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Col. Ryan in the dress uniform of an officer of the Blue Hussars in 1937.

BY KIND PERMISSION OF RYAN FAMILY.



One Man's Flying Column

By Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Ryan

Part 2*

The appointment of Sean Hogan to the command of the Battalion took place in or around the time of Seán Treacy's death — a little before that date I think, because I remember Treacy visiting us around that time and in the course of conversation he had indicated that a Column would be started in our Battalion area in the immediate future. Outside of that, nothing happened in our area until after Bloody Sunday, 20th November, 1920.

Dealing with the start of the Column in our Battalion area, as I have already stated, Treacy had spoken about this on his last visit to us shortly before his death. There was then a Column in existence in East Limerick, which I believe was the first of the Flying Columns, and that Column consisted of a number of East Limerick men and also some men from South Tipperary.

There was, therefore, some time in which we were able to think about the formation of the Column and consider the necessities in connection with the details of its organisation, the selection of suitable men, the arms available, the preliminary training of these men, and things like billeting arrangements and so on.

I placed myself at Hogan's disposal in rendering any assistance he might need but he, not being otherwise employed, was able to give his full time to visiting the Companies and preparing them for the launching of the Column. No.1 Column, that is, Dinny Lacey's Column had, I think, formed a little while before Bloody Sunday, but our Column was not formed until some time after that.

Actually, it was soon after that — probably by the end of the month — that Hogan set up his headquarters at Helen Prendergast's, Croughatour, outside Ballylooby, where he was joined by Jack Nagle, to whom I have already referred. He was not forced to, but he did go on the run with Hogan. Mossie McGrath from Burncourt — he was forced to go on the run and joined them there. Also Jack Butler of Hillgrove — he was not forced to go on the run either, but he joined them.

This was the nucleus of the Column which was added to shortly afterwards. Following Bloody Sunday I was being sought for at home by the police, and I threw in my lot with the Column, being the seventh member to join. A couple of others had joined the first four just ahead of me. The sixth man was Dinny (Sniper) Lonergan from Burncourt.

When I joined the Column, I had three rifles, four revolvers and a couple of hundred rounds of assorted ammunition which I took with me and handed over to the Column Commander. These arms had been in my custody for some time and were hidden in my home. They served to equip the two or three unarmed members of the Column, so that the seven of us were fully armed. I retained a Webley revolver for my own use and I swapped a Winchester Repeater for a Lee Enfield.

There were only 20 rounds of ammunition available for the Winchester. I saw little hope of replenishing this supply and I thought there was a better chance of getting fresh supplies of ammunition for the Lee Enfield. Hogan afterwards exchanged this Winchester for a revolver or a pistol, and I believe it found its way into Ernie O'Malley's hands eventually when the Division was formed.

* Part 1 appeared in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1991. Part 3 will appear in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1993. For editorial introduction, see *THJ* 1991, p.19 — Editor, *THJ*.



Our first activity when I joined the Column was a course of training which Seán Hogan undertook, to teach us something of scouting and protective duties. There was a certain amount of care and cleaning of arms, though we did not do any live practice as we had not the ammunition to spare for this.

Hogan seemed to have been acting on instructions from Brigade Headquarters and he worked from textbooks in conducting the course. At any rate, he seemed to have some knowledge of these matters and we had little or none at the time.

Nothing happened then until Dan Breen came into the area and got in touch with our Column. I am not sure when this was but, as Breen was badly wounded in the Fernside raid which was on the 12th October, 1920, it could not have been sooner than some time about December, 1920.

We knew, or rather we felt, that Breen's arrival meant that something was about to happen, that we were about to take some action, Breen's attitude being, "It's time something happened around here!" We felt that his presence in the area meant that there was going to be action and we were all delighted at the prospect and to have Breen with us.

On the evening of his first visit Breen came to the house of a family named Fitzgerald, about half a mile from my home. Hogan appointed me as chief scout, as I knew the area well. We set off on our first march from Prendergast's to Fitzgerald's. Breen had joined us at Prendergast's and marched with us to Fitzgerald's, but this was our first march openly as an armed body. We were welcomed at Fitzgerald's, who got supper ready for us.

Breen told me to post a scout outside the house for, at this point, we were midway between the garrisons of Cahir and Clogheen on a by-road. I posted Mossie McGrath, the Battalion Adjutant, to act as a scout in a field at the back of the house where he commanded the cross-roads leading to Fitzgerald's from the main road and where he would have a view of any military moving along the main road, which was about 300 or 400 yards away.

We had scarcely sat down to supper when McGrath rushed in to warn us that the military were coming across the fields in our direction. Breen jumped to his feet, quenched all the lights in the house and called on me to lead him, as I would know the country better than any of the rest. I led the Column then through a gorse-field at the back of the house, in the opposite direction to which we had learned that the troops were coming, over to a by-road and then down a boreen across the Tonogue river.

Having reached this point, I felt that I had them quite safe. I was more concerned about Breen than anyone else at this time, knowing that his capture would be looked upon as a major achievement by the enemy, but we felt safe at this point where we were about three-quarters of a mile from Fitzgerald's house. After crossing the river, we halted for the first time and Breen inquired where McGrath was. It was only then we discovered that he was not with us. Breen instructed me to go back and search for McGrath.

