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With Tipperary No. 1 Brigade in North Tipperary 1917-1921

By Seán Gaynor

Part II*

About August 1920 I was appointed Brigade Commandant [of Tipperary No. 1 Brigade] to succeed Frank McGrath, and was myself succeeded as Brigade Adjutant by Ned O'Leary. Liam Hoolan remained Vice-Commandant and Frank Flannery remained also as Quartermaster. My first action after being appointed was to take stock of the men occupying posts as battalion officers; some of them were rather old for their jobs. I made a number of changes, and made them myself, rather than resorting to the previous method of election by the battalion council.

When this was completed, I next formed a Brigade Active Service Unit. The Active Service Unit comprised twenty men. The A.S.U. column might have been larger or two columns might have formed, if sufficient rifles were available. However, the 3rd and 6th Battalions did not co-operate by giving men or rifles towards the personnel or equipment of the column. The training officer was Sean Glennon, an ex-Irish Guardsman. The deputy column commander was Sean Collison.

Immediately the personnel of the A.S.U. column was selected, the men were brought together in the townland of Gortagarry, Moneygall, for a few weeks' training, being supplied with food by the local people. Washing and laundry were done by the Moneygall Cumann na mBan. Boots and cigarettes, paid for out of brigade funds, were sent from Nenagh. The funds were obtained by means of lectures, concerts, dances and dramas and contributions from the battalions.

Before the establishment of the A.S.U. column, a number of armed attacks of a minor nature had taken place in the brigade area. Some of these operations had been carried out by the local units of the I.R.A. without consulting the brigade staff. The attack on the R.I.C. in Lorrha on 2 September, 1919, in which one policeman was killed and one wounded, and the ambush of the police at Lackamore Wood in April, 1920, resulting in the deaths of two policemen, were both brought off in this way.

An earlier incident took place in January 1918, when a British soldier on furlough brought home a rifle. His home in Silvermines was raided by a few local Volunteers, in the course of which the soldier's father, George Sheehan, who was alone in the house at the time, was shot dead. He attempted to prevent his son's rifle from being seized and, in a struggle which ensued, the fatal shot was discharged. The rifle taken happened to be the gun which I used myself later as the guerrilla campaign developed.

There was also an attack on the R.I.C. at Toomevara on 16 March, 1920, carried out by the local Volunteers under the control of Paddy Whelehan. Approval for this attack was sought from the brigade council by Whelehan in person, but the council declined to give permission. I

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— Editor, THJ.*



did not agree with the council's decision and, meeting Whelehan after the meeting, I advised him to proceed with the job. The Toomevara policemen were making themselves very obnoxious in the eyes of the local Volunteers and were going out of their way to provoke trouble.

I offered to take part in the attack myself, and about a fortnight later was actually a member of a party of about ten who lay in wait for a patrol of four policemen expected to come along the Toomevara-Moneygall road. The police did not show up that night, and I gave the revolver which I had to Paddy Whelehan and told him to keep it until the attack was carried out. He planned several ambushes of this patrol within the next two months, but the police had abandoned doing regular patrols, and all his efforts were unavailing. Eventually, as two R.I.C. men were coming out from evening devotions at Toomevara Church, they were shot dead.

A number of rifles were procured from British soldiers home on furlough from France. I have no idea of what the figure was. I did take part in the purchase of one of these guns from a native of Nenagh, named Sheridan. He sold us the gun for £1!

As stated earlier, coincidental with the framing of plans for the attack on Borrisokane R.I.C. barracks, a certain amount of planning for an attack by our brigade on Rearcross R.I.C. barracks had been done. The failure of the Borrisokane operation, however, caused a delay in proceeding with the attack on Rearcross, but the idea was not abandoned. A well-known Volunteer belonging to the No. 1 Tipperary Brigade, who had no rank and had of his own accord and without permission from his Brigade Commandant taken part in operations with the South and North Tipperary Brigades, where he came into personal contact with Seán Treacy, Dan Breen and Ernie O'Malley, urged these men to arrange an attack on Rearcross barracks. This Volunteer was Paddy Ryan (Lacken), who, strange to say, had declined to assist us on the attack in Borrisokane.

