

The Kilmeena Ambush

By Michael MacEvilly

By May 1921, the West Mayo Brigade I.R.A. had not been successful in carrying out a large-scale attack on the British forces in the area. The British had learned well from the South and had changed tactics accordingly, moving only in heavily armed columns at speed. Castlebar was the army H.Q. in the area under Col. Packenham, O.C., of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, while all the major towns had strongly fortified barracks, containing R.I.C. and Black and Tans.

The Brigade O.C., Michael Kilroy, a native of Newport, had decided some time previously to abandon the system of Active Service Units based on each of the towns, Castlebar, Westport and Newport, in favour of one single brigade column. Various ambushes had been laid which did not meet with much success—usually because the enemy did not turn up.

Derrykillew and Altamount Street, Westport, in March and April 1921, resulted in enemy casualties. However, Islandeady, on 6 May 1921, was a disaster, as a British patrol turned back without reaching the ambush point, killing two Volunteers, Tom Lally and Tom O'Malley, as they were cutting the road. This did not deter Kilroy and his brigade staff, Ned Moane (Vice O.C.), Johnny Gibbons (Adjutant) and Tom Ketterick (Quartermaster), who continued to press on. On the night of 16 May the West Mayo Brigade column moved in force into Westport and took over the town but the enemy remained in their fortified barracks.

On 18 May 1921, in an effort to get a movement of enemy forces between Westport and Newport, Michael Kilroy detailed two units to attack these towns. The first unit contained some of the most experienced men and was under the command of Brodie Malone, along with Johnny Duffy, Tommy Heavey and four others. They were all armed with Lee Enfield rifles. They moved into Westport and commenced firing at any of the enemy they saw.

The second unit, under Josie Doherty, the Newport Batt. O.C., along with Jim Moran, Michael Gallagher and Jim Browne, went into Newport. All, with the exception of Browne, who had a shotgun, were armed with rifles. About 8 p.m. Sergeant Butler came out of the R.I.C. station and was killed by a single bullet from Jim Moran. This was unfortunate as it transpired later he was an I.R.A. agent.

KILMEENA

The following morning (19th May), at 3.00 a.m., the main column, consisting of units from Castlebar, Newport, Westport and Louisburgh Battalions, forty-one men in all, took up position at Clooneen Cross, Kilmenna, close to Knocknabola bridge, on the main Westport/Newport road.

At first the men were positioned on a site commanding the road bridge which ran over the railway. It was a good position for shotguns to hold as any lorries which approached would have to slow down. But when it had been occupied it was decided against, as it was exposed

on the flank. The main ambush position was then selected to the south below Clooneen crossroads. A rough blockade was placed a little distance down the Derryharow road, which the men had come that morning, to prevent lorries from suddenly turning to the flank of the position.

Across the road, at another bank, Dr. Madden and a comrade acted as flankers, while beyond the brow of the hill, to the north of the position towards Newport, an outpost was placed to watch the Newport road and to control, by their fire, any approach along it. It was decided to place an observer on a hill 100 yards away towards Westport. He was to signal the approach of the British.

THE WAIT

The column now settled down to wait. They were armed with twenty-two rifles, sixteen shotguns and three revolvers.

About 10 a.m. a car was signalled approaching from the Newport direction, but the Newport men recognised it as belonging to Canon McDonald, P.P., Newport, who was attending a round-up station in Kilmenna.

A short time later two cars were signalled coming from Newport. They were filled with people in black and slowly came into the ambush position. Fire was almost opened when it was recognised that the cars contained nuns from Newport and Mulranny. They were on their way to a nun's funeral in Westport. The men relaxed and settled down to wait again.

By noon, Michael Kilroy was

thinking of moving the column away. There were a number of dangers in staying in an ambush position for an extended length of time. The men's concentration might drop and also information might be passed to the British. There was also the problem of food. Kilroy decided to arrange a meal for the men, after which the column would withdraw east towards the Half Parish. Shortly before 3 p.m. Jim Kelly and some others were supervising the cooking of eight fowl in the kitchen of Cummins' house. Suddenly two shots rang out from the scout on the Westport side, signalling the approach of the British convoy.

The convoy of one Ford car and two Crossley tenders (lorries) consisted of twenty heavily armed R.I.C. and Black and Tans, and was under the command of District Inspector Donnellon. (It is important to be aware of the fact that British official statements always referred to the Black and Tans as "police").

WOUNDED

Fire was opened on the leading armoured lorry, which was heading towards Newport, and Head Constable Potter, R.I.C., Westport, was seriously wounded on the chin and neck. It quickly sped through the ambush which, inexplicably, did not contain a road block. It met further gunfire from the northern outpost and disappeared from view about 250 yards away.

Meanwhile, one armoured lorry and a motor car had halted near the parish priest's house when they heard the firing. Inside the

house there were a number of priests about to have lunch and the lorry and car halted behind Canon McDonald's car. The British jumped from the lorry and first grouped on the road in the standard musketry position. Fire was opened by the I.R.A. on the kneeling R.I.C. who hurriedly took cover across the road. They mounted a Lewis gun and opened fire on the column.

