

A Short History of the IRA in Islandeady, 1919-1921.

Captain Patrick E Maye

The company was first formed in 1919 and was known as C Company, 1st Battalion, West Mayo Brigade. Battalion Headquarters were in Castlebar and Brigade Headquarters in Westport. Their numbers were small and the chief organisers were Michael Stanton, of Clogherneagh, Paddy Jordan and Frank O'Boyle of Letter, Peter Touhy of Likeen and Paddy Cannon of Cornagashlaun. This was organised in conjunction with the local Sinn Fein Club and Cumann na mBan. Ml. Stanton being the President and Paddy Cannon the Secretary of the Sinn Fein Club.

The first sign of IRA activity was the burning of the RIC barracks at Deergrove which had been vacated only a short time before. This met with the disapproval of a number of people who regarded it as too extreme.

In 1920 Ml. Stanton was transferred to Battalion Staff, and Paddy Jordan became Company Captain. A new drive to organise the youth of the parish was made, and by October a company of about eighty was formed, ages being from sixteen to twenty-one; very few over twenty-one wanted to join. The majority were from the lower part of the parish. Company parades were held each Sunday after last Mass and usually took place in Woodville. Ml. Ludden of Kilbree was drill instructor; he had spent some time in the British Army. There were section parades in the various section areas on evenings during the week, the Sections being in Cloonkeen, Dooleague, Cogala, Derrycourane, Letter and Derrycoush. Ceilithe, dances and concerts were held in the Sinn Fein Courts, a granary owned by Petie Hynes, Dooleague. At this time raids by R.I.C. and British soldiers, and a detachment of the Scottish Borderers who were stationed in Castlebar, took place all over the parish. Paddy Jordan became a wanted man, but this only made him all the more popular with the Company. Some of the old men of the parish who had been in the Fenian movement were delighted with this new effort to gain our independence, but the majority of the people, although willing to vote for Sinn Fein as a political party, were not prepared to support the IRA, who openly opposed British rule by force of arms.

Those who lacked a national spirit, or who were friendly towards England, were now offering advice to all those connected with the IRA, to sever their connection with the organisation. All sorts of arguments were used, chiefly that it was wrong to oppose England's armed rule by force of arms, and that it was murder to shoot police or soldiers, that the Irish were not able to govern themselves, that the IRA was full of spies and informers, and that the young men should help their parents and not be away on dangerous work, but the drilling and training still went on.

Active Service Units or Flying Columns, as they were popularly called, were now being formed; a number of volunteers from the Company offered their services, but arms were very scarce and they could not be taken.

About this time the British started their round up tactics, which meant that a large area was surrounded by their forces including their newly formed Black and Tans. These forces converged towards a central point, systematically searching houses, woods, etc. and collecting all the male population except those whom the RIC. knew to be loyal. In this way they hoped to capture any IRA men whom they considered dangerous. In one such round-up whose collecting-point was the Halfway House, Petie Tuohy was captured. Some men were picked out and well beaten if the Tans thought they

were connected with the IRA It was the cause of some people becoming strong IRA supporters who otherwise would not.

The British had now issued the challenge. The Company as part of the IRA took it up. The British had trained soldiers, and unlimited quantities of arms and ammunition. Their bloodhounds were the RIC Their Black and Tans were composed of ex-convicts, and their dare-devil fighters, the Auxiliaries, were composed of ex-British Army Officers. The IRA, the cream of Ireland's youth, met them and beat them. The seeds of Irish patriotism sown in Dublin in 1916 had now grown to a rich and glorious harvest.

English terrorism was let loose all over the country. IRA men were shot on sight, houses were burned, women were dishonoured, people working in the fields were fired on and even children at play. The people of the parish, like the people in general throughout the country, were stunned with this new display of British rule. Their sympathy was now definitely with the IRA but they thought their fight was hopeless.

Captain Paddy Jordan had a muster parade of the Company at Islandeady Chapel at night; scouts were sent out to give warning of any enemy. In a short soldierly address, he told them what lay before them. Their duty was to Ireland. Their lack of arms must be made up at every opportunity to disarm British forces, and their choice was either to remain true soldiers of the IRA or to sever their connection with it. This was the best parade ever held by the Company; not a man left the ranks; every volunteer now knew he would get a chance to prove his worth. The Company had only a few rifles, revolvers, and shotguns and very little ammunition. Early in 1921, the Company was kept busy, blocking roads, cutting telegraph wires and transferring arms and ammunition. Paddy Jordan was promoted to the rank of Commandant, and shortly afterwards he and a few volunteers held up two British officers outside Castlebar on the Newport Road and disarmed them.

On 5 May 1921, an ambush was laid at the High Wall to catch a lorry-load of police and Tans who used to travel from Castlebar to Westport early in the morning. The Company got orders to block the roads leading from Castlebar to Newport and Westport. The place chosen to block the Westport road was at Cloonkeen after the lorry had passed. A trench was cut on the road at the High Wall to hold up the lorry. The lorry passed by Cloonkeen about a quarter past six and the party of volunteers started to demolish the little bridge. When the lorry reached Ml. Stanton's house, it was halted, and the house raided. After the raid it was then turned back towards Castlebar. Just at that time a train was passing and the scouts who were posted on the Westport side did not hear the lorry coming. Volunteer Tommy Heston of Fairhill was the first to give the alarm. The party had no arms, so they tried to make their escape towards Bilberry Island. The lorry arrived at the bridge when the party were only a short distance away. The RIC and Tans opened fire and Volunteer Tommy Lally was hit. His cousin Volunteer Tommy O'Malley tried to help him get away, but both were hit when crossing a fence. They fell mortally wounded. Lt. Frank O'Boyle and Volunteer Jim McNulty were captured in a small clump of bushes near the bridge.

