



CARROWKENNEDY MONUMENT

The Irish Volunteers in Westport

Part IV

Vincent Keane

In Part 3 of this story (Cathair na Mart No. 23, 2006) we recounted the unsuccessful efforts of Charlie Gavan to procure weapons and ammunition from GHQ in Dublin, with the large amount of money collected in the Westport Battalion area for that purpose. The task was now given over to Tommy Ketterick, the Battalion QM. Ketterick was a very persuasive young man, and soon he returned with sufficient armaments to outfit a fighting column. The exploits of the Westport Active Service Unit, and subsequently the Brigade ASU, (The Flying Column) have been well documented in earlier editions of this journal by the late Jarlath Duffy, whose father and uncle were in these groups.¹

Untold in this journal is the amazing story of the withdrawal from Carrowkennedy, and the forced march that took the ASU in a circuitous route about Mayo, touching into all of the four battalion areas of the brigade and also into the East Mayo Brigade area. For a full month the ASU, now a column of 50 men, dodged around the county, with the British forces, estimated at 5000 men, hot on their trail.

This epic story was written by the men who took part in the War of Independence, and who left their written testimonies for this and future generations to learn from.² Also consulted was the series of articles by Tony Lavelle from the *Western People*.³

AFTER CARROWKENNEDY

All agree that the ASU, with its large haul of weaponry, left Carrowkennedy at nightfall on June 2nd 1921. They left behind six dead RIC men, (two more would die later) several wounded of the enemy, and the burning vehicles of that unfortunate convoy. The column of 35 men was led across the bogs and hills of Derryherbert and Oughty, reaching the safety of Durless and Culleen early next morning. There was a strong tradition of nationalism in this area and the men were fed and sheltered in the homes of Red Pat Joyce and Black Pat Joyce of Durless. Several sheep were butchered to provide for the visitors. Also providing hospitality on the occasion were the Kelly, Scahill and Fergus families in Culleen. Captain Fergus, of the local IRA Company, provided men to mount a guard as the men rested. Three nights were spent in the Durless area.⁴ The captured weapons were inspected and distributed amongst the men. Their older weapons were brought to a safe dug-out back in Owenwee. Each man was now supplied with a new Lee Enfield rifle and a .45 Webley revolver, plus an amount of ammunition for both weapons. A brief demonstration was given of the workings of the captured Lewis Light Machine Gun by ex-Connaught Ranger, Jimmy Flaherty, the only man in the column competent of using it.

Kilroy decided that it was now time to move on and the column moved by night to Aillemore, beyond Louisburgh. They moved again after one night to the Cregganbaun area, always staying close to the safety of the mountains nearby. The Brigade Staff (Kilroy, Moane, Gibbons and Ketterick) debated the situation and it was decided to keep moving on, as such a large number of men would surely bring unwanted attention. They were also thinking of the burden they were placing on the people who were providing food and shelter for them. In small groups the column proceeded, by night, west along the road by Doo Lough. The next port of call was to the townland of Glenamurra, situated on the road between Doo Lough and Drummin. A couple of nights were spent here in this isolated valley.⁵ The men were anxious to move off again and local volunteers brought them by night across by Glenawough Lake and down through the Erriff Valley. None of the statements tell us where the men stayed, as they visited Aughagower, Kilawalla and Tonlagee.

Kilroy now wanted to get to the safety of his own area in Newport- the 2nd Battalion. On one long march the column left Tonlagee and went northwards to Newport, via Ballinacorriga. The townland of Derryloughran, north east of Newport, was the next place that the column stopped at to rest and eat.⁶ At this point the staff was receiving intelligence reports that the British forces were hot on their tails and were just one day behind.⁷ Kilroy was now in his own area, and he suggested that they move to higher ground, again to the north-east. An all-night march brought them*to the townland of Coolabinna, at the foot of Nephinmore Mountain. Here they felt reasonably safe, with

the mountains to their rear and good views across the valley towards Newport. Word now arrived to Kilroy that Newport town was surrounded. It was only a matter of a few hours before the enemy would be on their trail again. The column was moved again, northwards to Derrymartin in the Bogadoon area.⁸

