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One Man's Flying Column

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Part 3*

At this time [early in 1921] a number of us were very dissatisfied with [Sean] Hogan's leadership. There were about 12 or 14 of the Column who wanted me to take over the leadership because they felt that Hogan was lacking in commonsense, and we were tired of being continuously hunted. Being surrounded every now and again, and getting out of these difficulties more by good luck than generalship, had a demoralising effect on the Column, and we wanted to take the initiative in action of our own making.

Hogan's attitude appeared to be that, so long as the Column continued to exist and did not lose any men or arms, it continued to be a thorn in the side of the enemy, and so served its purpose. But a number of us had different views and wanted to take more positive action. Nevertheless we were loyal to each other, and this particular episode¹ had shown each man that all his comrades could be relied upon in any emergency.

A report regarding the activities in Kilkenny of the South Tipperary No. 2 Column was made by Maurice McGrath, who was Adjutant of the Column. From my knowledge of the events, I know this to be an accurate representation of the facts and so I propose to quote from it.

"The enemy had concentrated all their retaliation operations on South Tipperary, so Column leaders decided it would be a strategic move if the Columns moved into strange territories and made things lively there, and relieve the tension in home areas. Kilkenny was the nearest and at this particular time several districts were comparatively quiet and free from enemy attacks; consequently our Column moved Kilkenny-ward. Long route-marches from Company to Company followed and consultations were held with local officers with the intention of obtaining assistance from Active Service Units in the carrying out of operations at different points. We found their Companies fairly well organised and ready to co-operate, but lacking very much in arms and ammunitions."

"Local Intelligence informed us that two to three military lorries passed daily from Callan to Kells through the village of Kilmanahan. Our O/C decided to attack those lorries and, accordingly, at about 9.30 a.m. took up positions in the village and awaited enemy approach. Nine men of the L.A.S.U. [Local Active Service Unit] joined Column here and the local Volunteers assisted in scout arrangements, etc."

"No civilians were allowed to leave the village and those entering were held, lest the enemy should be informed of our positions and plans. Notwithstanding our vigilant precautions word reached the enemy. Later Intelligence reported that two British ex-soldiers managed to get through out cordon and warned the enemy two miles from the village. They were dealt with at a later date."

* Parts 1 and 2 appeared in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1991 and 1992, respectively. For editorial introduction, see *THJ* 1991, p. 19. — Editor.

1. See Part 2, 1992, *THJ*, pp. 51-56.



"After several hours' waiting, we realised that the enemy were aware of our plans and were by this time preparing an attack. The Column wisely vacated the village before darkness and moved some miles in the Tullaroan direction, and were guided by local scouts until we considered that darkness afforded obstruction to our further progress. Consequently we billeted in the locality under great disadvantages."

"Expecting an attack from the enemy but being totally unprepared for such an extensive round-up, we realised that the enemy were gradually closing in upon our area. They were aware that we were not county-men [from Co. Kilkenny] and we could not have proceeded far before darkness. They quickly mustered reinforcements from Callan, Thurles, Kilkenny and other military centres and rushed them to the spot."

"Our Column having travelled for several days needless to say required a much-needed rest, so accordingly they were roused from their sleep after about an hour's rest and ordered to stand-to. Scouts acting under orders from W. Cleary and the Column Adjutant aroused the men and succeeded after a long time in getting men together, as the houses were a considerable distance apart. E. Aylward, O/C Kilkenny Battalion, decided to organise local A.S.U.s and impede the enemy's progress during our Kilkenny sojourn."

"The enemy lorries were gradually drawing nearer and we could plainly hear the general hum. Troops were dropped at various points and advanced quietly to take up positions and await the morning's light for the attack. Our position was such that, owing to darkness, without knowledge of the country we had to go through and with only a few local scouts available, we were badly handicapped. We feared to advance in one direction or another lest an ambush awaited us. Our only hope was to reach the Tipperary border, and to return on a future occasion when more systematic and co-operative organisation would afford better opportunities."