Rearcross Barracks Attack

Under the command of Ernie O'Malley, then a G.H.Q. organiser in South Tipperary, a strong I.R.A. force composed of men from South and Mid Tipperary and also some elements of 5th and 6th Battalions of the North Tipperary Brigade, were mobilised in the vicinity of Rearcross to attack the barracks in that village. At that period orders from G.H.Q. strictly forbade men from one area carrying out an operation in another area without the prior consent of the officer in charge of the area in which the operation was to take place. In the case of Rearcross, no notification whatever was given to the Brigade Commandant of that area — No. 1 Tipperary Brigade — by O'Malley or anybody else. By an accident, the Vice Commandant of the 5th Battalion, Patrick Doherty, heard of the impending attack on the night it was to occur. He at once came to Nenagh to report what he had heard to Frank McGrath, his Brigade Commander. McGrath forthwith sent a despatch to either Seán Treacy or O'Malley, ordering the attack to be abandoned, and at the same time gave verbal instructions to Doherty that no man in the 5th Battalion area was to assist in the operation.

Doherty's compliance with these instructions prevented the obstruction of certain roads which it was essential to block, in order to prevent reinforcements coming to the relief of the police in Rearcross. These roads included the main roads leading to Rearcross from Thurles and Templemore, both heavily garrisoned. O'Malley did not proceed with the attack that night, taking advantage of the intervening day to make other arrangements to have road barricades erected on the roads referred to. The attack took place on a Sunday night [11 July, 1920]. The





The group who took possession of Kilkenny military barracks from the British. Sean Gaynor (in uniform) is in front row. In the back row (centre) is the famous "Widger" Meagher of Toomevara.

post was not captured, but the building was so badly damaged that it had to be evacuated next day, causing the R.I.C. to be withdrawn from the locality. As I did not participate in this attack, I can give no details regarding it.

At the time I took over command of the No. 1 Tipperary Brigade, the state of intelligence in the brigade was very poor indeed. I had to look for a rear "live-wire" to take control of this work and for that purpose, selected Austin McCurtain, O/C of the 1st (Nenagh) Battalion, as Brigade Intelligence Officer. Together we discussed the lines on which intelligence should be built up. We decided that, in order to get this side of the military machine working effectively, we should start with the companies, as it was over a very scattered area and, unless the local men helped in bringing to the notice of the brigade everything that occurred in each company area, the brigade staff would not be in a position to have a proper picture of what was occurring in the area under their control.

We regarded it as imperative that we should have a day-to-day account of all movements of the Crown forces — the police out on patrol within the town or village, where the police and military went for drinks or any form of recreation, how they obtained supplies, how often outlying posts were served by convoys from supply depots, and if any particular member of the British garrison was making himself prominent because of truculent or aggressive behaviour. In addition, it was thought to be most important to have lists compiled of any of the civilian population who might be considered hostile, especially by giving information to the police or military authorities.

McCurtain carried out the organisation of intelligence himself, and started by appointing an Intelligence Officer in each battalion and in each company area. He required each company intelligence officer to furnish a weekly report to his battalion intelligence officer, who in turn would condense these reports and submit a report to the brigade intelligence officer. In the event of any item of unusual or special importance coming under notice, the company intelligence officer was instructed to report such an item instantly. All intelligence officers were asked to make special efforts to try and make contact with members of the British forces who might be inclined to be friendly, with a view to getting whatever information they were prepared to impart. McCurtain was in direct contact with the Director of Intelligence, Michael Collins, by rail through a railway guard, Pat O'Shea of Nenagh, and also with the commander of the brigade Active Service Unit.

Generally speaking, very little information was obtained through members of the Crown forces. In Toomevara an R.I.C. man named O'Brien, and another in Cloughjordan called Feeny, did give news of impending raids in their own localities. In Nenagh town the Intelligence Officer of the 1st Battalion, William Flannery, was a personal friend of the postmaster Mr. Manning, who, though a civil servant, was a supporter of the I.R.A. Manning passed over to Flannery every possible item of news which he gleaned in his official capacity, such as copies of telegrams and details of phone conversations between one military post and the other. The information obtained through this postmaster apprised us in advance on at least half-a-dozen occasions of big round-ups which the British had planned.

In order to facilitate the work of the intelligence staff, systematic raids were made on the mails. Between October 1920 and the Truce scarcely a week passed without such a raid taking place in some part of the brigade area. The battalion I.O. in Roscrea made seizures at the local railway station very frequently. The mail-car between Nenagh and Thurles was so often held up that it was said that the horse would stop on seeing an armed I.R.A. man on the road! Despite all the attention devoted to the searching of the mails, I cannot remember anything of importance having been discovered.

