

Recollections based on the diary of an Irish Volunteer 1898 to 1924

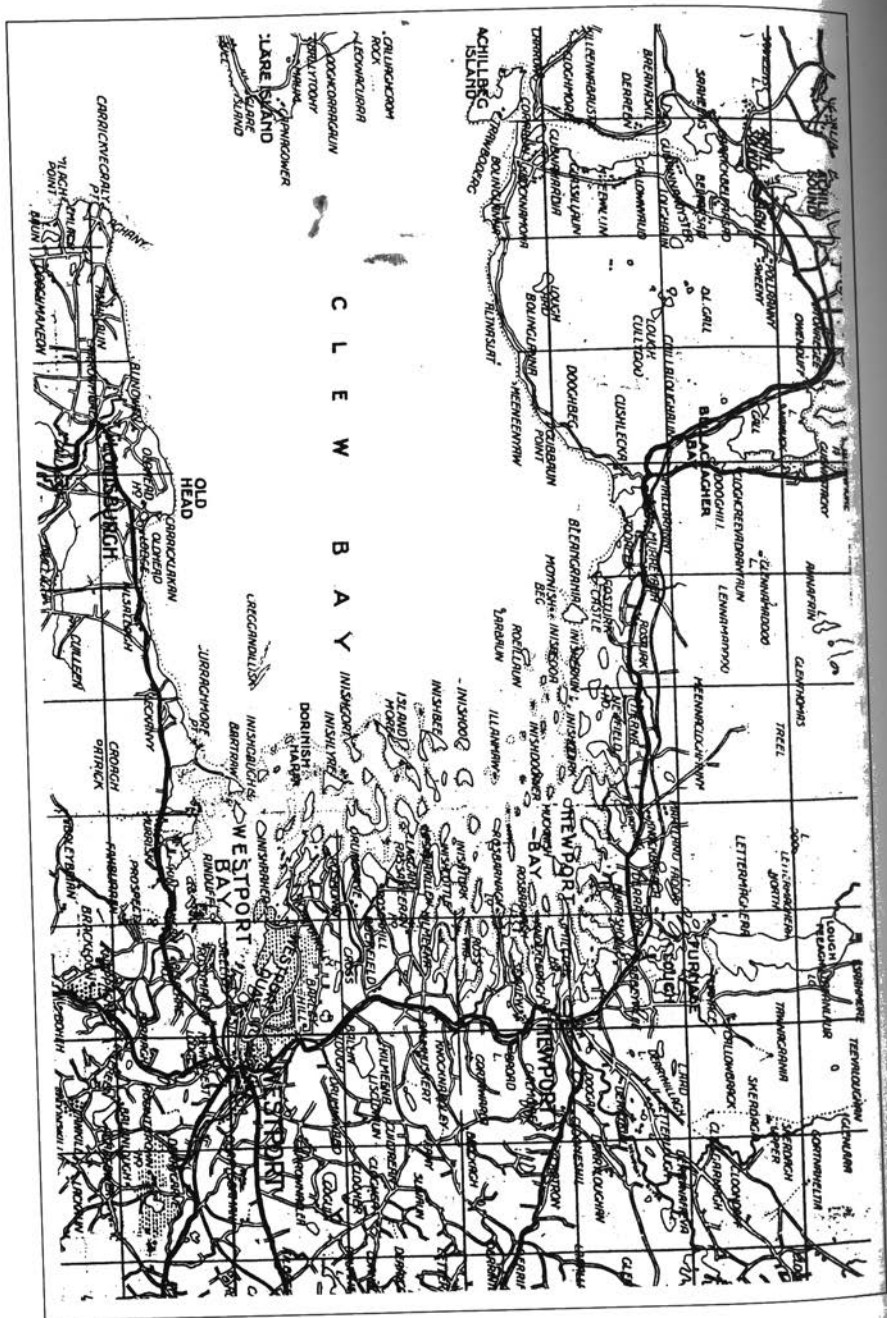
Part II

By Jim O'Donnell

We in the Newport battalion area took to the hills and again re-formed our Flying Column which was for a time in charge of Commandant Jack Connolly. We were left with it from then until our capture on 7 March, 1923. We operated most of the time in the battalion area and were seldom allowed to leave it, as we knew the ground so well and were considered more useful than those who did not. During that time we had several ambushes. Our orders were to snipe at the different outposts and to keep the garrisons constantly harassed. We worked on this job mostly in pairs. My comrade for some time on these raids was Paddy Keane, a fearless lad from Tiernaur Company who had been on active service in England and who had returned home to join the Column.

On one occasion Dan O'Donnell and Jim Moran removed their boots and went in their socks to attack the outpost which was located in the old Parish Hall, which was located on Barrackhill below St. Patrick's Church. They crept up a drain in the nuns' field and got into the sandbagged post on the opposite side of the road, and got safely to within fourteen feet of the hall. Had the two sentries been at their posts, it meant certain death or capture for the two boys, but the sentries had gone across to the hall for a smoke and left their post unguarded. The boys could plainly hear the conversation going on inside and it made them change their plan – which was to hurl the bombs they carried into the Hall. The men inside, seven or eight in number, said that had they realised that they were joining the army to fight against their country instead of for it as they were told, they would never have joined. The boys dropped three of the bombs on the steps of the Hall, and they made a terrific explosion, during which one of the soldiers inside fainted.

A few of those lads deserted over to the Republican side the next day, and brought their rifles and all their equipment with them. General Kilroy assembled his forces and attacked the strongly-entrenched Free State garrison at Ballina, and with the aid of the armoured car 'Ballinallee', captured previously in Coffooney, he captured it after a hard fight. I was told that the first to come out of the 'Ballinallee' was the late P. J. Rutledge, later Minister for Justice in De Valera's government. At Ballina Kilroy captured about 200 rifles, two machine guns, and a large amount of ammunition and supplies. Most of those arms he turned over to the North Mayo Brigade whose men were mostly involved.



Map of Westport District.

He then started off for Shramore, via Glenamoy, taking with him twenty-two riflemen, amongst whom were Anthony Caine, Derryhillagh, Newport, and Joe Baker, Westport. They rested at a place called Ascara, and during the night General Kilroy and Anthony Caine went back some distance to scout the ground, and surprised eighteen Free Staters who were following them up from Ballina and who had fallen asleep. They disarmed them and Michael told them to go and not to come back. They then went on to Glenamoy where they billeted for the night. He put out a guard, but before he went to bed he went out alone to scout the ground. The road at this point ran between two long low hills. He had travelled about half the distance when he discovered that he was completely surrounded by Free State soldiers who had followed him from Ballina and were lying in position, waiting for them to move out at daybreak.