I moved cautiously back the way we had come, with my rifle loaded at the ready, halting to listen every 50 yards or so, but saw or heard nothing until I had reached the crossroads leading to the main road where the military were said to have been. Just as I approached the crossroads I halted as I saw what appeared to be a head or a cap bobbing up from a stone wall across the road.

It was the first time I had ever issued a challenge and I shouted to the figure to halt. There was no response and I repeated my challenge. The third time the head bobbed up and I opened fire at it in the dark. That was my first shot fired on active service. I fired twice again rapidly, but there was still no response from the other side. I took to my heels then and rejoined the rest of our party as quickly as possible, telling them what had happened and that I had failed to locate McGrath.

Our immediate problem then was to find somewhere to stay for the night, and it was up to me to find somewhere in the locality. We were close to a house at this time which belonged to people



who had very little national sympathies. They were uppish kind of people, particularly the woman of the house, who rather resented the appearance of Volunteers or any national elements in the locality. We had very little choice and, reflecting on the matter, I decided that these people with their lack of national feeling would be well known to the enemy and that, therefore, it would be the safest place to stay.

With every expectation of active opposition, particularly from the woman of the house, which I decided we would disregard and commandeer the accommodation for the night, I knocked at the hall door, and finding the family in bed, we informed them that we wanted beds for our men for the night. The family had to leave their beds to make room for us. To my surprise, they received us very hospitably. We spent a comfortable night there.

On the following night we proceeded to Ballybacon, from where we sent an inquiry regarding the fate of Mossie McGrath. Within 24 hours we had a message back, to the effect that McGrath was safe but was badly torn after his experience the previous night. It transpired that the man I had fired at was Mossie McGrath. When this incident occurred, I had been quite sure that it was one of the enemy party I had fired at, as I did not think McGrath would be on the road where the military were supposed to have been. Though I knew he might be somewhere around, I thought he would be carefully under cover.

So when I challenged and got no answer, I had no idea that it was McGrath I was firing at in the pitch dark. When I fired the first shot at him, he in turn thought that it was the military were firing at him, and he took to his heels. He fell into a quarry, where he was torn and so injured that it was a fortnight before he was able to rejoin the Column.

From Ballybacon we proceeded to the Grange Company, which was in the 5th Battalion area, and received a cordial welcome from Jack Lonergan, the Company Commander there. Lonergan subsequently became the Battalion Commander of that Battalion area.

Having refreshed ourselves at Grange, we went on to Brett's of Knocklofty, where we met Sean Cooney of Clonmel and a lad named Patterson, who became a member of the Column afterwards. Dan Breen and Sean Hogan had an appointment there with Cooney for the purpose of selecting a few reliable recruits from the Clonmel area.

The Sean Cooney I refer to here was known as "Wiggy". This name came from the fact that he was rather bald and usually wore a wig. This was not the same Sean Cooney who afterwards became an officer in the National Army, and who was also from Clonmel.

Our mission at this time was the selection of suitable men from each of the Company and Battalion areas. As arms were scarce, however, and a very large Column would be unwieldy, many enthusiastic Volunteers for admission to the ranks of the Column had to be appointed and these had to be content with Company work in their own localities.

Luck favoured us on our move from Brett's as we had just passed a signpost outside Clonmel where we turned off the Knocklofty road, when a Company of marching troops — about 100 strong — passed along the road and turned for Knocklofty. They were out on patrol, on the look-out for parties felling trees and blocking the roads.

If they had come a little sooner or we had been delayed a little in reaching the crossroads, we would have clashed with them. The military in Clonmel were on the alert, as Dinny Lacey's Column had been operating around there for some months up to that time.

Having completed arrangements for Column recruits from the 5th Battalion area, we returned to Grange and to Ballybacon, and later visited other Company areas, all the time during these moves doing our military training and being subjected to a rule of discipline. This generated a feeling of security amongst us, even though we were moving through country infested with enemy garrisons and knew that their patrols continually moved around the countryside.



About a fortnight later we returned to Brett's of Knocklofty, where we were joined by 13 men from Clonmel. We were hospitably received by the Brett family, and the additional members to the Column gave us a pride and confidence in our ability now to undertake offensive action. Hitherto we had been concerned only with defensive tactics and the eluding of enemy patrols. Now, however, we felt strong enough to take some action on our own accord.

All this time we had been marching along the roads openly and fully armed, and our presence in the various localities was well known. This fact of our open appearance was heartening to the local Volunteers who either saw us moving along or heard we were in the locality.

While we were at Brett's, we had a great sense of possession for we had ample accommodation there, but in the place we stopped at when we left Brett's there was a vacant thatched house adjoining the residence which we used, and there were only four bedrooms which we all used in turn. This was owing to the fact that we had not notified our arrival in the locality and no arrangements for accommodation were made by the local Battalion Commander, Condon, who did his best for us under the circumstances.

On the second night the Column moved on to Glenpatrick, which became the Column headquarters for the next few weeks. At Glenpatrick we went into occupation of a large vacant house, known as Glenpatrick House. Here the proper organisation of the Column was undertaken. Officers such as Adjutant and Section Commanders were appointed, and each member of the column received a number.