My efforts to re-organise the brigade and to establish the active service unit occupied most of my time between August 1920 to the end of October 1920. By then I had also established a recognised headquarters for the brigade in Fawnlough, 1½ miles from Nenagh, in the house of Thomas O'Brien, whose sitting-room became our office. In it we had a typewriter, which myself and most of the brigade staff were able to use. The house was situated about a quarter-mile from a by-road that connected, after half a mile or so, with the Nenagh-Dolla main road. Though all the Volunteers within a radius of a couple of miles were aware of the location of brigade headquarters, it was never raided by the British.

One of the O'Brien girls had married an ex-Head Constable of the R.I.C. named Denis Horgan, who in 1920 was occupying the post of Petty Sessions clerk in Nenagh. (The Petty Sessions was the court of summary jurisdiction under British rule.) Horgan visited his people-in-law almost every evening and, though he became aware of the fact that we were using their home as brigade headquarters, he kept this knowledge to himself, and also was probably the cause of diverting the suspicion of the enemy from the place! The brigade staff rarely slept in O'Brien's place, but used a couple of empty houses in the neighbourhood for this purpose, beds and bedclothes having been obtained through seizures of Belfast goods.

Under a decree of Dáil Éireann there was a boycott of all goods coming into the area from Belfast firms. The staff at Nenagh railway station were nearly all members of the I.R.A. or supporters of Sinn Féin, so whenever a consignment of such goods arrived the railway officials passed on word to the officers of the Nenagh [I.R.A.] company, who promptly arranged for the seizure of these goods. Ultimately, because of the repeated seizures, the Belfast firms ceased to send any more consignments into the district. Similar action was taken by the I.R.A. in all the other districts in North Tipperary with like results.

The shooting of an R.I.C. constable named McCarthy outside Nenagh post office on 2 November, 1920 by members of the Nenagh company — my brother Michael, Eddie Quigley and George Gleeson — gave rise to a lively period of military activity in the town. Though the policeman was only wounded, the R.I.C. and military burned the houses of Jim Nolan and John D. Flannery in Pearse Street. The next day a British military officer, Lieutenant Hambleton, threatened to shoot one of the local curates, Father O'Halloran, an outspoken critic of British rule, even from the pulpit.

On 4 November, 1930 a member of the Nenagh company, Joseph Starr, recognised





This group of three Republicans pictured on their release from internment in Mountjoy Jail at the end of the Civil War in 1924 includes Seán Gaynor (left) and (centre) Frank Barrett, O/C Mid-Clare Brigade.

Hambleton going to Templemore on a motor cycle and notified the commander of the Active Service Unit, Ned O'Leary, who with his men was in the Knockalton area at the time. O'Leary took three or four men and waited near Cleary's house in Lisstunny, a mile from Nenagh. Between three and four o'clock in the evening Hambleton was on his way back to Nenagh when he was shot dead by O'Leary and his party. He was only wounded by the first volley of shots, which knocked him on the ground off the machine. He returned the fire, but another volley from the attackers put an end to his resistance. Two members of the Nenagh company, John and Thomas O'Brien (not related), who went to stay in Rody Cleary's, Knigh (three miles from Nenagh), for safety on the night of 2 November, were taken from there by a party of British military and done to death in a most brutal manner.

Following the shooting of Lieutenant Hambleton it was expected that Crown forces would destroy Nenagh creamery and other houses in the town. To counteract such activity, I gave orders to the Commandant of the Nenagh Battalion, Con Spain, to mobilise fifty men from his unit, and to the commander of the active service unit to bring his forces to the back of the creamery. The A.S.U. were armed with rifles, and the others had shotguns. These men assembled about ten o'clock on the night of 4 November, 1920, and were still waiting for the enemy at midnight.

Then by accident a shotgun was discharged. After this I decided that the British would be warned of our presence and would not venture out, so I dismissed the men. Three nights later the creamery was burned to the ground by a combined force of police and military. Of course, it was not possible to have the I.R.A. mobilised every night to watch out for incendiaries. Also, we got the idea that when the creamery was not burned the night after the shooting of Lieutenant Hambleton, the British had not intention of destroying that building.