They gave him the usual challenge: 'Who goes there?' – and he, instead of getting excited, answered: 'Friend' – and continued to walk coolly along to the end of the position, taking a note of where every soldier was placed, then turned and walked back again to where he had started. They thought it was one of their own officers on inspection and gave him no further trouble.

He alerted his men, and they surrounded and attacked the others, killing six, wounding two and capturing the remainder with 135 rifles and two machine guns and a large amount of ammunition. He then removed the bolts and magazines from the rifles and made them carry them into Shramore. He then lined them up, fed them the rations he was carrying for his own men, dismissed them, told them to go home and not to be caught by him again.

(I went to America on the Cunard Liner *Carmania* in August 1925. My best pal on the voyage was Tom Irwin of Glenamoy, an ex-Free State captain who was also emigrating to the United States. We were pacing the deck one night when he suddenly asked me if I knew Michael Kilroy. I said I did, and left it at that. Then he told me the whole story of how the hottest of the battle was around his own house where his parents and the rest of the family were. He related how an I.R.A. officer named Baker fought from it, and how he, Tom Irwin, was the Free State officer in charge of that part of the fight. About thirty Free State soldiers had sneaked away when they saw the small force of Republicans who had defeated them. Their commanding officer had deserted them on the field. He then gave me a glowing account of how General Kilroy had captured them after a hard fight, and finished by saying that he was a soldier and a gentleman. I then told him that, although I wasn't in Glenamoy, I was in the fight from start to finish. We remained good friends 'till the end of the voyage and swapped stories of experiences.)

The fight continued and our position became more difficult. The Free State

attacked Newport with strong forces and heavy guns. The heavy guns shelled our positions east of the Convent and round Peter Kilroy's house in Bleachyard, and continued throughout the day. General Kilroy, having gone out alone to Kilbride, as was his usual practice, to scout the position south of the town, before dawn, ran into the Free State forces. He fought them for a time singlehanded, at close quarters, killing four of them. He was surrounded and shot through the lung from the rear, and captured unconscious.

The Free State forces tried to surround the I.R.A. by landing troops from a ship at Roigh in Tiernaur but were driven back by a section of our Column detailed to watch that area. Wave after wave of Free State troops under cover of their heavy gun barrage, commanded by Commandant Tony Lawlor of the Free State Western Command (who could be heard shouting half a mile away luring his men on to the attack), tried to surround and take Newport. They were driven back time after time until night fell and the fighting stopped. Commandant General Petie Joe McDonnell of Leenane now took charge after General Kilroy's capture. It was decided to withdraw into the Leenane and Galway area.

Before starting out, all the men mobilised in Skirdagh. This again shows the heavy burden carried by the people. I counted 130 men who had tea in Mrs McDonnell's house in Skirdagh. It took two of her daughters, Helen and Katie, and three more girls of the Cumann na mBan (amongst whom was, I think, their cousin Mary Mulchrone of Brockagh) about three hours to bake bread and cater for that crowd. I remember objecting to so many crowding into one house, and asked them to go to other houses in the area.

The main body, about 145 men, left Skirdagh at 11 p.m. and travelled by Glenhest, Derryloughan, Leitir, Islandeady and on to Tourmakeady. We followed about 11.30 p.m. with about twenty men led by Commandant Jim Clinton and vice commandant Dan O'Donnell. Our job was to fight a rearguard or delaying action if attacked; to allow more freedom for the main body. We had slept little since Thursday and this was Sunday morning. We got into the townland of Tonlagee just as the people were returning from first Mass. We got to bed and knew no more until midday on Monday. We crossed over to Glenmask, then on to Trean and on to Maumtrasna. The main body had gone on towards Delphi. A cycling corps of the Free State caught up with us at Maumtrasna and we had a fight which lasted about four hours . . . The Free Staters, having lost their machine gunner in the first few volleys, then withdrew. That night they surrounded us in a wide circle but did not come to close quarters then or during the following day.

At dusk on the following evening we slipped through their cordon in twos and threes and started back across the mountains towards Newport. We travelled

across the flat mountain top through dangerous marshy ground. Our only guides were a compass, the stars, and a box of matches, as the guides who were told to show us the way had come in contact with some poteen, or mountain dew, and had disappeared, leaving us on our own in a strange area. Luck was with us, however, as having travelled in this way for over five miles we hit on the only passage which would take us down again to the level ground. We arrived in Islandeady an hour before daylight only to find the Free State forces waiting for us as they had received information that we were on our way back to the Newport area.

The townland we arrived in had the name of being very much in favour of the Free State but we decided to trust the people and felt that, although their views might be different from ours, they would not let us down. How right we were was proved by the fact that we slept all day in full view of the Free State patrols, without even the protection of a guard, in the houses of those people, and were not given away. The patrol didn't expect us to arrive until that night. At dusk that evening, guided by Captain Paddy Maye and some others of the Islandeady Company, we again got through their lines and made our way back to Skirdagh. We again started sniping at the town [Newport], and after a time the garrison withdrew from Newport and later blockaded the area. They decided that, not being able to beat the Republicans out, they would starve them out, together with the people who fed and supported them. They really did make things hard and most of the people were in a bad way as food was running short.

Our men had an answer to that also, as they had information that a shipload of flour, about 700 tons, was due in Westport harbour for unloading and had to wait for some time at Innishlyre for the tide. Joe Baker, Westport; Tom Lavelle, Shanballyhue; Paddy Keane, Roskeen; and Jack Dolan, Ballina, held up the pilot and went on board with him. They forced the captain, who was a Welshman, to change his course and take the ship into Newport harbour. When it was docked at the quayside, word was sent out to get men to unload it and transport to take it away. Within an hour, work was in full swing and the blockade on Newport was broken. We were on guard at Carrabawn to ensure that no Free State troops broke through from Westport to interfere with the unloading. They did come part of the way but turned back without making contact. It was a bright moonlight night, and it was a grand sight to see one continuous line of carts laden with flour on all roads leading to Newport. Tom Cleary, Shramore Company, and Dan O'Donnell, Newport Company, had the job of dividing the flour amongst the houses where our men usually billeted, and that was about every house in the area. Each householder received three one hundredweight bags and the rest was unloaded into Carey's stores on the quay and handed over to the owner. He also received receipts for the flour divided amongst the people and was compensated for it at the end.

After the ship was unloaded, and when Joe Baker was handing it back to the captain, he and his men shook hands with Baker and the boys and one of them said 'I hope we will be held up on every voyage, as we never had a better time or a better booze.'