"The Column was fortunate enough to choose a point of advance through the enemy lines which was yet open. After hours of forced marching there was no alternative but to chance taking some rest and refreshments. For twelve hours we had fasted, and the men were so physically exhausted that they actually fell asleep where they sat. Nine of the Column were billeted at a distance from the main body — the O/C, Tommy Ryan, Tim Mullaney, J. Nagle, J. Butler, S. Morrissey and three Kilkenny A.S.U. men."

"They had barely taken refreshments and were dozing when the men of the house rushed in and told them the boy on scout duty was waving a handkerchief from a few fields away. This was the signal that the enemy was in view. He had no sooner signalled than he was captured, and a party of Black and Tans, about 100 strong, were rushed in extended order towards the house. The men had barely time to get out and take shelter when they were attacked."

"Rapid exchange of fire took place and the O/C now endeavoured to out-flank the enemy and rejoin the main body some distance away. The enemy's cordon prevented this move, as a fresh force of military now appeared in that direction. No alternative remained but to engage the enemy and retreat in order. This we succeeded in doing for about 400 yards. The Black and Tans kept up a rapid fire from the front but did not advance as yet, the reason being that they realised that the I.R.A. were retreating into a trap, as a large force of military were advancing from their rear."

"The [British] military had taken up position in their rear and, though hidden, awaited their approach with levelled rifles. As they retreated, the Column members faced the "Tans" and consequently, their backs being turned to the military, they proved easy targets; but evidently the officer in charge wanted to capture them alive. Fortunately, as they were quite close, one Column member — Seán Morrissey — casually glancing behind, noticed the military in position and sounded the warning — 'tin hats, tin-hats at the other side of the ditch'."



"The military officer rushed through a gap and shouted, "Surrender", no doubt believing that he had nine prisoners: but he made a mistake. He had not nine children to contend with! Those were picked men and fearless, and death had no terror for them. No sooner had he uttered the words of surrender than the I.R.A. responded with a rapid volley of revolver shots and the officer and several men fell. The remainder dropped for shelter."

"The O/C of the Column [Seán Hogan], realising that a moment's hesitation in his position between both fires meant the annihilation of his small force and seizing the advantage of the enemy's surprise, rushed his men over a low fence on his right flank. The "Tans" meanwhile had moved several yards closer and now concentrated their fire upon the very gap the I.R.A. were passing through, the result being that two Kilkenny A.S.U. men were shot in the act of getting over. Tommy Ryan and Seán [Hogan], being the last two to pass through, covered the retreat of their comrades, maintaining a rapid fire."

"The O/C, realising that every attempt to rejoin main body of the Column was futile owing to military cordon between them, which had been strengthened by the addition of reinforcements, decided to attract the attention of the enemy further down the line and withdrew their forces from the vicinity of the main body of the Column which he hoped to rejoin in the latter darkness under local guidance. This he succeeded in doing by attacking a small body of enemy a half-mile further down from Tubrid, the scene of the first encounter."

"This had the desired effect, as the enemy forces withdrew in the direction of this new attack. A running fight was kept up for some time and the I.R.A. eventually succeeding in again eluding them until darkness and local assistance made it possible for them to leave altogether the area and later rejoin the main body on the Kilkenny-Tipperary border. Our losses, though serious, were small and could under the circumstances have been immense. The enemy lost several soldiers and an officer. Several others were wounded."

Seán Hayes, who in later years became a T.D., was a native of Ballingarry, on the Tipperary-Kilkenny border. He was an A.S.U. man of the 7th Battalion Tipperary Brigade, and one of the eight mentioned who took part in this engagement which included the O/C, Seán Hogan. When all seemed hopeless he led the way out.

Co. Kilkenny Operations

Regarding the two Kilkenny A.S.U. men who were shot, one of them was named Walsh; I forget the other man's name. The latter was a Mayo man with whom I was very friendly at the time. They had come to me that night, and I had endeavoured to persuade both of them to go home as there did not seem to be anything they could do to help us. This man — the Mayo man, whose name I forget for the moment — was very interested in football, and stayed there pretty late talking to me about football. So they were with us the next morning when we were surrounded by the enemy.