After the shooting in Nenagh, the British conducted widespread raids, mostly at night-time, around the district. From then onwards my own home was visited by these "raiders" at least once a week. In all this activity I cannot remember that a wanted man was ever captured except

British Military and Police strength in North Tipperary in November 1920

Nenagh	40 R.I.C. men 60 soldiers*
Toomevara	12 R.I.C. men
Cloughjordan	20 R.I.C. men
Borrisokane	20 R.I.C. men
Templederry	20 R.I.C. men
Silvermines	20 R.I.C. men
Kilcommon	16 R.I.C. men
Newport	20 R.I.C. men
Portroe	20 R.I.C. men
Ballina	50 Auxiliaries
Roscrea	25 R.I.C. men
Templemore	25 R.I.C. men Battalion H.Q. (military)
Birr	30 R.I.C. men Battalion H.Q. (military)

Notes: Above figures are approximately only.

* At Summerhill military barracks.

one night. About 25 November, 1920 during a raid on the home of the McCurtain brothers, Austin and Sean, in Pearse Street, the "Tans" found a very good Volunteer, Denis Carey, in bed. Carey at the time was managing the hardware business owned by the McCurtain family. He was taken to Wolfe Tone Terrace on the outskirts of the town and there riddled with bullets.

It had been observed that a military lorry began to run fairly regularly between Templemore and Nenagh towards the end of November 1920. The Column O/C decided to attack this lorry, and selected a position at Latteragh, eight miles from Nenagh and about twelve miles from Templemore. The column provided about fifteen riflemen and were reinforced by six or eight men from the Latteragh section of the Templederry company. The position they occupied was on the left-hand side of the road travelling from Nenagh; the men were placed at the top of a steep and wooden eminence roughly 200 yards from the road. On the other side the road was skirted by the Nenagh river, beyond which the country was flat and did not afford any suitable attacking position.

The lorry containing nine or ten soldiers came along between eleven and twelve o'clock, and was fired on by the riflemen. The driver accelerated speed, and brought his vehicle out of shooting-range without loss except for the wounding of one soldier. I was with the column in this engagement but did not interfere with the O/C's arrangements. The column retired into Gortagarry outside Toomevara, and rested for about a fortnight before again coming into action at Kilcommon on 16 December, 1920.

At that time the R.I.C. in Kilcommon patrolled the road between Kilcommon Cross and Kilcommon village, a distance of about a mile. The site chosen for this attack was about 300 yards from Kilcommon Cross. I did not participate in the operation and therefore cannot supply details. The British had four men killed and three wounded; there were no losses on our side. The British also lost some rifles.



A few days before Christmas the column was disbanded for a fortnight, each man returning to his own locality. On its re-assembly about the second week in January it met under new leadership. I felt that, as it had not been sufficiently active, it was better to replace Ned O'Leary as Brigade Adjutant by Jack Collinson, the Vice O/C of the column. He experienced a good deal of ill-luck in his new role. He had the column awaiting the enemy several times, but on each occasion no attack took place as the enemy did not show up.

Towards the end of January 1921 he occupied a position at Castle Otway, between Templederry and Latteragh, to meet an R.I.C. patrol from Templederry. That day as one of the officers of the Templederry company, Sam O'Brien, was scouting in the village when the local R.I.C. sergeant, John Igoe, called him. He told him to "go out and tell them lads who were lying in ambush out the road to go away"! On O'Brien delivering the message, Collinson withdrew his men.

A month or so before Christmas 1920 a Captain Michael McCormack was sent down to Tipperary from Headquarters, Dublin with a view to forming the 3rd Southern Division. This man was a first-class organiser and a fine drill instructor. One of the first jobs he undertook was the establishment of training camps for the officers of the brigade. The first camp was set up in Ballymacegan, Lorrha, where the classes were held in a gentleman's residence, vacant at the time. This camp lasted about a fortnight, and the training consisted of a thorough course on the rifle and the revolver, squad and company drill, skirmishing, visual training and semaphore.

Each officer was required to take a class for instruction, and by the time the course finished I think there was a big improvement in the military knowledge of all those who attended. Other such camps were held in Ballywilliam and Glenculloo. During the period of each camp, which altogether totalled about seven weeks, the brigade column did guard duty, and any spare-time which the members of the column had was devoted to semaphore training.