There was a rumour going about that flour in Carey's stores was in danger of being raided. The I.R.A. put a guard on it at night. Jack Healy, Glenamoy and I did our turn one night from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. We were then relieved and were walking towards home with our rifles when we were overtaken by a carload of I.R.A. men driven by Tom Gill, Island More. The car was an open Ford. They took both of us up. I sat on Healy's knees. The night was dark and the lights of the car bad. I saw the driver was going towards the drain and shouted to keep out. Instead, he turned towards the fence, jammed on his brakes, and catapulted me over the windscreen and over the fence onto the railway about twelve feet away. In the passage across, my mouth grazed the top half of the sleeper which was part of the fence. It broke part of my upper gum and three teeth and buried them in the roof of my mouth. It also broke a tooth in my lower gum and made a gash in my chin. Had I been one inch lower I would have been killed instantly.

One night shortly before Christmas 1922 when we were billeted in Buckagh, Commandant Clinton asked Johnnie McNea and myself to accompany him on a short visit to our homes. During that visit we were asked to assist two men who were taking a boatload of very important supplies, including clothing and ammunition, up the Burrishoole river to a dugout on Furnace lake, and it was necessary to have it landed before dawn as it was reported that a roundup was being made next morning. I knew the river well as I had taken boatloads of seaweed along the same route many times. As a rule, we had to wait for two hours after the first stage of the journey to Burrishoole Abbey for the tide to rise high enough to let us through a narrow weir at Nixon's. On this occasion, the anchor rope which was about a hundred feet long, and which should have been with the anchor carried above high water mark, was carelessly thrown out at low water mark. When we arrived to shift it, the boat was riding at anchor on the other side of the river, nearly one hundred yards from the shore, as the tide was very high and a very strong wind was blowing offshore.

Although the night was piercing cold and the time about 2 a.m., the four of us had a pretty hot argument, and, as was often the case at the time, my hot temper got the better of me. I ran down to the water's edge, stripped off, and dived into 15 feet of water, swam out to the boat, and succeeded after a hard struggle in climbing into the stern. It was a heavy three-ton boat and hard to handle. I hauled in the anchor rope, lifted the anchor and while doing so the boat had gone across

the river again in the storm before I could get out the oars. After half an hour of hard work, I succeeded in getting the boat safely in. I then dressed and told the men in charge to take the boat up the weir or leave it. We returned to Buckagh in the early hours of the morning.

On 20 December 1922 our section was on guard about three hundred yards from Thomas Moran's house in Callowbrack. (Thomas was in jail at this time). At about 2 a.m. we were relieved by a double guard from the North West Mayo brigade, who had received news of a roundup at dawn. We were ordered to stay at Thomas Moran's until daylight and then to move on to Buckagh to rejoin the Column. At 9 a.m. we were cleaning our rifles in preparation for moving when Agnes Chambers, Shramore, an active member of Cumann na mBan, rushed up saying, 'Get off quick – they are on top of you!' And sure enough, the Free State troops were within one hundred yards of us.

Johnnie McNea and I succeeded in getting as far as a little hillock at the back of Tom Noone's. It was there that we witnessed one of the many acts of the coolness and bravery of our Irish women and girls of that time. We were surrounded on three sides by the troops and on the fourth by the lake. Mrs. Kathy Noone, an officer in the Cumann na mBan, left her house, walked coolly towards us, pretending to be looking for cattle and carrying a stick. She stood over us as unconcerned as if there was no one within a mile of her, although there was still an occasional burst of machine gun fire. We were in a very exposed position and so near on two sides to the troops that we could recognize their faces. There was a small stone wall on the east side of us, and a good position on the other side. Mrs. Noone kept talking to us, while looking the other way. She made a gap in the wall, throwing stones in such a way as to make some cover for us and enable us to get into a better position. Owing to her assistance we escaped to Buckagh where we again joined the Column.

The order awaited us there to proceed to Shramore via Glenlara. The night was very bad with sleet and heavy snow. When we arrived in Shramore we were told the troops were already on their way there. We continued on through Glenamoy, to the back of Ohilly, where we spent the night. It was a terrible night. Every little stream became a raging torrent, and as we could find little shelter from the sleet and were exhausted, we ended by spending some time in the shelter of the bank of a little stream with the water running up to our knees. In sheer desperation we started to sing a song popular at the time *The Bold Tipperary Boy*. At daybreak we decided we had all we could take and started down the mountainside to the village just as the Free State troops were moving out of it. The I.R.A. then under the command of Commandant General P. J. McDonnell attacked the strongly-held

post of Clifden, County Galway, and with the aid of the armoured car, *Queen of the West*, captured it – all of the West Mayo brigade units, with the exception of the Newport battalion taking part. Our unit, under Commandant Jack Connolly, was ordered to take up a front in Brockagh and to the east side of it, and another unit under the command of Paul Reilly from that west to the sea at Kilmeena.

Jack, and indeed the rest of the column, were disappointed in not being allowed to go to Clifden, but we were there for the purpose of holding down and keeping the troops from going to reinforce the garrisons there. When Jack received a dispatch to retreat on Newport as superior forces were moving in on him, he refused to do so and said he would fight them. On the night before when he was changing guard, and it was my turn to do it, he looked at my face, which was in very bad condition owing to the recent accident, and said, 'You should be at home as you are in no condition to be out.' He then insisted I give my rifle to Willie McNulty, O.C. of Engineers, and that I take his short Webley revolver. He did guard in my place. He sent me and Paddy Neilon, Ballycastle, with a dispatch to Paul Reilly to hold on also. When we got there we found that Paul and his men had retreated as ordered, leaving our flank exposed.

After a few hours' flight, Mick Gibbons, Mick McNeela, Anthony Caine and Ned Murray were wounded and captured. Commandant Connolly had captured Transport officer Pat Mulchrone of the Castlebar Battalion who was on holidays at his home in Aughagowla, and was visiting his friends, Gallaghers (the barrack). They were playing cards when the Free State troops arrived. At the order, 'Hands Up' they all raised their hands over their heads. One of the Free State officers walked up to Pat, and although he was not armed and had his hands above his head, shot him dead. His funeral in Burrishoole Abbey two days later was the largest seen for many years in the district. Nora Gallagher, the Barrack, was taking care of two young children when a bomb was thrown in the window and exploded in the room in which they were. Only for her presence of mind in covering herself and the children with a feather mattress, they would all probably have been killed. Although she was only in her teens, she was an active member of Cumann na mBan.

After Christmas 1922, most of the Republican resistance was being crushed in Munster, Leinster and part of Connacht, but Kerry, Mayo, Galway, Donegal and a few other areas were still fighting fiercely. The Free State had embarked on a policy of reprisals. After every successful ambush, a number of prominent men from the area who were already held prisoners were executed. They had already issued a proclamation that anyone captured with arms after a certain date would be shot. They now issued a final one, confirming the first one.

