

Formation of Volunteers
Drilling and Raids for Arms
Shooting of R.M.
Westport Under Martial Law

WEST MAYO'S FIGHTING

STORY

as told to
Anthony Lavelle



THIS is the story, according to the facts now available of the fight for freedom in West Mayo, by the famous and feared West Mayo Brigade I.R.A. led by the late Brigadier Michael Kilroy, of Newport, whose death in December, 1962, deprived writers of a valuable source of information on the exploits of Michael and his group of daring fighters. Many still remain to tell the story and this paper has the honour to give it to its readers as told to staff reporters by men who fought side by side with Michael Kilroy in his campaign against the forces of occupation.

What they looked like in action—a West Connemara Flying Column typical of the many that emerged in answer to the call to freedom.
Photo (copyright)—J. Leonard and Son, Bofeenau, Ballina.

THE fight could never be started or won without the boys in the country villages up and down the country, and also the workers in the towns who formed the local Companies of the Irish Volunteers, later to become the Irish Republican Army.

These young men, farmers' sons; tradesmen of all classes; shopboys and factory workers, gave all their spare time to drilling and made up by enthusiasm what they lacked in arms. They were ready to fight for the Freedom of Ireland with their bare fists if necessary.

They were helped in their work by their sisters and sweethearts who encouraged them in every way and helped to raise funds for the purchase of the necessary arms and ammunition. These women formed branches of Cumann na mBan to help the volunteers in the fight for freedom. They did valuable work in acting as look-outs and dispatch carriers from one I.O. to another. They also learned nursing and first aid in order to render assistance to wounded volunteers after ambushes.

The Irish Volunteers were established in the Parish of Aughagower in 1915 and a Company formed with the following officers: Captain—Owen Hughes, Lankhill; 1st Lieut.—Hugh Reid, Knappaghbeg; 2nd Lieut.—Manus Keane, Cloonskill; and Adjutant—John Duffy, Letreen.

The organisation spread rapidly and there were men in it from every village in the parish. They aroused the people to a sense of nationhood and urged them to win freedom for the country by every means in their power. They also held concerts and dances to collect money to purchase arms. Many of these concerts were broken up by police and members arrested for singing songs of Easter Week and other national ballads.

Major John McBride of Westport Quay, and Bulmer Hobson, established the Volunteers in Westport, and with their comrades from Aughagower, they took a leading part in the fight for freedom.

A general mobilisation of Volunteers in the Westport area took place on Forbrook Hill, near Westport, on the Sunday after the Easter rising. Members of the Aughagower Company were: Owen Hughes, Harry Hughes, P. Hughes, Manus Keane, Cloonskill, Joe McBride, John Duffy, Ed. Duffy, Owen Duffy, Tom Barry, E. Berry, John Berry, M. Flynn, John McGuire, M. Tuohy, Larry and P. Conway. They had only five shotguns between them. The parade was reviewed by Joe McBride of Westport Quay (elected Sinn Fein M.P. in 1918).

Following the surrender of the 1916 leaders and the executions the following members of the Volunteers were arrested: Owen Hughes and his son Paddy, of Lankhill, John Berry, Lanmore, Manus Keane, Cloonskill, Joe McBride, John Gill, Charles Hughes, Ned Moane, Joe Ring and T. Walsh, and some were in Westport.

On the release of the prisoners in 1917 the leaders took over the training of the Volunteers for the renewal of the fight for freedom.

The Volunteers now became known as the Irish Republican Army.

John Duffy, Cloonskill, was elected Captain of the Aughagower Company; Hugh Reid, Knappaghbeg, and Tom Barry, Doon, Lieutenants. Ed. Berry, Lanmore; Martin Mulroy, Curvey; Pat

Quinn, Doon; Broddie Maguire, Cushen, M. Gavin, Roigh, and John Reilly, Aughagower, as Section Leaders, and Frank Knight, Ayle, as Adjutant.

Westport Battn.

ON re-organisation of the I.R.A. men from the parishes of Westport, Aughagower, Killawalla, Kilmeena, the half parishes of Cushlough and Drummin and Murrisk area were formed in the Westport Battn. The officers of this unit were: O.C.—Joe Ring, Westport, Deputy O.C. James Malone, do.; Adj Charles Gavin, do.; Engineer—Richard Joyce, do.; Intelligence—B. Cryan, do.; Q. M. E. Duffy, Westport; Transport—T. J. Gibbons, do.; Communications—P. O'Malley, do.

Collection of Arms

THE collection of small arms went on. Beg, borrow or steal the I.R.A. had to get guns for the coming fight. People who were sympathetic to the Cause gave them shotguns and a few revolvers which were all they had. With the money collected and realised at concerts and dances and other functions they had to purchase arms. They did this at home from members of the British Forces who were prepared to sell. These accounted for the missing guns by saying they were taken from them by the I.R.A. Volunteers who knew the large English cities were sent over to purchase arms and many had close shaves in smuggling them in. A friendly Customs man often turned the "blind eye" whenever necessary. At other times Volunteers got in easily dressed as priests and nuns. Tom Ketterick of Westport took this disguise to escape the 'Tans.

To prevent the arms falling into the hands of the I.R.A. the R.I.C. decided to collect all arms held by loyal subjects of the King. As usual the Republicans got word of this move and often beat the police to the arms by a few minutes.

There were arms in plenty to be got in the "big houses" of the local landlords, but at times it was a risk to raid. In Co. Limerick when Volunteers called to a "big house" for arms a young girl came out on the front steps and refused to give up any arms. When the Volunteers advanced to take them she fired, killing one of them.

Training in the use of arms and drilling went on in the evenings and after Mass on Sundays. The R.I.C. reported on all the activities of the Volunteers and attended dances and concerts run for funds. They took notes of the men in charge and those singing patriotic songs.