The total strength of the Column at this time was about 20 men. The rationing of the Column was the responsibility of the local Volunteer Company Commander. It fell to my lot to undertake the duties of butcher and cook. Every morning I went out on the mountain and shot a couple of Lord Waterford's mountain sheep, which we brought down and skinned, dressed and cooked. This fresh meat with little else was our food for a fortnight.

We were sleeping in hay at the time and, between the total meat diet and the conditions we had to live under, at the end of that fortnight practically all of us had become verminous. We had no method of dealing with this and we became so bad that all we could do was take off our underclothes every time we could get the chance and brush the lice off them. We believed at the time that the absence of variety in our diet was largely, if not wholly, responsible for our verminous condition.

I remember that Dan Breen for one claimed that if we could get an adequate supply of home-made wheaten-meal bread, it would help this condition. As there were 20 of us to be fed and there were only about a dozen houses near us on whom we could draw for bread supplies, we decided to go a bit further afield in our search for bread.

When we went to one house which was quite a bit away from us on the hills, the woman of the house refused to give us bread and generally indicated her dislike for us. This was the first occasion that we decided to commandeer whatever supplies we could lay hands on.

There was, however, one man of the Column in our party who spoke Irish, and we made some comment or other in Irish when the woman had said something about refusing to give us supplies. The woman apparently was also an Irish speaker and, when she heard the Irish comment, she changed colour and seemingly altered her views. She said she had the kettle down and she brought out the teapot and proceeded to get tea for us. Before this she had said that she had put strychnine in the teapot, as if intending to poison us, but she realised who we were and explanations followed.

She said she knew there were Volunteers at Glenpatrick and she thought we were some of the enemy forces trying to capture them. Her original hostility was therefore based on this misunderstanding but, now that she knew who we were, having fed us, she gave us two cakes of bread



to take away with us, proceeded to bake four more and, for the remainder of the time we spent in Glenpatrick, she sent us two or three cakes of bread daily.

In Glenpatrick we were made to realise that worldly comforts were not for soldiers of Ireland. Apart from the food scarcity and lack of variety, we had no beds and nothing but one blanket to cover us. Our daily training routine was rigorous, the Column Commander's aim being to subject us to a searching test of stamina and endurance, so that later, when these qualities would be needed for fighting, we would not be soft.

We were continually being called out of our sleep during the night to stand-to when an alarm was given. This meant that we had to be at our posts, ready for action, with full equipment in three minutes. We never knew from day to day whether these alarms might be genuine attacks by the enemy or part of the routine training. The use of lights or making of noise while moving from place to place was strictly forbidden, so that we were kept on the alert all the time.

A night march often followed one of these night alarms during which the eyes, ears and wits of the men of the Column were sharpened. After a fortnight of this, we felt like trained soldiers and eager to put our training to the test in a clash with the common foe.

I am not sure of the precise date of the setting up of the Glenpatrick Camp. It was soon after the Column was started and it remained established for about three or four weeks. Some of the Clonmel fellows who joined us returned home after about a fortnight, having found the life we led there too strenuous.

Some indication of the date of this Camp may be found from any record that may exist of the death of young O'Keeffe of Kilsheelan, who was killed by the Black and Tans a couple of nights before we broke up camp there. O'Keeffe was killed in the village of Kilsheelan, where there is a cross erected to his memory. He was a local Volunteer and was not a member of our Column.

On this occasion I believe he was engaged in blocking roads, or something like that, when a patrol came on him and shot him. We heard about this at the time, and I remember that it was immediately following this shooting that we broke camp at Glenpatrick.

When we left Glenpatrick, we returned again to the 5th Battalion area. I am referring here to the Cahir Battalion. This Battalion, which was originally the 6th, had now become the 5th. This was due to the fact that some time before that a despatch rider of ours had been captured with some despatches coming to or from the 6th Battalion.

It was decided, in order to confuse the enemy, to thereupon change the description of the 6th Battalion by making it the 5th Battalion, the 5th assuming the designation of the 6th. There was nothing involved in this except the swapping of the numbers between the 5th and 6th Battalions. I am not sure when this took place but I believe it was in or about the time when the Column started. The day following our departure from Glenpatrick, a party of military — over 100 strong — surrounded the place and made a detailed search of the surrounding woods.

At this point we were reinforced by George Plunkett, Sean O'Meara of the Brigade Staff, Sean Fitzpatrick and Con Moloney, who stayed three or four days with us. When we were leaving Glenpatrick, we marched in military formation across the Comeragh mountains and after, travelling about six miles, we were at a point overlooking Clonmel which commanded a wide view of the town and its surroundings. We rested there as we watched the movements of the military lorries coming and going on the Waterford-Clonmel road, the Cahir-Clonmel road and the Cahir-Ardfinnan road.

Perhaps it was because of our height above them at this point, but whatever the reason, we had a great sense of superiority and confidence and I, for one, felt very happy at this time, believing that our organising and training had now fitted us to take the initiative against the enemy. As far as I can remember, this was winter time, about the end of 1920.



From our halt on the Comeraghs we marched on to Grange in the 5th Battalion area, a distance of about 20 miles. We stayed in the Grange Company area that night and proceeded to Ballybacon on the following evening. At this stage Dan Breen returned to Dublin, leaving the Column in the complete command of Sean Hogan.