I have studied the fight both in the Black and Tan war and the civil war. I have always claimed, and I still claim, that most of the credit for the amount of freedom we have gained rests with the people, rather than with the I.R.A. For though the I.R.A. was the spearhead, no doubt it was the unbreakable courage and fierce determination of the people as a whole that smashed the tyrants of that time. The sacrifices which the people in general cheerfully accepted for the cause are almost beyond belief. In the first place, they billeted and fed the Column men at great risk to themselves. When the I.R.A. had moved away, the military raided the houses in which they had stayed, and often abused and tortured the people when they refused to give information. It was not unusual to see the householder take a rifle and do guard for the Column when they came in exhausted. The people stood firm and gave the enemy to understand that although they could kill or maim them, they could not conquer them.

Even the school children stood up to the soldiers and refused to give them information. The I.R.A. too, on account of the hardships they endured and exposure to the elements, were covered with boils and eczema and other skin diseases. It was hard to see young children put out of their beds at midnight to allow men in that state to sleep in them. We often pleaded with people to give us some clean straw to sleep on, but they would not hear of it, and claimed that it was their fight as well as ours. Certain houses were picked for contact points and dispatch stations and those people were in great danger at all times. There was a network of those stations in every company area and it was due to the efficiency of those that many a successful operation was carried out.

On 22 February 1923, the Column was billeted in Massbrooke near Lahardane. At about 11.30 p.m. we received a dispatch to return immediately to Buckagh, as a young stranger, who had formerly been a member of the I.R.A. and who had deserted to the Free State, had betrayed the location of a big petrol depot in Shramore. It was used for servicing I.R.A. transport, and was to be raided next morning. We started immediately for Buckagh, across the mountains, and arrived there about 3 a.m. on 23 February. When all the Column had gone to bed and it was the turn of our section, which consisted of Johnnie McNea, Pádraig Joyce, Frank Sweeney (now Reverend Father Frank) and myself to do guard, Johnnie McNea and I took the first guard, but the other two said they would do it, and pointed out that they would have the best part of the deal as they would only have four hours until dawn, while we would have much longer to do. I agreed and then we went to bed in Martin Bryce's house in Buckagh and were soon fast asleep.

At about 8 a.m. I was awakened by voices outside the window where the guards were posted. They had spotted a bunch of people coming down Loughran Brae nearly a mile away and shortly after, a second bunch. They became suspicious and

said they should call us but we were already out. We then took positions and alerted the remainder of the Column which totalled about 18 men. Jim Moran, who was in charge, gave each section its orders, and made each section leader responsible for his own section. He ordered me to take my section on to the shoulder of Buckagh, directly over Trienbeg school, and to deal with that area. Willie Burke was to take his section, Jim Jordan, Jack Clarke and Ned McNeela, to deal with the area from Curly Bryce's house down to the lake. While he was making those plans, Kathleen Noone, a member of a family of very enthusiastic workers in the cause, came up and asked for Jim Moran. She told him the soldiers had just raided their house, broken pictures, ripped up feather beds, and abused the occupants of the house.

Jim addressed the men before they went to their positions, saying, 'Today we have to perform a task which is not to our liking: to avenge this insult to our friends. In the course of doing it, we want to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed. Wait for my signal shot. Don't fire into them at the first volley. Fire over their heads and give them a chance to surrender.' This was typical of the orders we received before many encounters, and it often robbed us of victory, as it deprived us of the element of surprise which is so important in guerilla warfare.

Earlier that night, a party of about 75 men had gone on to Shramore, got the petrol and arrested several of the local men and took them along. We had no knowledge of this party passing through, but kept in touch with the party which had raided Tom Noone's, also numbering about 75 men. They travelled along the Trienbeg Road and we travelled parallel with them on the hill above at a distance of 150 to 250 yards, in order to manoeuvre them into a position where they would not have so much cover.

The party which had gone on to Shramore during the night returned at the same time and met them near Trienbeg school. Willie Burke and his section took up a position Newport side of Trienbeg school, and our section was in position within 200 yards range right over it. Tom McDonnell, Jim Moran, Paddy Conway, Jim Sweeney, Willie Walsh and three others were about 100 yards higher on the hill. Joe Baker, Dan O'Donnell, Mick McDonnell and Willie McNulty were on the Skirdagh side and John Kilroy and John Davitt still higher on the hill. Instead of us surprising them, they attacked us first.

The fight started at about 10 a.m. and lasted until darkness set in about 6.30 p.m. Our section was in such a position that we had a poor view of the school and the surrounding areas and therefore was not very effective. We advanced under fire down towards a good fighting position within 150 yards range, but one from which there was no retreat until dark. It was very lively for about an hour and a half, after

which we succeeded in silencing the machine gunner who was doing the most harm and was operating north of the school gate. A ten-year old Buckagh schoolboy, Paddy McGovern, acted as messenger between the two parties during a short truce. It was marvellous to see the plucky little lad running up and down with his little flag without any sign of fear. His sister, Mollie McGovern, came across the hill during the worst part of the fighting with a dispatch to Jim Moran telling him that a party of troops had gone out Glenhest Road and were coming through Glenlara to surround us.

Jim Moran then sent Dan O'Donnell and Mick McDonnell to Skirdagh to intercept them. The fight lasted until dusk. A young soldier named Collins and a Red Cross man named McQuaid were killed, and according to a very young soldier who was guarding us thirteen days later when we were captured, they had thirteen wounded. There was a big fuss made about the shooting of the Red Cross man, but it was not the fault of any member of the Column and in fact no one of us knew it had happened until 10 p.m. We were also unaware that the local men from Shramore were prisoners and brought along with the Free Staters.

After the Trienbeg ambush, we were ordered to ground arms and disperse, as the Free State forces in the whole Western Command were preparing for a full scale roundup.

MAUM ROUNDUP

We lay low for twelve days. On the sixth of March Jim Moran received a dispatch ordering him to mobilize his Column, to get out and get active. Even though he doubted the wisdom of the order as the roundup was still pending and large forces of troops were in the area, he obeyed and mobilized the men at his own home. We started at 8 p.m. and went by Derrychooldrim and Lettermoghera to Pat Chambers's house in Furnace. We halted there for an hour and then went on to Buckagh, where we billeted for the night. Jim Moran and Dan O'Donnell slept in Edward Mulchrone's and Johnnie McNea and I in John Mulchrone's. We were later told that at about 3 a.m. a fire was built and lit on the western shoulder of Buckagh as a signal to the Free State troops that we had passed through and were billeted there. They started to move about that time and by dawn we were surrounded.

