (my emphasis)

Given his nomadic past and his politics, it came as no surprise when this was refused!

In Fisher’s memoir of his early life and the Spanish Civil War, *Comrades*, Read is featured prominently and presented as an exemplar of libertarian socialist values like humour, egalitarianism and bravery. Read was thrown out of the Lincoln Battalion for his “Wobbly outlook” and his anti-Communism and anti-Stalinism.¹⁴ Pat had made links with the Spanish anarchist movement and held membership in the CNT while in Spain. Matt White wrote that Read apparently coined the IWW word “Gumpet,” meaning government pet. I would not be surprised if in Spain he used the IWW term for the Communist Party, “the comical party”, and coined the word ‘comic-star’ to refer to commissars.¹⁵

¹⁴ Moscow Archive, File 969 (ref. from Matt White)

¹⁵ Here is one example of the use of these terms: *Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: A case study of the Botwin company*, Gerben Zaagsma, September 2001

The popularity of a commissar depended not only on his political role. As veteran Irving Weissman writes with regard to the American Lincoln Brigade: “... while they knew from the start what they were fighting for, they demanded to know what was goin on at the moment. Knowledge, discussion and understanding were critical for their morale. However, the commissar who limited himself to speechifying soon earned the epithet “comic star”. On the other hand, one who soldiered in accordance with the rule, “The commissar is the first to advance, the last to retreat,” earned respect.” See: Irving Weissman, ‘The volunteers in Spain’ (review — Our fight: writings by veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Spain, 1936-1939/ The Lincoln Brigade: a picture history), *Jewish Currents* 45/1 (January 1991) pp. 22–24, 23–24.

Reflecting his odd sense of humour, Read’s articles in the paper were generally signed O U Rube, an American term indicating that you are a culchie, a Yokel.

As Milotte points out in his history of the CPI, Read played a leading role in the party and was on the executive committee. The CPI ran his articles stating that the “One Big Union” was the weapon “for the final conflict with capitalism.”⁴ The failure of the CPI to build a base in the early 1920’s was, according to him, because the leadership were “social republicans who demand that we as communists sing the Soldiers Song louder and wave the green flag harder than any other group in Ireland.” Milotte went onto say that Read stated that Roderic Connolly’s view was for the CPI to lay down tactics for the republican leaders.⁵

Pat had written an article in the *Workers’ Republic* attacking the Communist Parties subordination to ‘social republicans’. Within days of Roderic Connolly taking over as Political Secretary on November 12th Read was expelled on the 16th.⁶

Back to America and in the IWW

Patrick left Ireland in 1924, staying in England until 1932 until he moved again to America where I have very little idea of what he did during the early 1930s. He does show up in the IWW files of the period. His American address in this period was 2540 West Adams St, Chicago.

He also helped to found and was on the board of the Council for Union Democracy. Here is one description of that group, “the Council for Union Democracy was a 1930s and 1940s Chicago-based and IWW-influenced group organized to help individual workers and groups of trade-unionists combat the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 68

⁶ O’Connor, p91; the *Workers’ Republic*, 3rd Nov. 1923.

corruption and violence that afflicted many labour organizations. Its co-founders included old-time Wobbly Myron "Slim" Brundage and Pat Read, editor of the *Industrial Worker* at the time, served on its Board. Its advisors included IWW orator Jack Sheridan along with other Wobbly-influenced unionists such as Sidney Lens, and labour attorney Francis Heisler." Slim Brundage is another interesting character especially because he was considered to be an American surrealist and an influence on the beatniks. Like Brundage Read seemed to dabble in surrealism and some of his jokes in his *Industrial Worker* articles border on post-modern.

Travelling to Spain

With the start of the Spanish Civil War he decided to go, arriving in Paris with a group of 6 others who had apparently been organised by the American Socialist Party, in the Debs Column. One account says that only 25 members of the party joined this column, so any future volunteers joined the International Brigades directly.⁷

"Sam, Al and I left the United States on February 20, 1937, on the Ile de France. Some weeks later, after spending time in France and then making our way over the Pyrenees, we found ourselves in Spain. "

Harry Fisher writing in his obituary for Sam Walters, a Lincoln veteran in *the Volunteer*, Spring 2000, Vol. XXII, No. 2.