Neither of them had ever been under fire before, so this was a new experience for them. Up to the time I left them where they were lying on the ground, they were uninjured. I had urged them to run with the others while Seán Hayes and I covered their retreat, but they seemed rooted to the ground and I could not persuade them to move. As there was no time to lose, we left them there. Seemingly, they were killed when the "Tans" advanced to our position after our retreat. Whether the Tans shot them where they lay or after their capture, I cannot say.

An indication of the difference in conditions between county Kilkenny and county Tipperary at this period is shown by the following incident which occurred while we were in Kilkenny



during that Spring of 1921. In Tipperary from the time of the Soloheadbeg attack [in January 1919] the county was more or less continuously under martial law. Where R.I.C. barracks were still occupied, the R.I.C. kept strictly within the walls of their barracks and dared not wander indiscriminately abroad. There was no such thing as small groups of military moving around; these, fearing attack, always moved in large defensive bodies.

Consequently, the ordinary processes of law enforcement did not operate in the later period in Tipperary. It was a surprise to us, therefore, to find conditions very different when we reached Co. Kilkenny, as the following incident illustrates. A day or two previous to the Kilmanahan affair, I was billeted with a couple of my comrades in a farmhouse in South Kilkenny. We were awaiting lunch on this day, everything being peaceful and calm about, and I had occasion to leave the house and go into one of the out-buildings. I observed a lorry carrying police pulling up at the farmhouse. Concluding that this was a raid to capture us, I pulled my gun and covered the door of the house from a porthole in the wall of the cowhouse.



A formal photograph of the late Col. Ryan taken in McKee Barracks, Dublin, when he was a cavalry officer.

A girl of the house came to the door and remained in conversation with them for a few minutes and a document was passed between them, while all this time, as I watched with my gun levelled

on them, my comrades sat in the parlour! After a few minutes, they bade the girl good-bye, turned on their heels and walked off. I did not move until it was clear that all was peaceful once more. Going into the house, I was amazed to learn that the purpose of the police visit was to deliver a summons to the owner of the house for the non-payment of dog licences!

Maurice McGrath's report also gives an accurate account of an incident regarding an expected landing of arms on the south coast which, as far as I can remember, took place some time about April, 1921.

"South Tipperary Columns Nos. 1 and 2 were ordered to proceed to the Nire Valley for the purpose of digging dumps to receive a cargo of arms expected to be landed on the Dungarvan coast. The Nire Valley Company operated within a range of encircling hills between Clonmel and Dungarvan, and it was in those hills that we were to dig the dumps. The Nire Valley Company, being part of the Waterford Brigade, had been instructed to co-operate with us in preparing these dumps. No. 1 Column failed to turn up at the rendezvous owing to enemy activity in their area north of the Galtees, but No. 2 Column carried out the operation successfully.

"It was strenuous work for about a fortnight, using picks and shovels, and about a dozen dumps were made and lined with heather. However, these dumps were never used for the purpose for which they were intended. Owing to the vigilance of the coastguards, the cargo could not be landed near Dungarvan but was, I understand, landed further down the coast by arrangement with the Brigade Commander, "Pax" Whelan, at a point remote from the Nire Valley."

Following this we returned to Co. Tipperary and we were in our own Battalion area some time about six weeks before the Truce [July 1921]. Here I again quote from McGrath's report.

"Frequently two to three lorries of Black and Tans travelled on the Cahir-Clonmel road, our Intelligence reported, and their time of passing varied between twelve noon and three in the afternoon. So both Nos. 1 and 2 Columns concentrated at Derrygrath to make arrangements for an attack on these lorries. No. 2 Column, being in Tickincor outside Clonmel, made a detour and crossed near the Golf Links above Clonmel on through the Grange Company area into Nicholastown, about three miles from Cahir. We awaited there the arrival of No. 1 Column, which had travelled south via Clerihan."