At about 7.30 a.m. one of the section which was on guard went through the village and alerted all the Column and told us to get out quickly as we had not much time. Mrs J. Mulchrone insisted we wait and have breakfast, and when we could not she fixed us a nice lunch while we got dressed. Just as dawn was breaking we moved out along the New Line towards Skirdagh. As it got brighter we could see the troops, moving along the skyline in the same direction. We got as far as Mrs

McDonnell's and there we met S. Kilroy who had just arrived with dispatches from Belmullet. Lieutenant Mick McDonnell was with him. The two fell in with us and came along.

We got as far as the next hill and then turned north towards the top of Mount Eagle. We had gone as far as a place called the Black Banks and rested there for three-quarters of an hour, waiting for the return of a local man whom Jim had sent out to scout the Glenlara side, and who, having seen the troops coming up the valley towards us, went for home and safety and forgot the Column. Jim Moran and Joe Baker made their plans and were then in joint command of them. The front of the Column had turned up the hill again when Jack Clarke spotted the machine gunner setting up in the Banks we had just vacated and shouted, 'Get down!' We were then in a very exposed position with no cover whatever. The only thing that saved us was the colour of our trench coats – they blended with the ground. It was about 11.30 a.m. at this time, and for over three hours we were pinned down by a withering fire. After a time other groups with Lewis guns began to close in around us and joined in the battle. For the first five minutes I felt very nervous but after that I offered myself up to God and felt calm, wondering how it would feel when the bullets began to strike.

About half an hour before the end, I saw Jim Moran coming towards me on his hands and knees. He laid his head on my feet and said, 'We're trapped. Come on and we'll try to get up to Baker.' He was then silent for a time. I asked him a question which he didn't answer. I asked him a second time and then discovered he was praying. After a few minutes when there was a lull in the firing I said, 'Come on now.' 'No,' he said, 'if you come you'll break the connection in the Column as there will be thirty yards between. I'll go up to Baker and whatever order we send, pass it on and obey it.' The order never came and that was the last time I saw him alive.

At about 2.30 p.m. I saw the flag of surrender go up higher on the hill and Captain Tom Cleary and Commandant Baker and a few appear. Then all the different Free State companies began to gather up. When everything was quiet I crept up into some rushes that were higher on the hill and was hidden from view. During the three hours I lay on the top of the ridge I could hear a stream running each side of me but I could not reach any one. I also could hear a bunch of the boys talking occasionally – Dan O'Donnell, Paul Reilly, Tom McDonnell, Pádraig Joyce, Johnnie McNea, Jim Moran and I think Tommie McManamon, Newbridge Street, Newport were in the group and they had some cover although they were next to me.

As I have said before, Jim Moran had passed me by and had almost reached Joe

Baker. I next saw Willie Walsh accompanied by a young Free State soldier coming along our lines. Baker, thinking we could not have survived, sent him along to investigate. When they were within eight yards of me, and in the act of passing me by, I decided to try and save the seven who were in that bunch and stood up, saying, 'That is all.' He said, 'How many more?' I said, 'I am the last man as I am rear guard.' He still kept going, and to divert his attention, I took off my bandolier and handed it to him; at the same time I started walking towards the crowd. I caught Willie Walshe's eye and winked to him that all was well. He then turned and went back.

As Jim was dressed in uniform, I thought it was one of the Free Staters who was killed until I recognised a scarf he was wearing. I then realized it was he, and I suppose I just lost my head as I whirled the rifle twice around my head and threw it as far down the hill as I could. Jim was lying on his back on the bank of a little stream, his two feet tied together with a belt, his two hands joined on his breast, in which was a crucifix about four inches long, a half-penny on his right eye to keep it closed, and on his forehead just above the right eyebrow was a jagged hole about one and a half inches in diameter, and across the heather for about ten feet were scattered in lumps the size of a small hen egg, the brains that had plotted and schemed for the land he loved, and for which he gave his young life.

The little verse composed at the time of his funeral was very suitable. It ran as follows:

*Kindly, upright, generous, brave
He went when the call was sounded.
He never would live a contented slave
Freely his fresh young life he gave.
Dying by foes surrounded.
Nobly for Ireland he did his part,
His comrades around him falling.
That ugly gash in his forehead fair
Those tangled tresses of blood soaked hair
With no uncertain voice declare
That his was a soldier's calling.*

Jim was a grand character, and every man in the Column idolized him. He never knew fear and by his example made good soldiers of all the men in his command. I travelled with him sometimes, and it made no difference how weary we were or how late we arrived at our billets, his last act at night was to say the Rosary. He was always witty and even in the toughest situation he could sing and crack a joke. He said on more than one occasion that he would never be brought up the streets of Newport alive. He wasn't.

Tom Lavelle and Jim Sweeney, who were in the front section of the Column, escaped under fire to the top of the hill and made their way to Shreereevagh Lodge and found refuge there for the night. The seven men who were in the bunch next to my position also escaped. They had a narrow escape at the last minute, as the troops who had us surrounded on the north side were within thirty yards of them, and coming straight for them when the officer in charge of them blew his whistle and signalled them to go straight down the mountain. They changed direction and missed them by about ten yards.

It was rumoured that the Free State soldiers abused Jim's remains there on the mountain. I did not see any disrespect to him once I came on the scene, but I did see two things: 1) Before his corpse was moved I saw Tommie Flannery, Newport, take the crucifix out of his hands – and I am sure it was Flannery's crucifix. 2) The man who shot him came up, flung himself on his knees over him and said, 'My God, Jim, that it should be my hand that took away your young life!' He wept as bitterly as if it were his own brother. That man was known to us as Lieutenant Hogan. He was in charge of the party which actually captured us.

As I have already said, all the other troops gathered around us from all angles, and one platoon, commanded by a Lieutenant O'Grady from Clare, came up like roaring lions using obscene language and wanting us lined up against a bank so that, as he himself put it, he could blow the guts out of us with bombs they were carrying. To his credit, Lieutenant Hogan said, 'These are my prisoners, O'Grady, and if you or your men harm one of them, I'll make a sieve of you.' Covering him with his revolver he ordered him to get going back to his own company which he did without further argument.

They then took the bolts and magazines out of our rifles, tied some of them together and made us take off our trench coats to make a stretcher to carry the body down five miles to Glenhest Church. After the first turn carrying the corpse, we were walking down after it when one of the Free State officers accused Jack Clarke of having a softnosed bullet and started to abuse us again. I spoke up in his defence and said, 'If he had, it was some of your ammunition which was captured in Glenamoy.' The officer, who was under the influence of drink, said, 'You rotten —, you could not fight clean.' I answered sneeringly, 'We always fought clean and we never ran away from it like some of you.' I was referring, of course, to his deserting his men at Glenamoy ambush at which he was the officer in charge. I will admit that it wasn't very wise for me in the position I was in as a prisoner to be so defiant, and before I went much further, they did beat sense into me, as I was belted from one to the other four times, and that put the finish to my back answers.