Following this we went from Company area to Company area within the 5th Battalion with a view to infusing courage and enthusiasm amongst them. The latter, realising that an active trained protective force was now amongst them, looked upon us as saviours and gave their full co-operation and assistance. We realised early on that the activities of the No.2 Column were going to be considerably hampered by the fact that our area, that is, the 5th (Cahir) Battalion area, was the centre of a military stronghold.

The enemy forces moving in the area invariably travelled in strong forces of ten, 20 and sometimes 40 lorries, which it would be impossible for our small force to attack. Also horse cavalry from the local Cahir Barracks, which was the headquarters of the South Irish Horse, continuously patrolled the area.

Abortive Donohill Ambush

About this time the Column Commander, Sean Hogan, received information from Brigade headquarters of a projected I.R.A. attack on a troop train travelling from Dublin to Cork, the place of attack having been fixed at Donohill, about eight miles from Tipperary town. Our Column proceeded to the rendezvous, being reinforced *en route* at Knockgraffon where there was an A.S.U. (Active Service Unit).

Ned Reilly and Paddy Ryan (the master) were two of those who joined us there. No.1 Column — Dinny Lacey's Column — was also concentrated with us at Donohill for this attack. On arrival there we were billeted in the vicinity and all necessary arrangements for the attack were made. We only awaited a signal for the arrival of the train at that point.

It was our first meeting in the field with Lacey's Column and that evening, in the various farmyards where we were billeted, we exchanged confidences and had quite a singsong, expecting that the coming attack on the train would bring victory and glory for the combined efforts of the two Columns. We had mines laid on the railway, and it was expected that the train would carry at least a couple of hundred troops. As our arrangements were reasonably perfect, we expected that the slaughter of the enemy would be very heavy.

Having waited at Donohill for two days, there was no sign of the arrival of the train that was expected. Dan Breen, who had returned to Dublin, joined us there and he, in consultation with the other leaders at this stage, decided to abandon the project as we were in the immediate vicinity of about 2,000 troops located in Tipperary town and the length of our stay at Donohill left us increasingly liable to be surrounded.

The Columns thereupon separated and returned to their own Battalion areas. We marched back over the Galtee Mountains to the 5th Battalion area, covering in all a distance of about 45 miles. Nothing exciting occurred on our journey until the point of our arrival in the Battalion area, when we were crossing the Mitchelstown-Cahir road and going into a wood at Rehill.

We heard a lorry coming along the road in the distance and had only time to scramble over the fence and into the wood when it appeared. To our dismay, we observed that, instead of one lorry, there were about 200 lorries filled with troops, while we lay there helpless just inside the road fence, not knowing whether they had observed us or not.

Apparently this body of troops moving by road represented a change in plan by the British authorities. These were the same troops that we had expected by train and that we had laid in ambush for at Donohill. They were being sent as reinforcements to Cork. As each lorry reached the



wood, the occupants opened fire indiscriminately into the wood, which must have sounded to the natives around that a heavy ambush was in progress.

Protected by the road fence and bank, we lay quiet and did not return the fire. The people around thought that the whole Column had been wiped out in this episode until we appeared before them again. It seemed afterwards that they actually did not know we were there but that it had been customary for them passing this particular wood to blaze off shots into it, in case I suppose that it might harbour some of the Column. Actually, if they had any inkling of our presence and if one lorry had pulled up, we would have been caught like rats in a trap there behind the fence.

Back in the 5th Battalion area Hogan had plans for attacking and destroying the remaining police barracks in this area, notably Ballyporeen, Ardfinnan and Kilmanaghan. Owing to the scarcity of our ammunition at this period, we were constantly on the alert for police patrols from those places, in the hope of replenishing or adding to our supply by their capture, but they scarcely ever left the precincts of their barracks.

We repeatedly sniped the barracks, however, to keep them in a state of jitters and in the hope of forcing them to evacuate. In this way we caused them to waste hundreds of rounds of ammunition, grenades and Verey lights.

We took up positions for ambushes almost daily where our Intelligence could inform us that a patrol or small body of the enemy were in the habit of passing a particular road or point, but almost invariably we were disappointed as the enemy seemed to be possessed by supernatural intuitive powers. In some cases where they had travelled the same road day in and day out for weeks they failed to appear on the day we waited for them.

During this time we destroyed all the main bridges in the 5th Battalion area so as to render the movement of enemy troops more difficult. We barely allowed sufficient room on the destroyed bridges for horse traffic. We were assisted in this work by the Volunteers in the local Company areas, who did most of the spade work.

Our object in destroying the bridges on the main roads was to compel the enemy to use the by-roads where we could more easily ambush them, but they frustrated our intention by sending armoured cars carrying trench-crossing planks ahead of their convoys, thus enabling their lorries to cross the broken bridges and trenches. However, we dug fresh trenches every day to impede their progress. The British then began to commandeered local labour to fill in these trenches, in the fear that we had mined them as had occurred in other areas.

Having dealt in this way with our own Battalion area, we proceeded to the 6th (Clonmel) Battalion area, where we carried out the same programme. From that we went to the 8th (Carrick) Battalion area, where we carried out a similar programme.