"The Columns having arrived at Derrygrath, [Sean] Hogan and [Dinny] Lacey made the necessary arrangements and the Columns moved into position at Barne. Positions were taken up in such a way that, should a stronger enemy force than was expected arrive, the Columns could retire in order, keeping in touch with each other for a considerable distance. A section of No. 1 Column under Seán Kennedy, the machine-gunner, took up position behind the estate wall with a Hotchkiss gun, commanding a view of the road for about 100 yards as far as Hayden's pubhouse. The road to Clerihan runs directly opposite the forge."

The plan of action was that the first lorry entering the ambush position would be allowed to pass the pubhouse until it reached a point within about 50 yards of the demesne-wall, when it would be fired on by the machine-gun. Simultaneously with this, two specially selected men would push donkey-carts to "plug" both roads at the forge. These men were selected — one from each Column, Seán Downey from No. 1 and Tommy Ryan from No. 2. Both men were of great physique and proved courage and, on blocking the roads, they were to take up position in the forge and prevent any survivors of the enemy party from taking cover there."

"It was expected that, should the first lorry escape the machine-gun volley, the cart obstruction on the road would upset it and this would also cause the others to crash, as the lorries usually travelled very fast with small intervals between them. We expected that the obstruction would overturn the first lorry and that the lorry following would have very little time to avoid crashing into the first."



"The remainder of the Column was dispersed on both sides of the road, some men being close to the road behind the road fences, to deal with those who might jump from the lorries and try to gain cover on the roadside, while others were in sniping positions further back from the road, where they could readily close around the rear of the lorries when they had got into the ambush position, should the distance between them be greater than usual. All passing traffic was held up quietly and quickly, and passers-by were sent away down two by-roads where they were out of view of anyone coming into the ambush position and also out of danger. Guards were placed over them."

"The Columns maintained their positions for about 3¼ hours, but again we were doomed to disappointment. Fortunately for the enemy, as we learned afterwards, they had left Cahir in the lorries as usual and had travelled a few miles out when the steering of one of their lorries went wrong. It ran into a ditch and was disabled. The whole party was therefore delayed pending the retrieval and repairs to the lorry, and the [IRA] Column was so deprived of a great victory. The enemy party had consisted of about 40 "Tans" who would have been utterly wiped out if they had reached the ambush position, where we had that day some 62 men. Our dispositions were such that none of the enemy could have escaped us."

"About 4 p.m. our leaders realised the futility of further delay; nothing remained but to move on to further activities. They also realised that the enemy would by then have been informed of our position at Barne and would muster in strong numbers there in an effort to round us up. Consequently, the country carts — a couple of hundred of them — that had been detained during the day were released and, when they were released, they evoked so much enthusiasm in their departure as to give rise to a lot of amusement. The clatter of their thundering hooves as they sped away could be heard for a long distance."

"The following day, when the hue and cry had died down, a photograph of the members of the Column was taken by a man named Sharkey.² This photograph subsequently appeared in Dan Breen's book. Some members of the Column, however, were missing from the picture. Tommy Ryan had left the previous night on a mission of great importance and danger, and thus missed being in the photograph."

Concerning the mission of importance that I was engaged on, as mentioned in McGrath's report, the details are as follows. Mick Sheehan, who had been appointed Brigade Quartermaster at this time, had decided to make a survey of all the arms in the Brigade area and, for this purpose, was visiting Battalion and Company Commanders. Sheehan had no knowledge of the four Battalions in the southern area; so I was detailed to accompany him for his protection to introduce him to the people around. Being considerably older than I was, he was cautious — I could say ultra-careful! Of course, he was in what was to him a strange area; I, being in my own area, was in no danger of being captured.

One evening, while we were inspecting the Tincurry Company, I heard to my great surprise rifle-fire from the Galtee military rifle-range. This range had previously been destroyed by the local Volunteers, and we did not expect to see it in use again by the [British] military, but I now realised that the military in Cahir had ventured out again to carry out live practices on this range. A few hours later when the soldiers had started to move away from the range — we were then within 1,200 yards of them — on impulse I fired off three rifle shots at them.