This is important as in his book he says that after a few days in France, and he arrived on the 27th, they were joined by a group, including Pat Read. On the 4th Feb. they were told to get ready to leave.

⁷ www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk, Accessed 14/1/8

Whatever his political differences with the overwhelming majority of the International Brigades, Pat Read consistently led his men in their job, nothing very glamorous but it was essential to the war effort. Fisher said that: "Teruel was a rough front for most Americans. The transmissions unit didn't suffer too much, except for Pat Read, who never asked for volunteers and always did the most difficult jobs himself."¹³

Leaving Spain

In the Spring of 1938 Read had been quite ill, coughing up blood, but Fisher says that he refused to go back for hospital treatment. Fisher met Dave Doran, the Political Commissar, and was told that Read was being sent back from the line, but not for treatment. Doran was sending him back because "He's doing a lot of harm, always talking against the Communist Party." This must have occurred in late March 1938 as Fisher provides the detail that within days of sending Pat back from the line Doran was dead, and that occurred on April 2nd. [Thanks to Jim Carmody for clearing that date up for me.]

As one indication of how ill Pat must have been, there is a reference in the Moscow Archives that he was a North American who was to be repatriated. The note, dated 17th October 1938, concludes, "Informe del hospital antes de repatriacion" – which I take to mean that someone was to inform the hospital that he was to go. The likelihood is that he was either in hospital for the entire period, or like a lot of wounded men, ended up doing some behind the lines work, like hospital porter, etc.

The National Archives of Ireland, Dublin contains a file, P10/55 – Irish Volunteers in Spain (Repatriation of, etc.) which includes a letter from Paris Legation to Dublin, 15th November 1938.

¹³ Fisher, 97.

bash in the head of the workin' stiff? Just show me the cop who ain't the enemy of the workers!"¹¹

Nelson goes onto say that there was

a political struggle which was raging throughout Spain – a struggle which was basically a conflict between two theories, between anarchist and Communist principles. The conflict reached into every phase of the life in Spain. So it reached into the Army. Within two days the issues were being debated hotly throughout the Battalion.

The CNT Group, Pat Read declared, "has the right idea. You can run a big farm cheaper and better than you can ruin a lot of small ones. Look at back home in the West. Isn't it a fact, the big farms there yield more per acre per worker than the small ones? Sure they do! On a big farm, you use tractors, on the little ones you work with a hoe. Now, the UGT supports a petty peasant economy, and that's reactionary politically and economically. It's a step backward, and we shouldn't support it!"

The discussion went on, various people arguing that to win the peasants over you had to allow them to own the land themselves.

Nelson writes that 'Low looked pleased, and Pat threw up his hands. "Okay. So what do we do? Thrown in with the UGT, and blast the other guys?"

"No, It seems to me we have to stay out of the whole thing," I said.[Steve Nelson] "We can't take sides. But what we can do, is discuss, and learn."¹²

¹¹ Nelson, 1953, p114-117

¹² Ibid, p147-8.

The thirty men were divided into groups of five. Each group left separately for the railroad station. It was very crowded when we got there. The French passengers, though curious about the groups of young men milling around, said nothing, but looked at us with slight smiles and warm eyes. We, on the other hand, were very nervous that our identities would be revealed and that we might be arrested. It was with a tremendous sense of relief that we finally boarded the train, even though it was old and uncomfortable.

All night, as the train headed south, we gathered in small groups, and in hushed tones talked about Spain and the future. The next day dawned sunny and warm. I opened my window and gazed out at the flat and colorless land, but the smell of spring was in the air; it was beautiful. I saw my first French grapevines, and later, miles of them.

Our instructions were very clear. My group was to get off the train near Perpignan, take a bus to town, and wait at a certain restaurant for further instructions. When the train pulled in, we learned that the bus was due in about an hour. A few of us went into a restaurant near the train station for coffee. Before long a few townspeople came in, looked us over, and approached us with questions. 'They want to know if we're going to Spain,' said one of our boys who understood French.