When we arrived at the Glenhest Church, Jim Moran's body was shifted onto a farm cart and thus brought to Newport.

There were fourteen of us taken prisoners together with nine rifles. The men captured – Joe Baker, Tom Cleary, Jim Kilroy, Mick McDonnell, John Tom Maloney, Mike Horan, Johnsie Judge (Owenwee), Willie McNulty, Willie Burke, Willie Walsh, Paddy Conway, Jack Clarke, Paddy Neilon (Ballycastle) and myself – were lined up in double file, with a similar number of armed men on both sides, and marched on to Newport for six miles. We were by this time tired, hungry and thirsty, but still would not give in but made them travel, too. We were often told to slow down but refused to do so. When we were going up George's Street, Willie Burke, always a plucky lad in a tight corner, shouted 'Are we downhearted? Up the Republic!' We were then lined up in a double line on Main Street, facing towards John Kilroy's, and were taken into the Commercial House which was used as a barrack, and which until recently was occupied by the Munster and Leinster Bank. We were brought in in twos and interrogated.

Most of the Free State forces who had come in early were very drunk. I was in the rear line and standing at my back was an ex-Black and Tan. His rifle was a Lee-Enfield, the trigger of which had two pressures. After the first pressure is taken the lightest touch will fire it. He pushed his rifle into my back, using very obscene language, took the first pressure, and kept saying, 'I'll blow your guts out!' That lasted for about five minutes and I was certainly glad when another soldier came up and took him away, as it was one time in my life that I felt real fear.

We were then put on the train at the station, as the trains were running through Newport at that time. As Lieutenant Mick McDonnell was put on the train at one platform, his sister Annie, Mrs. Michael Willie Moran, was taken off the train in her coffin at the opposite platform. She had died in a Dublin hospital. When we got to Westport the train was held up for another hour. We still had neither food nor drink since midnight on Tuesday. One Free State officer, who did seem to have a heart, although he was fairly drunk, but seemed to realize our plight, said, 'Poor devils, you're nearly dead. I'm going down the town to get some food for you.' But although it is almost fifty years since, he has not returned yet.

We were then brought to Castlebar, taken off the train and marched over to the military barracks, paraded there for the garrison to see, and when one officer asked 'Who are those fellows?' was answered, 'The real McCoys – Kilroy's men.' We were then marched back to the railway station. The same procedure was carried out at any station at which there was a Free State garrison. As we were paraded through the different towns, there were crowds of people in the streets, some of the women praying out loud, some crying.

We arrived on the barrack square in Claremorris at midnight and were again lined up in double file. The Free State officers came along and abused and beat us.

A high ranking officer and one who had actually campaigned previously with Joe Baker – a tall, athletic fellow – came along from the front, and with his full strength behind each blow, punched each prisoner in the face. This was one time I got away free as he hit Paddy Neilon in the face, knocking him over on me, and both of us fell to the ground. At the same time, he spotted Joe Baker and hit him full in the mouth saying, 'So this is how we meet again, Joe.' Joe never flinched but said, 'Do it again, Mick.' The same happened four times and Joe said, 'I'm not dead yet – and we might meet on even terms some day.'

We were then run across the square and upstairs to a second floor and kicked into a large room. As far as I can remember, there were no seats so we sat along the wall on the board floor. There was the usual bustle and excitement as the higher officers drank themselves into a stupor, celebrating their victory. What a victory! Twenty-four men, not all armed, defeated – including one killed, fourteen captured with nine rifles, nine escaped – defeated by well over two thousand men armed to the teeth. This went on until at 5.30 a.m. on Thursday the 8th when some of the officers fell asleep and the rest had gone out to dances.

Then the rank and file of the army, who had been afraid to move before now, went to the cookhouse and brought their own morning rations and divided them amongst us. That was the first food or drink we had tasted since midnight on Tuesday the 6th. At 11 a.m. on Thursday the 8th we received our first official meal. Breakfast was over at 11.30 a.m. We were then taken back to the large room. Our real test then started. The part of the barracks to which we were taken for interrogation was known as the slaughter house, and before dawn on Friday the 9th we were to know in no uncertain way that it lived up to its reputation. Two high ranking officers went around the line of prisoners and picked out the youngest first. He was gone out about an hour when they came back and took another. This was repeated several times – none of the prisoners taken out returned to us. Shots were heard occasionally and it was rumoured that they were shooting them after questioning. At about 5 p.m. I was called and taken into a large room. As it was now dark, an Aladdin lamp was lit in the centre of a large table, around which sat four officers.

They started to question me first in a quiet way, but when I gave no information they tried torture. We were getting accustomed to that and were prepared for it. They tried everything. They went so far, that being convinced I was not going to leave that room alive, a mad thought occurred to me – if I could turn over the lamp on the table, I might set the whole place afire and take them all with me. I did try it a few minutes later but failed, as the lamp had a lead base and righted itself again. After that I got the butts of the revolvers on my arms, shoulders and the side of my head, but I saved my face as it was still sore from the accident. Then they suddenly

changed their tactics and tried bribery. They offered me three hundred pounds, together with the same rank in the Free State army which I held in the Republican army, which at the time of my capture was Staff Captain, with immediate promotion. The only condition was that I tell them the location of some dump or any information which would show we were ready to cooperate with them.

When they saw that this wouldn't work, they returned to their torture tactics until Lieutenant Hogan who had saved us on the day we were captured appeared. He told them to stop this and while he was present things were quiet, but when he went away it ended by one of them kicking me out the door. Jack Clarke, who had been called out of turn by mistake, was waiting outside during most part of the commotion and thought I was killed. This continued until 1.30 a.m. on Friday the 9th – fourteen hours to beat and interrogate fourteen men. At about 11 a.m. Friday 9 March 1923, we were marched to Claremorris railway station, put on an armoured train, each carriage covered with one-inch steel plating, two prisoners with four guards in each carriage and a Vickers machine gun at each end. It was rumoured that there was going to be an attempt made to rescue us, so they made sure it would not happen.

Jim Moran's body was brought as far as Claremorris and his brother Tom came there to claim it. He had a hard job to get the body from the authorities but he finally succeeded.