Sheehan was close by at the time and, knowing what happened, retreated hurriedly in the direction of Ballylooby where I rejoined him later. He informed me that he would have me courtmartialled for the action I had taken on this occasion, presumably on the charge that my

2. See article by Aodogán O'Rahilly, *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1992, p. 34.



action in firing on the military was undisciplined. I was very annoyed by his attitude, and I went away from him that evening on to the main road, away from the farmhouse where he was billeted.

Inside Cahir Barracks!

While I was on the road, Jack Keating, a driver of one of Brown's lorries of Clogheen, came along with the lorry, going in the direction of Cahir. I had in mind returning to the Column and leaving Sheehan to his own devices, so I asked Keating for a lift. When I got into the lorry, he told me that he was calling to Harty's, opposite the military barracks in Cahir, but that I would be quite safe in the lorry as he would not be stopped long there.

The night was dark, and as I was seated in the lorry opposite the barracks in Cahir, I saw groups of people going into the barracks, I concluded that there was some kind of a concert about to begin in the barracks. On impulse, I left the lorry and joined one of these groups, being admitted to the barracks without question!

The first thing that confronted me was a soldier who was on beat as a sentry. He was standing at ease. Moving close to him, I snatched his rifle from him and ran at a 100-yards sprint pace towards a lean-to shed at the back of the barracks. I knew the lay-out of the barracks very well, as I had delivered hay and straw there some years previously!

I scaled the sheds and got from the roof on to the wall surrounding the barracks without being detected by the sentries at either corner of the barracks. Outside the wall was a barbed-wire entanglement surrounding the barracks. I was unaware of the distance this was from the wall, as I could not see it in the darkness, though I knew it was there. I jumped from the top of the wall but landed in the middle of the barbed wire!

The alarm had gone in the barracks and the military had rushed for the front gate, apparently to cut off my exit in that direction. But, as I had anticipated this move by going to the back wall and none of them had come in that direction, my mode of escape was unnoticed. However, the search went on and the orderly officer, with a party of troops with fixed bayonets, moved outside the barracks and began to search around the walls.

I was caught fast in the wire and could not move without making a lot of noise, so I lay as quiet as possible while this search went on. The orderly officer had a flashlight which he shone upon the wall as he moved around, and the beam of this as they passed me was just too high to pick me up, passing about two feet over my head.

I remained still for about two hours before I ventured to pick myself out of the wire, which I did eventually, though I left the legs of my trousers behind in it, and also my revolver which I lost when I jumped and could not locate in the dark. I was badly cut by the wire and bled quite a lot; but I held on to the rifle! Having got clear of the wire, I made for the demesne wall of Colonel Charteris's place, a few hundred yards from the barracks. I knew then I was safe, and made my way from there to Quinlan's of Ballylaffan, about 4½ miles away. I remained in bed there for three days, recovering from my wounds.

This incident took place about a month prior to the Truce. A short time following this the Columns were disbanded and were replaced by active service groups in each Battalion area. I took very little part in any further activity until the Truce came about on July 11, 1921.

One of the last incidents that occurred before the Truce was the burning of some mansions in the locality, including Captain Perry's of Newcastle. He was the landlord of all that area, and his forefathers before him had been tyrannical landlords. Following the Clerihan ambush



the military had burned a number of houses in the area as a reprisal, including the houses of people who had no connection whatever with the Volunteers.

As a counter-reprisal for these burnings it was therefore decided to burn down a number of big houses of the gentry who were British supporters in the area; and Perry's was one of these. This mission was given to the local Company who were mobilised for the purpose, but the No. 2 Column went there to co-operate with the local Company in case anything out of the ordinary turned up. Having surrounded the house, I was one of a party of six detailed to go to the halldoor and demand admittance. Perry had the name of being a bit of a gunman. So, having knocked at the door, we waited with guns at the ready until he himself opened the door when we poured into the hall.