'No', he answered for us, 'we're just touring the southern part of France. We are students from an American university.'

John [Murra, their contact] "explained that we were going to be part of the first American group to attempt to climb the

Pyrenees into Spain. He warned us that this was not going to be easy. The border between France and Spain had just been closed by the French Government, and the number of border guards had been greatly increased. “

After driving for over 30 minutes and for several miles uphill, the taxis stopped.

A small group of men were sitting on the ground in a circle, evidently waiting for us. Altogether there were about 30 of us who would climb the Pyrenees in the darkness of night. A Frenchman, a smuggler by trade, with a dog by his side, was our guide. The dog, we were told, would stay at the end of the line and would remain with anyone who was unable to complete the journey until help arrived. We were asked not to smoke and not to speak in loud voices.

The walk started easily enough; the night air was warm and pleasant. After about an hour the hills became steeper and more treacherous. It was beginning to get colder, and it was difficult to keep warm. After a few more hours, the hills became even steeper, and the ground turned white from a recent snowstorm. Everyone was huffing and puffing and needing help to maneuver on some of the slippery spots. Pat Reid [sic], older than the rest of us, was undaunted, spirited and energetic. He kept encouraging us over the rough spots.

After six hours of this, I was exhausted. The snow was not deep, but in many places the ground was icy and slippery. I wanted to stop to rest and sleep. But I saw the others struggling, slipping, getting bruised and scratched, yet still going on. I couldn't stop. So I pushed ahead, climbing, slipping, falling, and freezing.

Later in the war one comrade reported that “Hard little Pat, hard as teakwood, ..couldn't hold back his tears when he heard of Cookson's death”.¹⁰

Political differences

In the summer of 1937 there were debates in the Brigades about the political developments in Barcelona, etc.

Steve Nelson, an American Political Commissar, has written that Read, who in one edition of his book is wrongly called Mead, had complained to him about the non arrival of his IWW paper, the *Industrial Worker*. He complained off political obstruction, Nelson said it was just chaos and that sure enough a bundle of papers arrived shortly after.

On reading the papers Pat was very agitated to see that the IWW was attacking the Spanish government. As Read himself pointed out, there were only a handful of IWW members in Spain. He went onto say that “there's a lot of things about this war [that] I don't much like myself. There's too damn many capitalists mixed up in the Spanish government if you ask me.” Nelson, a leading member of the CPUSA, tried to provoke Pat by using the slogan, that they might win the war but lose the revolution”.

The reply from Pat was “is this a revolution” What's comin' out of all this, anyway? We don't claim to be fightin' for socialism, not even the Communists claim that. In fact, they insist we 're not fighting for it.”

The discussion ranged over the Spanish governments nationalisation of some large industry and then on the theory of government. “What's a government but a policeman, when you come right down to it? The cop with the star, and the club to

¹⁰ Nelson, *Volunteers*, 187

Read, disregarding the fire, finished his work and returned unhurt.”

There is one short article signed by Pat Reade from *Nuestro Combate*, No. 34, a paper which circulated among the International Brigaders in Spain:

A life for every line we laid

The title doesn't mean that it is anything to be proud of. It just happens that the conditions under which our Brigade was thrust into the last action cost us just that: a life for every line laid.

We found ourselves at Brigade Headquarters at 10.00a.m. with the attack scheduled for noon. We had the largest percentage of new troops of any technical unit- faced with as tough a job as any telephone group ever faced. Yet it is to the credit of our boys that not one faltered.

A new experiment, that of alternative lines, we left until dark. We came back, sorrowful at losing a few of our boys in laying the lines, but also proud that not one was lost in their maintenance – even communication was consistently maintained.

Yet we were not to be left alone. The avion bombardment of the Lincoln took from us Vernon Snow, a comrade with a loveable personality, calm courage and plenty of ability.

In the hour of rejoicing at victory, we will think of the regular guys who made the fight more worthwhile.