Our Intelligence reported that a convoy of four lorries passed weekly between Cahir and Clogheen. This information had been obtained by Brigade Headquarters which converged Nos. 1 and 2 Columns to attack this convey. We looked upon this as a great opportunity because, as I said before, otherwise the enemy only moved in large bodies of 10, 20 and more lorries. Dan Breen and Con Moloney came from Brigade Headquarters to assist us in this operation. The place for attack was fixed at Hyland's Cross — not to my mind a suitable place for an ambush — 1 1/2 miles from Clogheen on the Cahir road.

The Columns took up position on either side of the road, No.1 on the Knockmealdown side and No.2 on the Galtee side, it being estimated that the mountains afforded a safe retreat if anything went wrong. We remained in position there until the late afternoon. As the convoy had failed to show up by that time, it was considered desirable to evacuate the position. We were in a rather dangerous situation, located there between strong military garrisons at Cahir and Clogheen and, fearing that the enemy might have received intelligence of our presence there, we withdrew.



Dan Breen and Con Moloney, very disappointed at the failure of the convoy to appear, left Hyland's Cross to return to Brigade Headquarters. No.2 Column having got out of their positions and moved off, we had not gone more than 300 or 400 yards when we heard firing. We realised that the convoy had unexpectedly made a belated appearance and had been attacked by No.1 Column, which had been a bit slower in evacuating the ambush positions.

We got back as best we could into our original positions and the fight was short, sharp and successful from our point of view. One soldier was killed and two wounded, one of whom died later from his wounds. The remainder surrendered and disarmed. The lorries were then destroyed by burning and the prisoners released.

Realising that the shooting could easily have been heard in both Clogheen and Cahir and that we might expect immediate enemy reinforcements on the scene, the Column parted and each made its own line of retreat. No.1 retired towards Newcastle in the direction of the Knockmealdown mountains. No.2 retired in the direction of the Galtees.

It was at this point that No.1 Column accidentally encountered District Inspector Potter [of RIC] and made him prisoner. I, of course, was not present when this took place as our Column had left for the Galtees; but we heard all about it at the time. It seems that what happened was that No.1 Column had left Hyland's Crossroads and had gone about a mile, but that two of their men — one was Seán Downey and I forget the name of the other — had delayed at Hyland's Crossroads for some reason or other.

It appeared that Downey was in the course of filling his pipe when Potter came along in his car in civilian clothes. Had he passed on no one would have known who he was nor would he have been molested; but, seeing the remains of the burning lorries and probably some of the soldiers around, he pulled up. Downey, who then found he had no matches to light his pipe, stepped out and asked Potter for a match.

As he stepped up to the car to ask for the match, he noticed a revolver lying on the seat of the car, and he guessed that Potter was an enemy officer of some kind. So he placed him under arrest and took his revolver. He sent the other Volunteer on to Lacey to tell him that he had taken an officer prisoner, and he brought him along to hand him over to the custody of the Column.

Potter, it will be remembered, was subsequently executed in reprisal for the execution of an I.R.A. man who was hanged in Mountjoy Jail (Traynor). The date of Potter's arrest in the records will set the date for this Clogheen ambush. Lacey's Column was pursued by the enemy and was attacked three or four times on their march from Hyland's Cross to Rathgormack, Co. Waterford, which is in the Nire Valley. They were attacked late that evening and on two or three occasions during the following day or two, but made their way eventually to their destination.

When the Brigade reported the capture of Potter to G.H.Q., negotiations were entered into with the Castle authorities by offering to exchange this prisoner Potter for Volunteer Traynor, then under sentence of death. As these negotiations proved abortive and the execution of Traynor was proceeded with, Brigade Headquarters instructed that Potter would be executed in reprisal, and this order was carried out by the Commander of No.1 Column (Dinny Lacey).

No.2 Column, having made a safe retirement to the Galtees, billeted at a place called the Black Road up in the Galtees for the night. A large party of military were seen scouring the country for us along the main road by Skeheenarinka, but we were safely up on the heights of the Galtees. As we felt so safe up there, we decided to remain there for a few days.

We had at this time an order from Brigade Headquarters to procure some motor-cars and motor-cycles which were required for our own use and that of Brigade Headquarters. We appointed a select party of five men who could drive to go into Clonmel and commandeer the cars. These men



went into Clonmel and selected six or seven suitable cars in a big garage in Clonmel. These were taken over within the next couple of days.

In the meantime the remainder of the Column was somewhat unfortunate. Due to the fact that the housing accommodation was very scattered, we were billeted over a wide area in twos and threes and fours. One evening we were surprised by a large body of cavalry, evidently searching for us. But for the timely warning of a local member of the Column, it is probably that we should all have been captured.

Because of the fact that we were resting, our discipline had relaxed somewhat. At one house, which formed the headquarters or centre of the Column, we assembled twice a day for a bit of arms drill, but otherwise the members strayed around rather loosely and they usually left their arms at this centre.

On this particular day I happened to be at the centre when the alarm was raised, and there was no one else with me at the time. I saw a party of about 12 cavalry approaching slowly up the boren leading to this house where I was. Having no help, I did my best to run with 12 or 14 rifles and other equipment that was lying around, bringing them in relays to a place of concealment up the hill.