First Arrest

THE police heard of drilling by the Aughagower Company, and one Sunday a large force arrived after Mass and found Johnnie Duffy drilling the members of the Company up and down the road. He was arrested and taken to face Westport Petty Sessions and sentenced to 3 months in Sligo jail. Hugh Reid took over and training continued.

On the release of the prisoners in 1917 a Sinn Fein Club was formed in Aughagower, with Owen Hughes as Chairman; John Foy of Aughagower, as Vice-Chairman, and Ed. Duffy, Cloonskill, as Secretary. These Clubs were the political arm of the Republic, and organised the people in support of the men

on the run. They also formed Sinn Fein Courts and appointed their own police later in the struggle for freedom, when the R.I.C. were driven from their barracks, which were burned over them, to the big towns.

Excitement in Westport

ANOTHER incident that happened in 1918 caused great excitement in Westport. It was the arrest of Ned Moane, Carrabawn, one of the Westport Company of Volunteers for singing a patriotic song at a concert at Carrakennedy, a village that was to make history later.

Ned was tried before the magistrates in Westport Courthouse and everybody in the district came to see the trial. A large force of police and British troops were drafted into the town to prevent a rescue. Also in the dock was another Volunteer named William O'Malley, who was charged with drilling. The streets of the town were crowded with people waiting to see what would happen.

A parade of people was formed and led by a fife and drum band from Cushlough village on the Leenane road, marched up Castlebar Street to the courthouse, which was surrounded by fifty members of the R.I.C. and a company of a Scotch regiment stationed in the town.

This array of military strength did not deter the Cushlough boys who marched on playing lively airs. As the band reached the Christian Brothers Schools the members of the R.I.C. drew their batons and charged the unarmed crowd. Members of the band were badly beaten up. The big drummer—a man named John Hastings or O'Malley, (my informant does not know which), was badly beaten but gave more than he got with his drum sticks. A number of countrymen used their ash plants freely and blood was flowing all over the place.

One R.I.C. man who attacked Joe Walsh of Mill Street, was thrown into the Mall River by Owen Duffy. The battle raged all afternoon. The crowds stoned the police and they charged with batons. District Inspector Shore had his teeth knocked out. The prisoners were at last brought to the court and got six months each. They were lodged under a strong guard in the barracks for the night, awaiting the train to take them to Castlebar jail the next morning. The battle was resumed the next day when they were being removed to the Railway Station and again continued for hours.

Men Arrested

AS a result of the disturbances, Joe Ring, Joe Walsh, Charles Gavin, Wm. Malone, Tom Ketterick and Ed. Gannon of Westport town, were arrested and got 12 months in Belfast Jail. Ned Moane's sister, Tess, also got jail for singing what the police called rebel songs, at a concert at Carrakennedy.

Resident Magistrate Shot

IN Westport around this time there lived a notorious resident magistrate named Milling, who boasted that he would send every Sinn Feiner to prison. Whenever a man or woman came before him for drilling or singing an Irish song he dealt out pretty stiff sentences. He used insulting language against Sinn Fein and the Irish in gen-

eral on every occasion so the patience of "the boys" became exhausted and one night three Volunteers arrived at his house—he lived on the Newport Road—and on being admitted shot Milling dead at his fireplace.

The affair caused a sensation all over the county. The town of Westport was placed under martial law and surrounded by military and police. All the vacant buildings were occupied by soldiers. Nobody was allowed to enter to leave the town without a permit from the officer commanding the garrison. For a long time Westport, one of the best business towns in Mayo, was in this position and people from surrounding districts transferred their custom to Castlebar. Westport merchants lost an immense amount of trade during this period and were never compensated for it.

Visit of American Delegates

IT was at this time that three American delegates from a Self-Determination of Ireland League, named Dunne, Walsh and another arrived in Westport to see conditions in the country. They were met at Knappagh, on the Leenane Road, by Volunteers from Aughagower and Cushlough. General Richard Mulcahy was with the delegates, and the Volunteers who marched in two companies to the first military barricade at Knappagh school. The delegates, in the name of the United States, demanded admittance to Westport and were refused.

The military ordered the parade to retire, and before they could do so advanced with fixed bayonets. They attacked John Lavelle, of Cordahagh, who was carrying an American flag and ripped the flag from his shoulder. Lavelle received scratches and tears. There was a struggle and the flag was recovered and handed to Governor Dunne, Penn. It is sure that Governor Dunne reported to the United States government and questions were asked in Parliament about the insult to the American flag.

Other Companies Formed

AS well as in Aughagower and Westport, companies of Volunteers were formed in the following areas: Cushlough Company—John Hastings, O.C., M. Tunney, Deputy O.C.; P. O'Malley, Adj.; and John Hasting, Quarter Master.

Drummin Company—Bod. McLoughlin, O.C.; Pat Cox, Deputy O.C. Owenwee Company—Tom McLoughlin, O.C., Peter Joyce, Deputy O.C. Belclare Company—M. J. O'Malley, O.C.; Pat Duffy, Deputy O.C. Killawalla Company—Martin Warde, O.C.; J. Lally, Deputy O.C. Kilmeena Company—Jeff Gibbons, O.C.

In 1921 the officers of the Westport Battn. I.R.A. were:—
O.C.—James Malone; Deputy O.C.—Wm. Malone; Adj.—T. Blaney; Q.M.—Ned Sammon; Police—J. McGoff; Transport—T. J. Gibbons; Intelligence—B. Cryan and J. Duffy; Communications—T. Ainsworth, and Training—John Berry.

Shrahen and Glenmask became part of South Mayo Brigade under Tom Maguire and formed a company of their own under John King, O.C., and M. Butler as deputy O.C.

In the next instalment will be told the first actions against British Forces.



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