We arrived in Galway City about 2 p.m., were taken off the train and marched over to Galway Jail. As we marched across the bridge and saw the gloomy aspect of the jail our spirits fell and we felt that for us it was the end of the line. We had heard many of the soldiers talking, and they had told us to be prepared for the worst as it was our last journey. We were locked in – four men in each cell which was about ten by four feet. The rest of the prisoners were out in the yard at exercise and the guards would not allow any of them to get in contact with us. But they pushed the guards ahead of them and held them there while the boys from home who were already there talked to us through the spyhole in the cell doors. They told us all the news, and we told them the news from home. On the following day the warders opened the cell doors and let us out to exercise with the rest of the prisoners and we felt better.

We were a week in Galway jail when we were called out and went through a drumhead courtmartial. The officer in charge of the courtmartial was Commandant O'Malley of Galway. After the usual procedure we were each handed a printed sheet on which were the following particulars: Parents' names, my name, age, height, weight, colour of eyes and hair, and any other identification marks including birthmarks. Then followed this statement: *You have been found guilty*

of being in possession of firearms with intent, after the date of the Proclamation, and you are hereby sentenced to death before a firing squad on 28 of March 1923.

Ten days passed and still no sign of the execution of Baker's Column, as we were called. We were on edge every time the big gate rattled, expecting to be called out. Then on 11 April, six young Galway lads, members of the Headford Column who were captured after the Ballyglunarr ambush – S. O'Malley, Francis Cunnane, Michael Monaghan, Jack Newell, John McGuire and Martin Moylan – were called out at 6 a.m. and shot at 8 a.m. Tommie Newell, Jack's brother, who was a prisoner in the other part of the jail, was allowed to spend the night with him in the 'reception' or 'condemned wing', before he went out to his death. All night long the rosary was loudly recited by over five hundred prisoners until 8 a.m. when the six brave young lads went to meet their God. We saw them march out under an armed guard on their last journey to Tuam to die before a firing squad for Ireland, little knowing that but for the mercy of God and the prompt action of our comrades outside, it was we, not they, who would be making that journey. We were moved up into their beds in the condemned cell section on the morning of their execution.

About a week later, Commandant General Petie Joe McDonnell and divisional quartermaster Jack Feehan were taken prisoners and brought to the other part of the jail. There was a heavy door like a garage door but heavily reinforced, between the two sections of the jail. It was known to us as the big door. The day after they arrived, they got in touch with us through this door, and told us the news of all that had happened since our capture. They were the first who gave any hope to us and we began to understand why we had not yet gone before the firing squad. The following is their story.

The news had leaked out that we had been sentenced to death and would be executed on 28 March. Immediately after the news arrived, the I.R.A. officers, including Petie Joe, Jack Feehan, Dan O'Donnell, Jack Connelly (who had escaped from Galway jail the day we were captured), and a few others, met either in Thomas Moran's Callowbrack, or Tom Noone's, Furnace (I am not sure which). They discussed the situation and decided that if we were executed they would do the same, and shoot ten for every one of us. They then wrote out a 'Death Notice' something like this: *If one man of Baker's column is executed, you will die if we have to follow you to the ends of the earth.*

They mailed sixty of these to prominent Free Staters all over the brigade area. And immediately it took effect. The next move was made by the Free State. Monsignor Dalton of Claremorris got in touch with the I.R.A. officers and got them to arrange a meeting. He came to Furnace, met them there and tried to

influence them to give up their arms in order to save us as it was our only hope. They listened to what he had to say, then told him, 'Go back and tell them to shoot them. We will not give up our arms. But tell them if they do, the West will run red with blood.'*

His Grace, Dr. Gilmartin, Archbishop of Tuam, called a conference of all the clergy of the Diocese of Tuam to see if anything could be done. He asked each priest in turn to give his honest views on the situation. They each gave their views, and the majority were in favour of the I.R.A. being advised to give up their arms. It came to the turn of Father Garvey, a young curate in Aughagower, who was a staunch Republican. When asked for his opinion, he said, 'I would much prefer not to express my opinion as it would clash with my superior' (meaning his parish priest). His Grace said, 'I called this conference together to get everyone's honest opinion. I am your superior and I call on you for yours, and I want yours.' Father Garvey then said he had been in touch with the boys, that he had pleaded with them as he knew there was no time to lose – that he was firmly convinced they meant every word when they said the West would run red with blood if we were executed.

There was no further move made for five months, during which time the sentence of death hung over us. I now state, without wishing to appear boastful, that we had no regrets except the thought of the sorrow we were causing our parents. We had no fear whatever of death, but when we were notified that we had been reprieved and our sentence commuted to twenty years' penal servitude, we did receive a shock.

The jail was very much overcrowded, and conditions were really bad for a time. Four men were in each cell. It was filled with mice and vermin. Our mattress was left on the floor with the end over a water pipe which ran from cell to cell and acted as a pillow. It was not unusual to have four or five mice run across our faces one after the other. The food for most of the time was not so bad, but the quantity was very small for young lads with good appetites. If any type of life showed up the true character of a man, jail life did it. The breakfast was a small tin of porridge, one slice of bread, and some butter. There were four of us in a cell, the rations were usually uneven – one small one of each kind, two medium and one larger. I was often so hungry that I felt I hadn't the willpower to take the small one, and for that reason I walked out of the cell when breakfast came in and let the others pick out theirs first. On every occasion Willie McNulty took the small ration of each kind, although I knew he could easily eat the lot. In that and in many other dealings I had with him, I came to the conclusion that he was one of the most unselfish lads I had ever met.

We were never called out by name while we were in prison but by 'convict

number'. My number in Galway was 6772 and when we left there and went to the Curragh it was 2357. After five months we were moved from Galway jail to Tintown No. 2 the Curragh, and from that time forth conditions improved somewhat. In Tintown, as in all camps, a lot of tradesmen and men from all walks of life were interned, and the jails or camps were such that all men were equal. It was not what your status was but what you proved yourself by merit that counted. Each man passed on his knowledge to his comrades and soon it was like a big factory – some men designing and making rings and brooches, some weaving and knitting mantle borders and other fancy articles from macrame twine and other such materials; some making rugs and table centres, etc. This work broke the monotony of prison life and helped men to save their sanity.

Inside the jails and camps as well as outside we had a strong organization. We had to obey our own camp council as well as the prison authorities. Our letters in and out were censored by both parties. When conditions improved, we were allowed letters and parcels once a week, except when there was a row on. It often took very little to spark off trouble, and it was then made tough on our camp and line O.C.s. Mick Gallagher (Sonnie) was one of these, and on one occasion he was taken to the torture chamber, known as the 'Glass House' and hung by his wrists for hours, with his toes just touching the ground.

About the end of November, 1923, several of the higher I.R.A. officers, including Michael Kilroy, Austin Stack and several others, were tortured in Mountjoy. A powerful fire hose was turned on them in their cells about 1.00 a.m. in freezing weather. Their nightclothes and bedclothes were drenched with water and themselves driven out into the yard and left there in that condition until morning without clothes. As a protest against this treatment, they went on hunger strike and remained on it for 42 days before their demands were granted.