This was rather difficult with the military so close upon me, but I managed, however, to get them all away and I remained as a solitary guard over the arms until the military had gone away. One of our Column was captured by this party, a man named Pyne.

The enemy retreated after about two hours with their prisoner. Apparently this indicated to them that the Column was in the vicinity. So strong forces invested the area and for the following two days an intensive comb-out of dwellings and likely places of concealment was made. When Pyne was captured, he had no arms with him, and the O/C of the Column Seán Hogan being absent at the time, there was no plan or attempt made to rescue Pyne.

Anticipating the further raid, we had decided that evening to cross over the Galtees into the Glen of Aherlow; but the enemy had anticipated this move and had sent forces to the Glen to intercept us. Our reconnaissance element, however, made contact with the advance guard of the enemy moving down the Glen.

As the Column came up we exchanged shots with the enemy advance guard and, crossing their encircling line, we crossed the Suir by a ford near the moat of Knockgraffon without any further encounter with the enemy. We were joined at Rosegreen by the five members of the Column who had gone to Clonmel to commandeer the cars.

The Column Commander decided to billet in this area for a few days, and plans were made for an attack on a patrol from Ballinure police barracks in retaliation for the capture of Pyne. We took up a position on the road for two or three days awaiting this patrol, but they never turned up. We did not consider attacking the barracks as it was a strong position, difficult to attack, and our ammunition supply was limited.

5,000-troop movement

The next serious engagement was the Ballygiblin round-up, which nearly eventuated in the annihilation of the entire Column. Ballygiblin is on the Tipperary-Cork border between Mitchelstown and Ballyporeen. On three different occasions before this we had made sniping attacks on Ballyporeen R.I.C. Barracks. On this occasion, however, we were determined to ambush the police patrol, which our Intelligence reports informed us came out daily on one or other of the three or four roads leading from Ballyporeen.

So we lay in ambush positions and remained in the vicinity of the town for four days; but the police never moved from their barracks during this time. We had remained in each of these ambush positions for eight or nine hours at a stretch, keeping ourselves warm during that time by a certain



amount of horseplay and jumping around, but expecting at any minute a signal that the patrol was approaching. But they never came.

We were getting rather uneasy at this stage, because it began to appear that there was some leakage of information to the enemy and that they were aware of our presence. It was proved later that this suspicion was, in fact, well founded. An inquiry held into the matter by direction of Brigade Headquarters later resulted in the dismissal of the local Company Commander and, in fact, the question of whether or not he should be executed for betraying our plans to the enemy was for some time undecided.

It was established that the leakage took place because this Company Commander was keeping company with a daughter of a local publican who was very friendly with the local parish priest; the local parish priest in turn was very friendly with the local R.I.C. Sergeant. Seemingly, the Company Commander had conveyed our plans to this girl who had spoken of them to the parish priest, and the latter, who had no political leanings of any kind, was anxious to avoid any bloodshed in his parish, and warned the local R.I.C. Sergeant. Due to this warning given to the R.I.C., we were surrounded by strong military detachments. The parish priest, it was reported to us, had spent the whole day praying in church without ceasing, and it was said there afterwards that our escape was due to his prayers.

After being four days in this locality it became evident to us — and particularly to myself, as this was part of my Battalion area — that we had remained too long in the district and that we were bound to be surrounded there. I had some discussion about this matter with the Column Commander and, in fact, we had a considerable disagreement on the occasion.

He had decided that we would snipe the barracks that evening and, as usually happened when a barracks was sniped, they would send for reinforcements, or reinforcements would be sent out — in this case from Clogheen and Cahir — but it might be four or five hours before the reinforcements would arrive. In this case, we were to lie in wait for the reinforcing party and ambush it as it arrived. This ambush would, therefore, be carried out probably in the hours of darkness.

However, the Column Commander then decided to organise a dance and sent word to the local Volunteers and the local girls that we were going to run a dance that night. It was about this that I had a bit of a falling-out with him. I said I would not think of going to the dance, that this place was much too dangerous and that we should be getting out of it and making for the Galtees, as I thought there was a strong probability that we would be surrounded there before morning.

Having carried out the sniping of the barracks, the dance proceeded while awaiting the arrival of the enemy reinforcements. A centre was appointed for a stand-to in case of alarm. It became obvious by midnight that no military party was coming to the rescue of the R.I.C. The Column Commander decided that nothing was likely to happen and that anyone who wanted to go to bed could do so. The Column was billeted in an area of half a mile radius outside the town in farmhouses. Three of us were billeted in one house.

The first intimation I had of the presence of the enemy was when the woman of the house rushed in to me at 5.30 next morning to say that there were Lancers approaching up the boreen. We had scarcely time to seize our arms and, as the front door was in plain view of the approaching enemy, we threw ourselves out of a back window and hid in a cabbage garden while they searched the house.

The officer in charge of the search party said to the woman when he was searching: "You had them here! Where are they?" but getting no information, they eventually withdrew. We made our way as fast as we could towards the mobilisation centre where, meeting other members of the Column who had arrived there, we found that they had had a similar experience to ourselves.



We had only just assembled at the centre when we were observed by the military, who began to advance on us and opened fire. We did not return the fire but began to run as fast as we could, in the hope that we could cover the intervening four miles or so to the Galtees where we would feel safe.

