

## RICK JOYCE REMEMBERS

(as told to Jarlath Duffy)

Rick Joyce (now an octogenarian in Chicago) remembers being a member of Na Fianna Éireann by early 1916 and mobilising on 29 April with his unit at Farnaght for a period of four days. The nature of his military work was scouting exercises and dispatch work. Regular military drill classes were held and subscriptions for arms for the Irish Republican Army were collected.

Soon after 1917 Rick left Fianna Éireann and joined the Westport Company, Westport Battalion of the West Mayo Brigade of the army, later known as the IRA. Drills and parades took place frequently. Efforts in 1917 to impose conscription were opposed. The R.I.C. were attacked at the trial of members of the company at Westport Courthouse. Baton charges and counter-attacks became an almost nightly occurrence during 1919.

Soon dug-outs for the storing of arms and ammunition were prepared. Early in 1919 Rick became the Brigade Engineer and was in active service continuously afterwards. Brigade staff meetings were attended and important dispatches delivered. Rick's special responsibility was the care and storage of arms, ammunition and explosives. On one occasion while bringing guns from Leenaun, it was decided to dump the arms in Carrowkennedy as a precaution. Pat Tunney, Dan Gavin and Rick hid the arms and later brought them to a house near the Red Bridge owned by John Cunningham.

Out in Cloona Mills with his moulds, jars of sulphuric and nitric acid and cotton, Rick manufactured powerful high explosives. Hideouts had to be frequently changed. Known relatives and friends of the IRA became targets of the enemy who tried to terrorise them. The brigade men struck back in the hours of darkness when least expected. Many an ambush was planned, but had to be abandoned after long hours spent in vain awaiting the forces of the Crown.

Rick remembers taking part in the burning, with P. Heraty, Joe Baker, Dan Gavin, J. McDonagh and others, of the R.I.C. Barracks at Westport Quay where he had the arms and ammunition ready for the job at hand. P. Heraty had only three bullets in his revolver. Joe Baker was beside a small building not far from the barracks where he could see towards the Demesne gates. Dan Gavin and Jim McDonagh were with Broddie Malone who started the fire. McBride was outside hoping his house would not go on fire. On other occasions he lay in wait all day at Sheeane, Murrisk, Erriff, Aille, Meneen and Brackloon for enemy forces which did not come. The abortive ambush at Islandeady stands out in his mind, where three lorries of Black and Tans were warned by a woman before they approached the positions held at the ballroom, returned to Castlebar for reinforcements and came upon some of the Column in the act of cutting the road to prevent reinforcements arriving.

Clogher Cross ambush was a hard fight where the men of the Flying Column were met by three lorries of Black and Tans when it was rather dark. Both sides used grenades and rifles for almost one hour before the enemy withdrew. Like his Westport comrades, Rick was not at the ill-fated ambush at Kilmeena, but took part

next morning in the holding up of the train at Meneen where they expected to find wounded R.I.C. and Tans with an escort, but had to content themselves with the carrying off of the mail which they censored later. Rick found £1,800 in a packet from a Westport Bank on its way to a Ballina Bank.

Enemy forces escaped the attention of the Column in Altamont Street when they received intelligence and escaped into nearby houses at the approach of the men of the Column. Around this time Tom Kittrick came from Dublin posing as a student doctor, and gave £600 from the White Cross to Joe Ring for the men of the Column who never had anything. Rick remembers receiving about 30 shillings (£1.50 in today's money but of course worth a lot more then than now).

The burning of Drummin barracks was another important event in Rick's service, but above all, the successful ambush at Carrowkennedy stands clear in his mind. The Column were billeted in Claddy – a compact village of six or seven houses. About 1.00 p.m. after an alert from the sentries, the men mobilised taking some bread in the haversacks. There was no excitement. Michael Kilroy O/C, Ned Moane V/C and J. Gibbons Adj., arrived and led the men to the Westport Leenaun Road. Three lorries of Tans and R.I.C. had passed out from Westport. Some trenches had been dug in the road further out and so the men of the Column expected their enemy to return sooner rather than later. Positions were scouted for at the ambush site. Before leaving the village of Claddy those with no arms were dismissed for the time being. John Kearns and Pat Joyce from the Owenwee Company came with two rifles and some ammunition. The four rifles in the possession of the men of the Column were of a junk nature and had been possibly worn out on some English rifle range. But they nevertheless served their purpose. It was thought that the Tans had used dum-dum ammunition on the men in Kilmeena, so a few rounds of 303 which were used for shooting seals were divided amongst the rifle bearers. John Duffy's section lost no time in getting ready and he was the first to fire on the first lorry. Dan Gavin and Rick near the road, got orders to take cover. Hearing English voices hollering the other side of the wall, they fired at the positions where they imagined the Tans to be and seemed to scare them from making any advance. However, they ran into the fire of Jim Moran and Joe Doherty who were lying in some rushes and they (the Tans) did not have a chance. J. Flaherty was out on a flanking position and Rick joined him, bullets cracking by him and missing narrowly. Ammunition was scarce and had to be spared. Joe Walsh stood up on some rocks looking around and despite the fire, located the position of the Tans under a little bridge. With Dan Gavin, who had grenades in his haversack, they approached the Tans' position. But the enemy all of a sudden decided to make for the McGreals' house which was about 100 yards away. Shots were fired at the retreating soldiers who reached the safety of the widow's house. There they drank the old woman's tea despite her protests and taking cover fired on their attackers. Meantime John Duffy had got out on the road to force a surrender of the first lorry which quickly happened after an explosion in it. A Tan with a broken leg was used as cover approaching the McGreal's house. Some Tans lying under cover had to be rounded up. The captured lorry was cleared and fired. Tom Kittrick gave the captured Lewis gun to J. Flaherty and Rick, and they set it up on higher ground. Soon the Tans in the widow's house surrendered.