Meanwhile, the occupants of the first lorry, which had broken through the ambush position, pulled up just behind the bridge and came back on foot. They did not meet any opposition as the men from the northern outpost had withdrawn, but the column men near the road were aware of this.

Unobserved, the British took up positions and mounted a Lewis gun on the bridge which opened up on the now exposed column positions. This machine gun provided covering fire which helped the R.I.C. advance up a laneway at the back of tailor Flynn's house and allowed them to fire on the bank held by the column. Against this crossfire the shotguns were useless. The shotgun men withdrew while the rifle men covered their retreat. A Black and Tan, Constable Beckett, was shot through the eye at the back of the tailor's house and another R.I.C. man was wounded nearby.

The fight continued for about two hours. Kilroy now gave the order for the column to retreat to the second bank and this the men had to do across the top of Clooneen Hill. There were gaps in this bank, sometimes fifty yards in length, which were exposed to the fire from the enemy

positions near the tailor's house and the parish priest's house.

CASUALTIES

Seán Collins, a Belfast man working as a tailor in Westport, was killed in the first few minutes of the engagement. When Séamus MacEvilly (Castlebar) was wounded in the stomach at the second bank, John Chambers (a brother of the Castlebar Batt. O.C., James Chambers), attempted to help him but there was nothing he could do. MacEvilly probably bled to death there.

Fathers Killeen (C.C., Mulranny) and Walsh (C.C., Kilmenna) had left the priests' house, where earlier D.I. Donnellan had burst in and accused the priests of firing on his men. While the fight was still raging they went onto the hill and found two volunteers dying. These were Thomas O'Donnell, a young carpenter from Rossinrubble, Newport, and Patrick Staunton of Kilmenna. The priests were in time to anoint them and they died before their eyes.

Fr. Killeen now came upon Séamus MacEvilly and anointed him, although he believed he was dead. They then went to the top of the hill. They came across Paddy Jordan from Islandeady, vice-commandant of the Castlebar Battalion, who was badly injured. He had a deep track of a bullet across his head and by this time there was a lot of blood.

Paddy Mulloy (Newport) and John Cannon (Westport) were wounded on the way back. At the third bank, Kilroy found Paddy O'Malley of Ros-

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sinrubble whose shin had been shattered by a bullet. He was able to advise Kilroy on what part of the next bank the enemy were sighted, as he had observed the result of the fire on men who had crossed in front of him before he had been wounded.

Nearby was Tom Nolan (Castlebar), who had been wounded in the leg, and with him was the Westport man named Pearse, who had insisted on staying behind with Nolan.

Kilroy, using O'Malley's rifle with its damaged foresight, remained as long as he could firing at any movement. Then with the rest of the column, including the following wounded—James Swift (Castlebar), John Chambers (Castlebar) and Michael Hughes (Castlebar)—the column withdrew under harassment to Aughagowla, where the wounded were tended to by Dr. Madden and Nurse Joyce of Clogher.

In a follow-up engagement in Skirdagh, Jim Browne, of the Newport unit, was killed.

In all, the British recovered four I.R.A. dead at Kilmenna: Collins, O'Donnell, Staunton and MacEvilly. Comdt. Paddy Jordan and Captain Paddy O'Malley were dragged by the legs across fields and over banks, and thrown in on top of the dead and wounded already lying in a lorry.

O'Malley's leg was amputated some years after the ambush. Paddy Molloy, J. Cannon and Thomas Nolan, all seriously wounded, were captured along with the man Pearse.

AFTERMATH

The British convoy then returned to Westport. The dead and wounded were thrown down on the street outside the R.I.C. barracks and left there for a considerable time. Even sections friendly to the British in the town were shocked. The Marquis of Sligo went into the barracks to protest against the disregard for the wounded prisoners. Eventually the bodies were dragged inside and the wounds tended to.

On Thursday evening, the wounded Patrick Jordan was removed from the Westport police barracks to the Mayo Infirmary in Castlebar, and from there to King George (V) Hospital (now St. Bricin's) in Dublin, where he died on 2nd June 1921.

On Friday morning, at about 6 a.m., the prisoners were taken by train from Westport to Castlebar. The authorities, having difficulty in getting one of the bodies identified, made elaborate enquiries in Castlebar and on Friday evening had the four bodies removed to Castlebar jail, where they were thrown on a dung heap

for the relatives to identify.

On Saturday a military enquiry, in lieu of an inquest, was held in Castlebar. Identity was established for three of the dead but it was not until Sunday that the body of Thomas O'Donnell, which was stated in official reports to be "Smith" or "Chambers," was identified.

On Saturday also the remains of Constable Beckett were removed from Westport police barracks to the railway station, en route to England. An official report stated that he was an Australian who had only six weeks service in the R.I.C.