In March 1921 in response to a message from Liam Forde of the Mid Limerick brigade staff, I went to Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, where I met Sean Carroll, who rowed across the Shannon and took me to a house in the Clare side where I met Forde and Austin Brennan, then in charge of the East Clare brigade. Forde disclosed that his purpose in inviting me to the meeting was to get me to send a number of men from the North Tipperary brigade into Limerick city to shoot a number of R.I.C. and "Tans", who were making themselves very objectionable by beating up the civilian population in that city.

I could not see my way to agree to this request, as I considered there should be at least a dozen men in the Mid Limerick brigade who would have enough courage to carry out this job without bringing in absolute strangers for the purpose. However, learning from Forde that they had more rifles than they needed, I asked for and got the loan of six long Lee Enfield rifles. On the night following my return I sent Austin McCurtain and five men from the Nenagh company for these rifles. This party walked to and from Castleconnell in one night, a distance of about 36 miles, and brought back the guns with them. We kept those weapons until the Truce. When we received them they were in such an extremely neglected condition that it took a considerable amount of time and trouble to get the dirt and corrosion out of them. Even then, they were only fit for training purposes in the camps.

In April 1921 Captain Michael McCormack and myself were summoned to Dublin to attend a meeting of brigade officers with representatives of G.H.Q. staff who included Dick Mulcahy, the Chief of Staff, Gearoid O'Sullivan, the Adjutant General, Sean McMahon, the Quartermaster General, J. J. O'Connell and a few others. There were brigade officers present from all over the country. As I now remember it the two principal items discussed at that meeting were the formation of divisions and a "pep talk" to the officers from brigades regarded as not pulling



their weight in the fight, with a view to relieving British pressure on some of the southern brigades. The meeting was held in a hall in Parnell Square, Dublin; McCormack and myself travelled by train to and from Dublin.

Black-and-Tan Officer killed

In the Newport area the I.R.A. organisation was very poor, and the police in that village were under the control of a vicious Black-and-Tan officer named Biggs, an Englishman. He had the countryside terrorised, burning the houses of I.R.A. men, shooting Volunteers and civilians, beating up men. On one occasion at Silvermines after a Sunday Mass, he rounded up the congregation and ordered the people to sing "God Save the King", which they made an effort to do after volleys being fired over their heads!

A favourite practice of Biggs was to bring well-known I.R.A. supporters in lorries as hostages through the country. Old Matt Ryan, the father of the prominent I.R.A. man, Paddy Ryan (Lacken), was kept a prisoner in Newport for two or three months and was used frequently as a hostage. In addition, old Ryan, while imprisoned, was threatened almost every day by Biggs about the fate that awaited his son should he ever be captured.

With the two-fold purpose of putting the Newport area into a properly organised state and of shooting Biggs, I went to the Newport district on 15 May, 1921. I stayed that night outside the village of Newport, and was thinking of going to bed when Paddy Ryan (Lacken), Tom McGrath and Dinny Hayes arrived in the house after having come back from a period of service with the East Limerick Brigade, during which another colleague of theirs, Paddy Starr, Nenagh, had lost his life.

In a discussion with these three men they agreed to come with me to a meeting of the 6th (Newport) Battalion which I had convened for the following night in the Ballinahinch country. The next day on our way to Ballinahinch we called at Tom McGrath's home at the Turnpike road for our dinner. While partaking of this meal, McGrath's sister went outside to do scouting. She noticed a private car passing the house and recognised in it Biggs, two other men in civilian attire, and two females.

Miss McGrath came back to tell us this news, and suggested that the car was probably on its way to the house of a Major Gabbitt, a well-known loyalist who frequently entertained Biggs and his friends. Our reaction to this news was to rise from the dinner and make preparations to ambush the car on its return journey. As there were two roads running between Killoscully (Major Gabbitt's residence) and Newport, we decided to collect about a dozen of the local Volunteers who had shotguns to ensure that both roads would be watched and the car attacked in either road. Myself, Paddy Ryan (Lacken), Tom McGrath, Dinny Hayes and four of the Newport Volunteers took up positions at Coolboreen, four miles from Newport; the other men went to the Rossquile road.