They were sure they would be shot, but relaxed when Michael Kilroy warned Sergeant Hadnett not to be caught in the uniform again or he would be shot! It was now getting dark so the Column prepared to withdraw taking all captured arms with them. The wounds of the enemy were attended to, and help was sent for before the men of the Column made their way into the friendly mountains where food and rest awaited them. There was a hard core in the Column who were not found wanting on that day and they knew they could rely on each other. It is appropriate to thank all the fine people who stood by the men of the Flying Column. They will never be forgotten by those who took part.

The men went quickly via Derryherbert and into Durless. As daylight approached the sound of lorries or aeroplanes could be heard in the distance. The Column managed to outwit their pursuers. The Truce was announced and reorganisation took place. For health reasons Rick requested that some other person be appointed to his position. Michael Kilroy agreed and Rick turned over explosives, electric batteries and other materials to T. P. Flanagan in the new Town Hall.

The Civil War should not have happened. It is difficult to understand why Collins signed the articles of agreement. Liam Breen said the signatories should have been shot as they came off the boat at Dublin. After the Truce the IRA went into barracks and training camps. Military opponents were arrested. Rick, committed to Michael Kilroy, went to Limerick city with part of his unit for one week expecting



*W. R. Joyce, 1927.*

civil war to break out there. He was on active service in Renmore and Castlebar military barracks. He became Battalion Vice-Commandant and was second-in-charge of the Westport military post. He helped to blow up important bridges with Capt. J. Moran, Newport, and a man named Grey from Achill at Manulla, Ballyvary and Turlough. Michael Collins came to Castlebar and Michael Kilroy sought money from him. McCabe from Sligo drew a mauser pistol and some shots were fired before McCabe and pistol were seized.

On 22 April 1922 Rick was badly injured by a grenade during the trial of a fuse and he was rushed to St. Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, where he remained for two months. Rick returned and saw further action in the attack of an enemy boat at Newport which was bringing supplies to the garrison in the town. On other occasions he helped the defence of Newport when it was in the hands of the IRA and under attack from the Free State army. He fought at Castlebar, Derrypark, Dulough and Brocach Mountains. He fought his way out of many a round-up in Mountbrown, Durlless, and Derrymore. Rick was active in the attack and capture of the barracks in Clifden where, after seven hours, the enemy positions were captured. He was among those guarding the unloading of a flour boat at Newport.

The unit was disbanded at Christmastime 1922, but Rick was captured later when he was re-joining the Column which was reformed. Next came internment in Galway Jail for six months where he was on the list for execution, then No. 3 camp Tintown, the Curragh, for another six months, and then to Harepark Camp, where Kilroy, H. Murphy (Kerry), Liam Deasy, and Joe Baker were also prisoners.<sup>2</sup> In the late summer of 1924 he was unconditionally released. In Tintown Rick endured hunger strike for over three weeks.

Rick returned to Westport in a poor state. Soon he found himself in Chicago having first worked in the coal mines in England where he was well received by the coalminers. Throughout the years he has kept in contact with relatives and friends in the home country, visiting on many occasions. Some of the accounts of the period from 1916 to 1924 appearing down through the years, have not told the truth and done justice to the brave men among whom Rick was numbered. Names like Jack McDonagh, Dan Gavin, Jack Keane, the Duffy brothers, Joe Baker, Jim Moran, Tommy Kittrick and of course, Michael Kilroy, spell bravery and courage to Rick. No problem going into an ambush with men of that calibre!

It is hoped that Rick will be among the survivors who, together with their fellow countrymen, will commemorate in 1991 the deeds of seventy years ago.

## NOTES

Sources for the above article are contained in the following written accounts by R. Joyce on his contribution to the Fight for Freedom 1917-1924.

1. Statement of R. Joyce, 12 May, 1936, to Pensions Board Dublin
2. Letter to John Duffy, Knockrooskey, 1964
3. Letters to Jarlath Duffy  
19 January 1985  
18 January 1988