Resting by day and proceeding cautiously by night, the large column left the Nephin area. All along the route they were guided by volunteers from the local companies, men that knew their own areas intimately. Crossing by the Windy Gap, the column was billeted in the townlands of Crimlin, Laragan and Gort. Capt. Staunton of the local company had his men in position to stand guard. They were but a few hours resting when they were alerted that Gort and Laragan were being surrounded by the enemy. The military searched twenty-four of the twenty-five homes in the two townlands. Had they searched the twenty-fifth, they would have caught Paddy Duffy and Rick Joyce.⁹ All the men got clear, regrouped, and marched on towards Shunnagh, near to Parke village. The enemy now went in a different direction and the column was able to relax a little. The next resting place was in the townland of Carracastle, near Bohola village. Here they attended a dance in their honour, organized by Father O'Hora, as they were well guarded by the men of the East Mayo Brigade. Two nights were spent here before continuing on to Kiltimagh. This was the furthest point that the column reached before heading home via French Hill, Ballyheane and Kilboyne. On the 15th of June the staff got word of the possibility of a truce with the British, but they kept their guard up and proceeded cautiously. However, news was also coming that the British troops were setting up large encampments in preparation for an attempt to entrap the column. The men now passed through Prizon, Tawnagh, Cloonsonnagh (near Errew Monastery), Bawnogues, Buncam and Devlish, reaching Tonlgee on the 2nd of July, one month after the Carrowkennedy engagement.

An intelligence report now reached Kilroy, via Tom Ludden of Curvey, that the enemy was hot on their trail and had set up new camps at Killawalla and Cooloughra Bridge. Kilroy led his men via Trianlaur and Crickahinny and brought them back to Owenwee. The British army had now set up a camp at Brackloon Bridge, right next to where the column was staying at Owenwee. The Brigade staff decided, in the best interest of all, to disperse. The men were told to get back to their own areas, by whatever means they wanted, and to await further mobilization orders when the British withdrew from the countryside. The staff, Kilroy, Gibbons, Moane and Ketterick, would stay together and make their way south to the safe haven of the Connemara Brigade area. Paddy Joe Kelly and the Louisburgh men went over the side of Croagh Patrick and headed for their own battalion area. Joe Doherty, O/C of Newport, guided his men down to Murrisk where a boat would bring them safely back to the 2nd Battalion area at Tiernaur. Joe Baker, Willie Malone, Joe Walsh, Dan Gavan, Tommie Heavey and Paddy Duffy took off in a westerly direction towards Drummin.

So, the 'Men of the West' broke up after their adventurous tour of Mayo. They had marched for exactly one month and a day through the four battalion areas of Westport, Louisburgh, Newport and Castlebar. They had also crossed into the East Mayo Brigade area and visited the South Mayo Brigade area as well, and had come safely through the

whole ordeal. They were now a very seasoned bunch, well led, and undoubtedly would have had more successes in the field had not the Truce come about on the 11th of July 1921.

NOTES

- ¹ See *Cathair na Mart* 24 & 25 for full accounts of operations at Clogher, Red Bridge, Islandeady, Kilmeeena and Carrowkennedy.
- ² All information for this article has been gleaned from the Witness Statements gathered by the Bureau of Military History. These include the testimonies of Michael Kilroy, Ned Moane, Johnny Gibbons and Tommie Ketterick. These men comprised the Brigade Staff at that period. Information was also taken from Joe Baker's book *My Stand for Freedom*, (1989) and Tommy Heavey's story in *Survivors*, (1988).
- ³ Tony Lavelle was the correspondent for the *Western People* in Westport. He interviewed many of the IRA men and produced a series of articles in his paper in 1964.
- ⁴ Testimony of Ned Moane.
- ⁵ Tony Lavelle, *Western People*, May 1964.
- ⁶ There are two townlands in the Newport area called Derryloughran. One is about one mile north of the town; the other is about three miles out in a north easterly direction.
- ⁷ This suggests that people were giving information to the British Army, or to the RIC.
- ⁸ It was here that J.J. Leonard, brother in law to Michael Kilroy, took the photograph of the column at 11.30 p.m.
- ⁹ An investigation was held as to how the enemy knew exactly where the column men were staying, and suspicion was directed at a tinker woman who had been seen leaving the area towards Castlebar that night.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Western People, 'West Mayo's Fighting Story' by Tony Lavelle, from 22 February to 2 May 1964
Mayo News, 4 June 1921
My Stand for Freedom, by Joe Baker (1989)
Survivors, 'Profile of Tommy Heavey' by Uinsionn MacEoin (1988)

WITNESS STATEMENTS

(The Bureau of Military History was set up in 1947 to gather information on the Irish War of Independence. Survivors of that war were invited to give an account of the activities in their own areas.)

Statements were received from the following in the West Mayo Brigade and were used in the compilation of this article;

Michael Kilroy, Brigade O/C (Newport)
Edward (Ned) Moane Brigade Vice O/C (Carrabaun, Westport)
Johnny Gibbons, Brigade Adjutant (Quay Road, Westport)
Tommie Ketterick, Brigade QM (High Street, Westport)

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