Fortunately, as events showed, we were unsuccessful in this attempt. The military kept up their pursuit, riding along a couple of fields at a time on their horses and then getting down to fire at us. They kept up this fire all the time but without hitting anybody.

As we got on to a boreen leading on to the main road, a woman who was washing clothes as we approached the main road held up her hands in a sign to us that there were military on the main road which we were about to run into. At this point the whole Column was together, and we had just realised that we were completely surrounded, but nothing but a miracle could save us now.

We did not know it at the time and, although we saw various detachments of troops here, there and everywhere, it was only afterwards we learned that troops had been drawn from Mitchelstown, Fermoy, Cahir, Clonmel and all the surround barracks and posts and that there were at least 5,000 troops engaged in this operation to surround us and round us up; and 200 or 300 horse cavalry were in close touch with us at this moment!

Apparently the enemy had decided on one great sweep to rid the country not alone of our Column but also the North East Cork Column and the East Limerick Column which had been harassing them severely. I believe that the launching of this attack at that particular time was due to the fact that we had delayed so long in Ballyporeen and they had received information of our presence there. They decided to begin by rounding up our Column.

On the night the round-up began the Column was billeted at Kiltankin near the Tipperary-Cork border, the intention being to return to Graigue the next day. We learned afterwards that from dawn soldiers, arriving from all the military centres mentioned already, had formed posts on all the roads and all the points of vantage in the area to ensure that we could not move out of it — all working a pre-arranged general plan. Ballygiblin was their centre of operations.

The alarm had been given in some cases by country people who were early risers, such as the people driving milk-carts to creameries and who, seeing troops moving, warned anybody they saw. Great praise is due to the people of the neighbourhood who, as well as passing on the necessary warning to us, delayed the advance of the troops by offering them tea, of which they gladly partook but which impeded their rate of progress and gave us time to mobilise! Up to the time we reached the main road where we were warned by the woman of the presence of troops, we had not realised the extensiveness of the round-up and the state of jeopardy in which the Column found itself.

Hogan had spoken encouragingly to us and suggested a retreat towards Mitchelstown, as we had a member of the Column from that area with us who knew the way. He was appointed to act as our guide. The line of retreat was across the Furrough Bog, a very low-lying place of ground, about 20 or 30 acres in extent, until the Ballygiblin-Kilbehenny road was reached.

We were crossing the bog when we were perceived by Miss O'Hanlon, a national teacher from Ballygiblin, who had cycled hurriedly half-a-mile to a point where we intended crossing the road, to warn us that troops were about there in all directions. The extraordinary thing about all this is that, although the military had observation points at Ballygiblin and all round about, they failed to observe us. Dave Moher led the way and crossed the road in the direct view of a party of Black and Tans who were holding up creamery carts.

The Lancers had been behind and pursuing us all this time, but their continuous fire on us had not caused any casualties. We were exhausted from running, however; yet we had to cross this bog to shake off the pursuit by the Lancers. We went through it, though sinking up to our middles in



parts of it. Our rifles and everything were a complete mass of mud and therefore useless until we could get time to clean them.

We were covered in mud from head to toe and completely exhausted when we got to the other side of the bog; but we had shaken off the pursuing Lancers, some of whom had tried to cross after us. But their horses sank and they were held up trying to get them out. Some of them kept up the fire on us while we were crossing the bog, and some others tried to surround the bog so as to intercept us on the other side.

A most extraordinary thing happened when we got to the other side of the bog which to this day I cannot find an adequate explanation for. When we reached the ditch on the far side of the bog, we found we had run right into a party of about 200 soldiers who were on the road outside the ditch. Some of them were lying on the ditch and others around the round.

They were in extended order with about five or six pace intervals between them, all with their rifles at the ready. We also were running along in file with a similar interval between us, and I am sure, from the firing of the pursuing Lancers, they must have seen our approach across the bog. Yet, when we reached the ditch and turned to run down along it — there was only a fence separating us from the soldiers on the road — they did not fire on us and did nothing to intercept us.

I can offer no explanation for this. Our arms were useless, caked and choked with the bog mud, so we just ran on past the soldiers on the other side of the ditch, practically within arms' reach of them. Continuing in this direction, we dared not to cross the by-road. After going about 500 or 600 yards, we reached a farmyard of a man named Nolan which was about four fields from the road.

Nolan was the man who saved the lives of the Column, for he directed us to a spot which afforded shelter and concealment from the various military observations posts. This spot was a large dike at the end of a field behind his house. The fence along this dike was very high — 7 or 8 feet — and the top of the fence was covered by a thick growth of furze. In front of the dike was a large growth of thick sallies screening us from the breen.

We were glad to get this respite to enable us to get some rest and, though our position was somewhat cramped, we were thankful for the comparative ease after our strenuous retreat. Our rifles were so badly plugged with mud that we could not attempt to do anything with them then, so we concentrated our attention on cleaning our pistols and revolvers, so that we would have some arms capable of use if necessary.

Our position was such that only a limited amount of movement was possible, and it was undesirable in any case to make any noise for fear of attracting enemy searching parties. From where we lay, we could see the party of about 20 horse cavalry that had been following us and that had tried to cross the bog after us. Some of their horses had sunk in the bog, and we watched them for about two hours trying to extricate these horses. If they had been able to keep on after us, they might have tracked us down to our hiding-place.