Finally, just before dawn, the guide stopped us, put his fingers to his lips, and sat us down around him. Quietly, he explained that we were less than half a mile from the Spanish border, but that there were many unfriendly French guards around us. We would have to proceed with extreme caution.

The walking was much easier now, as we were going slightly downhill. We all seemed to have miraculously regained our energy and enthusiasm.

And then a white house appeared just ahead. Our guide began running. One by one we broke into a run just behind him. Spain! We were on Spanish soil!

We raised our clenched fists and shouted 'Viva Espana' We began to sing 'The Internationale', quietly at first, a little self-consciously at first, then louder and louder. It was a moment I will never forget. We were the first American group to climb the Pyrenees into Spain. But we would not be the last.⁸

So Pat Read arrived on Spanish soil on February 5th 1937.

In Spain

When they arrived at the training camp, they were asked if anyone had previous military experience, so Pat replied that he'd been in WW1, and so because of his war experiences Read was named as drill master of his group. The problem with this appointment was that Pat, as an anarchist, didn't believe in officers leading men!

⁸ Fisher, 25–6.

“As a result, our group would often sit around in a circle, listening to Pat relate his experiences.” Despite Read’s position on training the group of soldiers did get about 10 days intensive drilling, marching, etc. He refused to take or give orders, opposing discipline “of any kind...As we’d march to town, Pat would always, intentionally, be out of step.”

A French Unit?

Several sources describe him as brave to the point of recklessness...a die hard anarchist and an outspoken anti-Communist. When he questioned the CP he was transferred from the French transmission company he was working for into the Americans because they were thought to be more amenable. This version of his period in Spain, by Carroll, is questioned by Fisher who met up with Read in France, travelling with him into Spain and then into action, all the Spanish period being in the Lincoln’s. There is no disputing his anarchist opinions, just this detail of a French unit.

Peter Carroll, p109, says that his politics made “his comrades to question his anti-fascist loyalties. Such allegations, in this period of Stalin’s anti-Trotsky purge trials, could jeopardize a man’s life.” He goes onto say that Reade [sic] was ‘returned’ to the American battalion, where he enjoyed greater political tolerance. The impression given by Carroll is that this all occurred very early in 1937, but I can’t see where there was a period when Read was out of the Lincolns, and it doesn’t appear to be mentioned elsewhere. The only period when I haven’t accounted for his time is after Madrigueras but before Brunete, in other words, April-June 1937.⁹

While with the French unit it is alleged that he would stop laying the lines to roll cigarettes and smoke them, showing his bravery, foolhardiness under fire.

⁹ Carroll, 108–9.

Leading from the front

Harry Fisher recalls that Read had been at the Madrigueras training base in the run unto April 1937 when, along with about 40 others, they were sent up to Jarama. His role in Spain was to lay telephone lines between the different army units. In that period of war, there were very few radios, etc, so links between the units had to be maintained either by runners or by laying down phone lines, both highly dangerous jobs.

Fisher tells us that the transmission unit was operational before the Battle of Brunete, July 1937. He also recounted how Pat allegedly “acquired a lorry load of phone equipment” near Madrid, and that’s how he operated as head of transmissions for the battalion. The first instruction he gave his men, who included Pat Rehil an Irish-American member of the CPUSA from New Jersey, was “that there was to be no saluting. He refused to become an officer. Pat Read was a buck private to begin with, and even though he was in charge of an important group, he remained a buck private until the day he left Spain...he never issued orders. He would ask his men to do a job; if they couldn’t, he would do it himself. If the job was dangerous, he wouldn’t even ask, he’d just do it.” Fisher credits Pat’s example as the reason why he himself turned down the post of Lieutenant prior to his expected departure in late 1937. (As it turns out he stayed for a lot longer.)

Ryan described his work. “Telephone wires, cut several times daily by bombardment, were taped together with bits of cloth and paper, no other material being available. One night, Pat Read, was running a telephone wire from battalion HQ to the various companies along a route which led him up and down several hills. Seeing a figure silhouetted against the sky, first on one hill then on another, the fascists took alarm and opened up...it was evident they were convinced that they had discovered at least a Company trying to make a night attack.