They were on strike a week before the news reached Tintown 3, which was the next camp to ours. It was decided to call out that camp in sympathy. They signalled the news to our camp with flags in the semaphore code and asked us to join them. We went on hunger strike that evening and remained on it for a few hours short of twelve days. Some people would tell you that after three days hunger would not trouble you. That was not my experience, as the pangs of hunger were just as severe on the twelfth day as on the first. The hunger was very severe from 9.00 a.m. to 9.20 which was our breakfast time. After that it eased off until dinner and again at supper. We had severe headaches all the time. We then began to get weaker. You would see some of the boys walking around, apparently all right. Then, without warning, their knees would fail and down they went.

On the twelfth day, just as suddenly as we had been ordered on the strike, we

were ordered off it. We had no say but to obey orders. Mostly all the prisoners from Connacht stuck the hunger strike to the end, but only about half of the men from the other counties stuck to it longer than five or six days. It was amusing sometimes to hear fellows talking in the middle of the night about some great feast they had in the past – the next minute, a few shoes would be hurled at them. After the strike was called off, things returned to normal until Christmas.

On New Year's Day it was rumoured that all sentenced prisoners were being moved to Mountjoy and all the rest released. Most of the prisoners, against whom there was no charge, were released. We were moved to Harepark Camp, where we stayed until 7 June. We were the last bunch of prisoners to be released except De Valera himself.¹ On the morning of 7 June 1924, our numbers were called out. As it was, all the men with the biggest sentences were called first and it was widely rumoured that all sentenced prisoners were being moved to Mountjoy. We were convinced we were on our way at last. But to our surprise and joy, we received our vouchers to Westport railway station and were turned loose on the plains of Kildare at 4.00 p.m.

We walked about three miles to Newbridge, got the train which arrived in Westport at 2.00 a.m. on Sunday 8 June 1924. Mick McDonnell had been released in a dying condition about the sixth day of the strike, but was so determined not to break the strike that he refused to touch either food or stimulants until he arrived at his own home. Willie McNulty had been released to attend his brother Pat's funeral a short time previously and Willie Walsh, Willie Burke and Tom Cleary a few weeks earlier. The bunch that was released on 7 June were Joe Baker, Paddy Conway, Mike Horan, John Tom Maloney, Jack Clarke, Johnsie Judge, Paddy Neilon, Séamus Kilroy and myself. ~

Nobody knew of our release, so there was no one to meet us. The night was bad with driving mist and rain, and we were badly clothed – but I don't think we even noticed it. We employed a side car (or jaunting car) which took five of us to Newport. We parted there after fifteen months of very close companionship and walked the rest of the way home and arrived just as day was breaking. There was rejoicing in our home and in every home as we were not expected. I then had breakfast and went to bed as I was too weary to go to Mass, and even if I was able I had no presentable clothes.

It was often said by people who didn't have the heart to take part in the struggle that those who did gained well by it. But if you can judge them all by our cases (and you can), that was not true. I had plenty of good, neat clothing when I left home.

1 Éamon de Valera and Austin Stack were released 16 July. Ernie O'Malley and Seán Russell were not released until 17 July. — Ed.

I had practically nothing worthwhile when I came back. When we were in occupation of the barracks we were supposed to get ten shillings per week pocket money. We did get ten shillings one week and that was the lot. I also received three pounds for a suit of clothes about a month after our release.

I slept until four p.m. and when I awoke, my pal Marcus McDonnell, Derrin-taggart, who was released a short time before me, was to see me, as he had just heard I was home. He spent the evening talking with me and when he was leaving for home said, 'I'll see you at the Fair tomorrow.' I said 'No, you won't. I have no clothes to go.' And he, taking off his overcoat and cap, said, 'Yes, you have! You'll wear these.' And he insisted I take them. The truth of the matter was that owing to how I felt after the hardships of the past two years I did not want to meet people. My father and Marcus, noticing this, were worried and insisted on my going. After a lot of argument, I did agree to go. There was a big crowd of people in town and they did give us a rousing welcome.

I remained at home for more than a year, during which time I did enjoy myself and got back gradually to normal life. But for a long time, when thinking of the past, I felt depressed at times. When I saw all my companions going to America, I decided that I also would go. I left home at 9 a.m. on 4 August 1925 and at 9 a.m. on 4 August 1926 I was married to Jim Moran's first cousin. We spent five happy years in Chicago and then came home to live in Ireland.

I will just mention what I consider to be a coincidence. After returning home, I called to see Joe Baker at his premises in Westport. After we had discussed old times, I went to the next counter to choose and play some new records. A young priest came in and got into conversation with Joe. The subject they were discussing was the story we had been told by Petie Joe McDonnell and Jack Feehan seven years previously in the condemned wing in Galway jail, about our death sentence, and the action of Dr. Gilmartin, Archbishop of Tuam, in calling the conference of the clergy of the diocese to see what could be done. In the middle of the conversation, he noticed that I was taking more interest in them than in the records. Thinking that I might be a C.I.D. man, as they were very active at that time, he whispered to Joe, 'Maybe I'm saying too much.' Joe just laughed and told him I was one of the Column. He then called me over and introduced me to Father Garvey, the young curate from Aughagower whom I mentioned earlier. Father Garvey then told us the story almost word for word that Petie Joe and Jack Feehan had told us through the 'Big Door'.

CONCLUSION

Although this seems to be a story of my own life and impressions up to 1924, it is not meant to be so. It is meant to be an example of the life led by almost all the Volunteers in the area and that would mean not one man but hundreds.

Anybody reading the history of those times would think that the Newport battalion areas did very little for the cause. This is very unfair as it was one of the best areas in the whole country and was a hotbed of republicanism. It was there at the start and remained active until the last shot was fired and produced leaders second to none.

When I started to write this, I intended to take in a wider range of activities, and for that purpose I asked several of my comrades, whom I knew were in a position to supply valuable information, to help. They told me they would prefer not to be involved, so I decided to base my story on the facts relating to my own life and to a personal diary which I had kept during that period. I have not written anything which I don't know to be the truth and I have been very careful not to offend anyone or to mention any name without permission.

I do hope I have been successful in this, and that if I have hurt anyone's feelings during that time, I ask them on behalf of myself and those gallant people with whom I worked to forgive us as it was not in hope of any gains we worked. We all, every one of us, loved Ireland with an undying love, sometimes maybe not too wisely, but so well!

^a **Jim O'Donnell** returned from the United States in 1932, and worked as a ganger with Mayo County Council until his death in the 1970s.