At Coolboreen there is a bridge on the bend of the road coming from Killoscully. Inside the fence, on the right-hand side of the road and on the Newport side of the bridge, myself (with revolver), Paddy Ryan (Lacken) and Tom McGrath (both with rifles) and one of the local Volunteers (with a shotgun) were waiting. Forty yards or so further on towards Newport, but on the opposite side of the road, Dinny Hayes (with a rifle) was in charge of three local Volunteers (all with shotguns). Two hundred yards to my left we had a scout posted in a prominent position to warn us when the motor-car would be coming back.

The car returned about three o'clock in the evening, and the scout gave us the signal that our quarry was approaching. When the car had passed the bridge all my party opened fire. The car



went on for about twenty yards, and then came to a halt on the left-hand side of the road. Three people alighted from it. The local Volunteer who was with us, and who knew the District Inspector, shouted, "That's the D.I.!" We re-opened fire on these three people. One ran off towards Newport and escaped; one fell in the centre of the road; the third fell into the ditch.

After a few minutes another man emerged from the car with his hands up, and he came walking towards us. He turned out to be Major Gabbitt. He informed us that a Miss Barrington had been shot. She was the person who fell into the ditch but, being dressed in mannish fashion, was mistaken for a man. McGrath, Ryan and myself then went up to the car, where we found an English woman named Rivers, unharmed. She was by no means frightened, and proceeded to give us "dogs' abuse" for having shot Miss Barrington.

Miss Rivers's language upset me somewhat, but Ryan quickly silenced her when he said: "Only for the bitch being in bad company, she would not be shot!" The car was searched, but it contained nothing of interest to us. The man who had fallen in the centre of the road turned out to be District Inspector Biggs. He was dead. Miss Barrington was badly wounded, having been shot through the lung. We got women in nearby houses to take her in and render whatever aid they could. She died in a few hours. She was the only daughter of a big landowner in Glenstal, County Limerick.

Expecting a big round-up in the area, I called off the battalion council meeting and with Ryan, McGrath and Hayes, I went to Toor, between Newport and Knockfunne. There Ryan and McGrath left us and Hayes and I went on, the former going to his own place in Ballywilliam, and I proceeding to brigade headquarters. Before I separated from these men, they promised me that they would join the North Tipperary active service unit as soon as they got a few days' rest. Only Hayes kept his word, but I think illness was the cause of the other two not doing so.

At brigade headquarters I had some business which kept me engaged for a few weeks, at the end of which I decided to spend a while with the Active Service Unit, then located in Terryglass outside Portumna. Reaching there, I found the unit had left for Eglis, about six miles away, so I went to that area, where I overtook the men in their billets. A man from the Nenagh company, armed with a shotgun, Pat Nolan of Cunnahert, accompanied me on this journey. A brother of his was already with the A.S.U. but Pat insisted in taking part too.

In Eglis I met the commandant of the 4th battalion, Felix Cronin, whom I questioned about the possibility of engaging the British in his area. He told me that on the previous day a great chance had been lost in Ballinderry. The Volunteers had cut the telegraph wires in that townland and, on hearing about it, a dozen police on bicycles came out from Borriskane. They proceeded to get drunk in the local pub, and threw their rifles carelessly around the bar and its precincts, not returning to Borriskane for several hours. While all this was happening, the Active Service Unit was in the 4th Battalion area, a few miles away, and no steps were taken to notify them. I gave Cronin some of my mind for his neglect in this matter.

Our conversation gave me the idea that, by cutting the wires again, there was a possibility that we could lure the police into an ambush. On my orders, Cronin arranged to cut the telegraph wires next day at Ballinderry, and I took the Active Service Unit during the night into the neighbourhood of that village. Scouts were also posted in Borriskane to watch the movements of the police and to report to me as soon as a patrol was observed to be setting out.

At four o'clock in the evening one of these scouts on a bicycle came with the news that one of the police in Borriskane had called him, in the street, and told him that they knew in the barracks that we were in Ballinderry and that military were on their way from Birr to round us up! The policeman also added that a party of 13 policemen on bicycles would be going from Borriskane to Cloughjordan on the following Friday morning to attend a court.



I decided to keep this part of the scout's message to myself and, for safety sake, decided to remove the A.S.U. to Ardcroney, between Nenagh and Borrisokane. My reason for not mentioning the full message I had received to anyone else was because I began to feel a bit perturbed over the fact that the British had failed to turn up when ambushes had been prepared for him. I thought of the possibility of this being due to information having reached them, through loose talk even among the Volunteers themselves. The A.S.U. remained in Ardcroney from a Tuesday to a Thursday morning. In that time I put them through an intensive course of training in occupying ambush positions and on the use of cover.