While these cavalry were engaged trying to rescue their horses, lorry-loads of infantry came along, dropping parties here and there as they went, to complete the encirclement of the Ballygiblin area, and those parties had now taken up the search. One of them came to Nolan's house and took up position on a high wall in Nolan's yard directly facing us, with rifles levelled in our direction. These troops remained there until all the troops were recalled that evening, so that, even had we wished to do so, we could not have moved from where we then were.

Some of the cavalry proceeded a couple of hundred yards further up the breen and, entering the fields, cantered around in the rear of our position, coming quite close to us in search but failing to locate us. The enemy knew we had got to a point somewhere about here, but could not understand where we had disappeared to from that. This fact was related to us afterwards by a member of the R.I.C. who had himself been engaged in the round-up at that time!



Enemy activity now became intense. Lorries, moving along the road continuously, dropped fresh parties of troops. Observation posts were established on top of hay-barns and in tall trees, while the troops scoured the fields and houses in the locality and officers swept the country with powerful field-glasses in the effort to pick up our trail.

Suddenly we noticed a party entering the field in which we were, through the small gate leading to it from the breen. There was an oldish Colonel carrying a pair of field-glasses, and another officer with him. He levelled his glasses on every point of the field and the ditches surrounding it while we remained perfectly still. Apparently he saw nothing to excite his suspicion.

He remained, however, on top of the small hill in this field, with his glasses now and then focussed on various points, for about an hour while we remained motionless. Possibly the fact of his presence there had the effect of directing the attentions of the search parties in the vicinity further afield as, seeing him standing there, they would probably consider there was unlikely to be any of us in the immediate vicinity.

It was then late in the afternoon, and we suddenly heard three rifle-shots in rapid succession. We did not know what this might mean, nor was there anything we could do. While we speculated to ourselves this, firing started from apparently over the whole area. We concluded at this stage that this was a signal for attack and that they had located our position. We had moved closer together and we held hurried whispered conversation as to what should be done.

The Column Commander, addressing us at this stage, said something to the effect that it was all up now, that there was no further hope of bringing the Column safely through and that, therefore, it would be best to break up and scatter in pairs, leaving each pair to look out for themselves. We did not agree with this view. We realised, of course, that the crisis had come, but we felt it would be more fitting to face death together as a unit, selling our lives as dearly as possible when the attack came.

We felt in any case that there was no hope whatever of any of us escaping either individually or otherwise. In view of this unanimous decision of the members of the Column, the Column Commander agreed to accept it. There were 24 of us there on that occasion, and we all made a solemn agreement that no individual would try to break away on his own and that we would all fight and die together when the time came, which we expected would be within the next 15 minutes, or an hour at the most.

During this military operation every male of military age, from 17 to 70, in the area between Ballygiblin and Burncourt had been arrested and brought into the different villages in the locality for identification before being released, so that, when the troops were withdrawn, there were practically no men left in the area!

As time went on, and while we awaited the expected attack, it became gradually apparent that no attack was coming and that seemingly the purpose of the shots had been a signal for the withdrawal of the various military posts, because we began to observe lorries moving along and troops moving on the road and being picked up.

So it was clear after a while that the investment of the area had concluded. We remained where we were, however, until a general silence around proclaimed the fact that the enemy had definitely withdrawn. We had been lying on the damp or wet in the bottom of the ditch from about 10 o'clock that morning until this time late in the evening — nearly 6 o'clock — and naturally we were stiff and cramped, both from the cold and enforced inactivity.

Consequently, when we began to get up from the ditch, some of us were unable to walk or even stand, but feeling a great sense of relief at our miraculous escape. After a little exercise and massaging of limbs, we decided to call to Nolan's house to thank him for his patriotic and humane act that morning in saving us from certain death. We then found that Nolan himself had been



arrested by one of the raiding parties and taken into Clogheen, and he had not yet been released.

The local Cumann na mBan in the area, who apparently had been watching the progress of events, got in touch with us as soon as they saw that the military forces had withdrawn and brought us tea and sandwiches, which was one of the most welcome meals I remember having. We had had nothing to eat all day, having been interrupted before breakfast by the raiders, and so, in fact, this meal at about 6 o'clock in the evening was the first bit of food we had tasted from about half-past one before going to bed the previous night. Following this meal, we continued our retreat to the Galtees where we could recuperate in the safety of the mountains.

Looking back on this episode, I have mixed feelings about it. In the first place, I realize it should never have happened. I blamed the Column Commander at the time for bad handling of the situation in maintaining the Column in its position around Ballyporeen much too long, and I said so to him at the time. Then this dance went further to advertise our presence and I had a bit of a falling-out with him about it, pointing out that I would not be surprised at all if we were surrounded by morning, which we were.

From the moment the military round-up began, we had no initiative or no freedom of action left to us. We were driven helter-skelter in our retreat, and it was only a set of lucky coincidences or an act of God that brought us safely through. On the other hand, the members of the Column behaved with admirable courage and fortitude. The spirit that animated us all when, at the back of Nolan's field, we resolved to die fighting to a man is something to be remembered with pride and pleasure.