The lorry went on to Castlebar with the dead volunteers and the two prisoners. In a short time, a large force of police, Tans and soldiers arrived at Islandeady Chapel where Mass was being celebrated, it being a first Friday. The congregation was questioned and searched. Paddy Cannon's father was taken up on a lorry as a hostage. At eight o'clock I was sent by Comdt. Paddy Jordan from the High Wall to Cloonkeen on a bicycle to find out if the party was still there, as no word of what had happened was sent.

When I reached Cloggernagh National School Mr Pat Hughes shouted to me to stop; he sent Joe Fahy down to tell me that Cloonkeen was full of British soldiers. I immediately turned back for the High Wall, but when coming near the Chapel Road, two carloads of the enemy came up that way and turned towards me. They pulled up and ordered me to halt; I was made take off my coat, shoes and stockings. I got a thorough searching but lucky enough I had nothing to give me away. A Tan then placed me with my back against the wall, he fired two shots with his revolver close to my head and told me to run. I did not run, as that was their usual excuse for shooting prisoners trying to escape. He then took a rifle with a bayonet fixed and said he would make me run. Another Tan stood up in a car and asked me where I lived. When I told him about half a mile away, he said, ' You Irish? You will live no longer.' He raised his rifle, pointed it at me, and as he was about to fire, an RIC man who had been stationed in Ayle police barracks, knocked up the barrel just as he fired. I could feel the bullet near my left ear. The RIC man said that I was an only son and that he would not see me shot. A British soldier hit me on the side of the head with the butt of his rifle and knocked me half stunned to the ground.

When I recovered, they were gone. I then went as fast as I could for the High Wall, but when I came near Petie's I heard lorries coming behind, so I got across the railway intending to get across the fields to the High Wall. When I got near the top of the hill I was fired on, but their timing was bad as the lorries were travelling. The lorries halted opposite Lally's as I ran for cover behind a wall. They fired again; I could see the bullets strike the wall in front of me.

I threw myself flat and crawled to a sheep hole in the wall and got through. I then went as fast as I could towards the High Wall, keeping under cover of the fences. Some of the soldiers got out of the lorries, came up to where I threw myself down and after looking around, went back. Kate Lally, a sister of Tommy Lally's, who saw the whole incident, ran to tell my mother that I was shot back on Petie 's hill. She had not known at this time that Tommy was killed. When I came near the High Wall, I saw the place full of British soldiers; the ambush party had only left about fifteen minutes.

Next day, Saturday, the bodies of Volunteers Tommy O'Malley and Tommy Lally were taken to Islandeady Chapel. The British Officer in Command gave orders to Father Paul McLaughlin to have the funeral at one o'clock on the next day, Sunday, and that nobody was to be present except the families of the dead volunteers. The funeral took place at 12 o'clock, an hour earlier than the prescribed time. It was the biggest ever seen in Islandeady. The coffins were covered with tricoloured flags and wreaths. The Company paraded and formed a guard of honour. The two coffins were placed side by side in one grave in the plot used by the Lally family, and then just as the graves were being filled in, about twenty lorries of British soldiers arrived.

The Officer in Command insulted Fr McLoughlin, people were searched, questioned and abused, but a number of IRA lads who were on the run got away in the general confusion. After this a large number of the Company wanted to join the active service unit, but unfortunately, they could not be taken as there were not sufficient arms. Paddy Cannon was taken as the RIC knew he was at Cloonkeen, for they found a topcoat of his there with letters addressed to him in the pockets. About a fortnight afterwards, Paddy Jordan was wounded at the Kilmeena ambush midway between Westport and Newport. He was taken to a Dublin hospital where he died shortly afterwards. His body was taken by train to Islandeady station. The British made no mistake this time as regards the funeral. They rounded up every male person in the parish to prevent any public demonstration. A brother of Paddy's, Tom, who had escaped the round-up was fired on by a British officer when he tried to join the funeral near the chapel. The next day, Sunday, the funeral was due to leave for Kilmeena burial ground after last Mass.

There was a large crowd gathered at Islandeady Chapel to honour the body of this brave young leader, but the British were there with their armoured cars and lorry-loads of jeering British Tommies, Black and Tans, and RIC. Only the immediate relatives were allowed to accompany Paddy on his last journey and even they were subjected to insults from British officers.

About a week later a second ambush was planned and laid at the High Wall, but after waiting vainly for about six hours, the ambush party withdrew. The flying column was to be found very often in the parish those times, where they were sure of a warm welcome. On one such occasion about twelve of them were resting in Drimneen. A few local volunteers were on guard, when about six o'clock a large force of the enemy was observed turning in the road leading to the village. The alarm was given, and the party got safely away under cover of a fog which had arisen that morning.

An ambush was planned to take place at Eastbridge on the main road between Castlebar and Newport, but before it could be put into effect, the Truce came. In the months following the Truce the Company started intensive training, preparing dug outs, one at Letter, and another at Kilbride. Arms and ammunition were procured, and the Company was ready to have another round with England.

Petie Touhy, Frank O'Boyle, and Jim McNulty were released in November. They got a rousing reception at Islandeady Station and an all-night dance was held in Petie Hynes's granary that night. Shortly afterwards the barracks in Castlebar was taken over from the British and some of the Company formed the new garrison.

Written by Captain Patrick E Maye of Knockdrien Castle, Co. Westmeath, in 1941-2. His daughter Maureen M Alsip, who lives in the United States, has submitted the article.

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