On Thursday morning we moved from Ardcroney to Bantiss, four miles from Cloughjordan, and in the vicinity of the Cloughjordan-Borrisokane road. We billeted in Bantiss for the night, joined by Bill Dwyer, 1st Lieutenant of the Cloughjordan company, and seven of his unit equipped with shotguns. Leaving billets at four in the morning of 2 June, 1921, the party marched along the road to a point in the townland of Modreeny, about midway between Borrisokane and Cloughjordan. As we were coming to the end of this march, I disclosed to the commander of the A.S.U. the full information I had received in Ballinderry from the scout.

The Modreeny Ambush

Our total force now amounted to 17 men, equipped with rifles, seven more with shotguns, and one with a revolver. We deemed this to be good enough to cope with the police patrol of 13 cyclists. In Modreeny we formed a position which we regarded as suitable for the operation. The main party (Section 1), occupied a position at the bend of the road where it is joined by a laneway. At another bend on the road and right behind the fence was Section 2, six riflemen under Sean Glennon. Section No. 3 included the seven local Volunteers, armed with shotguns and under one of their own officers. Five men in scattered points were detailed to act as snipers and to cover the other parties, should the necessity arise. Bill Dwyer and another of his own unit were posted on top of a height, 300 yards to the right of the main party, to act as scouts.

The three sections were about to go into their positions at six o'clock in the morning when a man came along the road, carrying an ass's winkers. The Cloughjordan men recognised him as an ex-British soldier who was regarded as hostile to us. I and a few of the officers held him up and interrogated him. He took us to be British forces — Auxiliaries — because of our attire — trench-coats, breeches and leggings, and caps worn in the reverse way!

We questioned him about the local Sinn Féiners. He described them as a dangerous crowd, and told us the names of three of the prominent Volunteers in the area, Bill Dwyer, Jim O'Meara and Sean Kenny, the latter being the company captain. We decided to hold him as a precaution, advising him to remain with us for his own safety, since we expected that the Sinn Féiners might be coming at any time and he might be caught in the cross-firing! He agreed without demur to this course, and he stayed with us during most of the ambush.

Around nine o'clock in the morning Dwyer, in a semaphore message read by Jack Collison, signalled the approach of the British and gave details of their formation. This consisted of two police cyclists in front as scouts, then four motor cars, followed by four cyclists, two abreast, and in the rear a military lorry. Collison and myself had a quick discussion as to whether this force, estimated at 40 men instead of 13 as expected, was too big a handful to tackle. He was extremely keen on testing the Active Service Unit in action, so we agreed to go ahead with the attack. At his request I took over charge of the operation, and took his whistle from him, one blast from which was to be the signal to open fire, and three for a withdrawal.

The leading police cyclists were allowed to go about two hundred yards beyond Section 1,



and the first of the motor cars was just approaching the bend at which that Section were placed when I blew a single blast of the whistle. Section 1 started firing, and all the others, except Section 2, followed suit. The military lorry was really outside the ambush position, so the occupants, on dismounting, tried to get into the field on their right, in the hope of developing an encircling movement.

They were prevented from doing this by the accurate fire of the two snipers, Jack Collison and Tim Gleeson, who kept them pinned to the road. The lorry itself left the scene of the ambush soon after the attack had opened and, with the driver as its only passenger, went off in the direction of Borrisokane. I knew that the driver had been despatched for reinforcements, but made up my mind to persevere with the attack, as we might be able to overpower them before the reinforcements arrived.

All the police in the first car — five men — were either killed or wounded except District Inspector Fitzpatrick, who threw himself out of the car and got cover at the roadside. The rest of the police at once got into positions along the road fences. They attempted to advance towards Section 1 and a number of them were hit in the attempt. The military also started to move towards us up the road, but did not come as far as the bend where Section 2 had been posted. Thus they were outside our field of fire, but should have come right under the fire of Section 2. They soon began to worry us by the use of rifle grenades, which all fortunately fell harmlessly well to our rear.