On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Crown forces searched many houses in Castlebar and Westport but no arrests were made.

FUNERALS

The British O.C., Col. Packenham, now issued an order that only 12 persons would be allowed to attend each funeral on Sunday and that no banners or colours were to be displayed. Vol. Pat Staunton's body was handed on Saturday to his family and it was taken to Kilmenna, where he was buried on Sunday.

When the remains of Séamus MacEvilly emerged from the Castlebar jail on Saturday evening, the people refused to have the coffin placed on the waiting hearse and insisted on carrying it on their shoulders to the Church of the Holy Rosary in Castlebar.

On Sunday morning the funerals of Volunteers Séamus Collins and Thomas O'Donnell, to the Republican plot in Castlebar cemetery, went off without incident, even though the numbers were restricted. The military had refused to hand over Collins's body to his comrades for interment in Westport. (He was an orphan).

The funeral of Staff-Captain Séamus MacEvilly was scheduled for 3 p.m. on Sunday, following Mass that morning. Shortly before this time the British attempted to move the people off the streets. Despite this, a large crowd had assembled at the church. At 3 p.m. a body of military, with fixed bayonets, were drawn up outside.

The coffin, draped in the tricolour, was carried from the church by some of his I.R.A. comrades, including Captain Paddy Horkan, J. McCormack and Ned Philbin. A British officer ordered the flag to be removed and when this was refused, it was seized. A further difficulty arose with a wreath of "National" flowers in the shape of the cross and this was ordered to be seized as well. The British officer in charge now ordered the people to disperse, which they refused.

It was not until the military

brought their rifles into the "working position," and on the advice of Fr. Geoffrey Prendergast, an ex-British army chaplain, that the crowd moved into the precincts of the church. The cortege of 12 relatives then moved off.

The approaches to the cemetery were held by R.I.C., Black and Tans and British military with rifles at the ready. After prayers by his brother, Fr. Michael MacEvilly, he was laid to rest beside his comrades in the Republican plot.

He was the only Castlebar man killed in the War of Independence and Civil War. His father, Michael, was a member of the I.R.B., and at this time his two brothers were serving in other brigades—Tomás with the Sligo Brigade and Jerry with the Cork No. 4 Brigade in Fermoy.

AVENGED

On 3 June, 1921 this defeat was avenged at Carrowkennedy, on the Westport-Leenane road, when the brigade column ambushed a large convoy of R.I.C. and Black and Tans and forced it to surrender. In all, 12 British were killed, 13 captured and large amounts of arms and ammunition, including a Lewis machine gun, were captured. The I.R.A. had no casualties.

The British response was the largest roundup ever seen in the West, in an attempt to capture what they called "this murder gang." Armoured trains, with thousands of troops, were poured into West Mayo. Aeroplanes from Castlebar aerodrome joined in the search. In Clew Bay and Killary harbour, the British mounted a sea blockade, lighting up the mountains at night with their searchlights. All to no avail.

The fact that no member of the column was captured is in itself a telling tribute to the West Mayo I.R.A. and to those, especially the women (who have been written out of the War of Independence history), who gave them aid. (Michael MacEvilly is a son of Mrs. Nancy MacEvilly, Station Road, Castlebar, former Children's Officer/Social Worker, with the Western Health Board, and the late Mr. Gerry MacEvilly. He is a nephew of Staff-Captain Séamus MacEvilly, who was killed in the Kilmeena ambush. Michael, who has his own accountancy firm in Dublin, is married to the former Ursula Egan, a lecturer in Kevin Street School of Technology, Dublin, daughter of the late Mr. Joe Egan, Mayo Co. Engineer, Westport Road, Castlebar, and Mrs. Egan, who resides in Ennis, Co. Clare).



"The men of the West," - Kilroy's Column - taken on the southern slopes of Mount Nephin on June 21st, 1921, at 11.45 p.m., with no light but the light of Heaven, is supposed to be the best picture in Ireland taken in active service. Back row: M. Kilroy, T. Ketterick, E. Moane, J. Gibbons, J. Walsh, P. J. Cannon, P. Lambert, J. Kelly, J. Doherty, B. Malone, J. Rush, J. King. Middle: M. Naughton, J. Hogan, J. Hearney, D. Simmon, J. Keane, J. Connelly, R. Joyce, P. McNamara, W. Malone. Front: Dan Gavin, T. Heavey, J. Duffy, J. McDonagh, P. Kelly, J. Moran, J. Flaherty, B. Cryan, M. Staunton. At front: Dr. J. A. Madorn. Inset (top) P. Duffy, J. Baker. Bottom: M. Gallagher, T. Ainsworth. Copyright: J. J. Leonard and Son, Rofeenaun, Ballina, Co. Mayo.



Kieran Kilkenny, Hilary Downes, Clodagh McAllister, John Kilkenny, of the Redmond School of Dancing, Castlebar, pictured back in the 70s.