After ten or fifteen minutes of intensive firing a lull ensued, and it then struck me that Section 2 was not in action. From my own position I was now not able to get a sure shot at any of our opponents hidden in cover along the roadside, so I jumped over the wall on to the road where I lay down in the middle of the carriage way. I was releasing a spent cartridge when the rifle jammed. There was then nothing left for me but to get inside the fence again; there I discovered one A.S.U. member praying, with his beads in his hands and his rifle over his shoulder. I exchanged rifles with this man.

I next made an attempt to ascertain what had happened to Section 2, making a detour through the fields and across the road, on the Borrisokane side, to a point where I could clearly see that Section 2 had gone. I then returned to my original position with Section 1. The ambush was now in progress for about half an hour, and it was soon time for the reinforcements, for which the military lorry had been sent, to be coming on the scene. In view of the loss of Section 2, I came to the conclusion that it would be too risky to keep up the engagement any longer.

Before doing this, we tried to collect as many of the guns of the dead British forces as possible, but we only got two rifles which were still on the cycles of the police who had been leading the party. We also collected 100 rounds of .303 ammunition. I sent word to the snipers and to Section 2 to retire to where Section 1 was awaiting them, and then retreated along route marked also on sketch. Before the party crossed the main road, I instructed the local men to disperse. With the A.S.U. I sent through the fields and bogs to Knockshegowna, where billets for the night were procured.

On our way through a bog there were a number of men working at turf, including some Volunteers. I learned from them that Glennon, with Section 2, had passed that way half an hour earlier. When we reached Knockshegowna that section were there before us. Glennon's explanation of his early flight was that he was obliged to do so as the military had made his position untenable. Though I had my own views about his action, I made it appear that I was satisfied. As we were making our way from Modreeny to Knockshegowna, we came in view of the Birr-Borrisokane road and saw seven or eight lorries of soldiers being rushed to the scene of the ambush.



On the whole, I was pleased with the result of the Modreeny engagement. We had suffered no casualties and, fighting with depleted forces against very big odds, we inflicted heavy losses on our opponents who we learned from good authority had four killed and 14 wounded. Besides, we captured two rifles and some ammunition. The I.R.A. Chief of Staff, Dick Mulcahy, sent a letter of congratulations to myself "and all engaged".

On the day after Modreeny I attended our usual monthly meeting of the brigade council held at Kilruane. This was the last time before the Truce that I presided over this council. The next day I went to brigade headquarters, where I started preparations to relinquish my post as brigade commandant, to take up duty as adjutant of the newly created 3rd Southern Division. I was replaced by Liam Hoolan, and his place as Vice Brigadier was given to Felix Cronin, Commandant of the 4th Battalion. Austin McCurtain, Chief Intelligence Officer of the Brigade, was made Divisional Quartermaster; he was replaced by William O'Brien.

The 3rd Southern Division was made up of No. 1 Tipperary Brigade, Nos. 1 and 2 Offaly Brigades, and Nos. 1 and 2 Laois Brigades. It covered the whole of the counties Laois and Offaly and the portion of Tipperary roughly above a line drawn from Castleconnell in Limerick to Borris-in-Ossory. The Staff appointed were: Divisional Commandant — Michael McCormack; Divisional Adjutant — myself; and Divisional Quartermaster — Austin McCurtain. None of the other posts were filled before the Truce.

Temporary divisional headquarters were set up a few weeks before the Truce at Dooley's of Camross, Co. Laois, a good-sized farmer's house, where the sitting-room was placed at our disposal as an office. McCurtain and I were engaged in work of an organisational nature in the remaining fortnight of the war. My main joy before the cessation of hostilities was to go in person back to my old brigade headquarters to bring news to them of the cease-fire order, which was to come into operation on 11 July, 1921.

Strangely, no effort was made to enrol me in the I.R.B. until I was about to be appointed to the divisional staff in July 1921. I was then approached in the matter by the Divisional Commandant. I declined to be associated with that body, pointing out that the Irish Republican Army was good enough for me. My connection with the political side of the Sinn Féin was of very little importance. I had not much appeal for me; from 1918 onwards the Irish Volunteer movement, and later the I.R.A., occupied all my time.

Correction. In the caption to the photograph on p. 36 of Part I of the Seán Gaynor Story (*Tipperary Historical Journal* 1993), the reference to the 1st Southern Division should be to the 3rd Southern Division, as indicated in the Editorial Introduction on p. 31. Editor, THJ.