Perry was in his pyjamas and became ghastly white when he realised who we were. He concluded apparently that we had come to shoot him, and appeared vastly relieved when we informed him that we had merely come to burn down the house, at which he smiled all over and requested us to give him permission to take a glass of spirits. We accompanied him to the diningroom, where he helped himself to a glass of whiskey and offered us a drink which we refused as none of us took drink then.

While he drank he told us he had a very valuable library and requested permission to save these from the flames. We sent a runner to the Column Commander with this request, and permission to save the books having been given, about ten men were detailed to remove the books from the house, following which straw was spread around the rooms and other men came along to sprinkle this with petrol.

The inmates of the house were sent to a nearby house on the estate where they remained for the night. Though the house was burned to the ground, there were cellars in it containing wines and spirits with which the local people made free in the next couple of days. As a result, in the subsequent round-up a number of the locals were captured by the enemy in a half-tipsy condition!

Another place that was burned some days later was the house of the Protestant Minister in Tubrid. This was after the formation of the active service groups and was one of the first — if not the first — acts of the active service group in that locality. The rumour had got around that the enemy intended to establish a blockhouse system where strong points in sight of each other would be established to dominate the whole country.

This Protestant Minister, named Disney, had a house which was situated on a hill overlooking the surrounding country, and it was thought that this would constitute a temporary blockhouse and would be so used by the enemy. Therefore it was decided to destroy it. I was back in my own Battalion area then and, except for this, there was no more activity worth mentioning until the Truce occurred. This concludes the story of my activities up to the date of the Truce, except for a few incidents which come to my mind just now as having been skipped in the chronology of events.

Plane Shot Down

One of these incidents concerns the shooting down of an aeroplane, which occurred some time about April 1921. At that time the Column were at the house of people named McGrath of Crohane, Newcastle. We were in a field at the back of the house cleaning our rifles one morning, when a military aeroplane came flying low over us. We concluded that the occupants were searching for the Column and had some information of our location. The Column Commander hurriedly ordered us to assemble our arms and open fire on the aeroplane.



All six of us who were present at the time took very careful aim and fired several shots as it passed, at what seemed to be 50-100 feet over our heads. Our fire was not returned. It was so close to us when we fired that we could hardly miss it. After our firing the 'plane set up a crackling noise and wobbled for some time, so that we expected to see it crashing at any moment. Then, seeming to recover, it gained height and changed its course. Instead of flying, as it had been, over the Knockmealdown mountains, it now turned and flew out of sight over the Galtees. It was still clattering as it disappeared from our sight.

The daily press next day gave an account of an aeroplane that had been shot down by the I.R.A. in East Limerick. I cannot say, of course, if the 'plane shot down by the East Limerick men was the same 'plane that we fired at, but this incident occurred about the same time and, from the circumstance of our firing on it, we could hardly have missed it, though whether our shots had any serious effect on the machine I, of course, cannot say.

The following is another incident I would like to record. Tom Looby, later a Lieut-Colonel Looby of the National Army, joined the Column in May 1921. He brought information to the Column Commander that a party of enemy cyclists moved out from Clonmel each day two or three miles out the road and might easily be attacked and captured. I was one of ten picked out to carry out this mission and we proceeded, with Looby acting as a scout, to ambush this patrol.

We had planned to surprise them but, in fact, they came on us unexpectedly so that we were surprised instead. After a short sharp exchange of fire we withdrew, but Looby was captured by the enemy. The engagement took place within a mile of the military barracks in Clonmel on the Kilsheelan road.

Another engagement in 1921 deserves recording. We were in the mountains above Slievenamon, having come along a main road, when from the heights we observed a party of "Tans" travelling on the road from Kilkenny to Clonmel. We were a considerable distance away but we opened fire on them at long range, and this started a fight which last all night but we were not in it!

After we had fired on the "Tans" we withdrew and went off to our beds. We were greatly surprised to read in the papers next day of a heavy engagement that had taken place in Slievenamon. Seemingly at the time that we opened fire on the Tans there was a party of [British] military coming from the direction of Cork; they, hearing the firing, went into action in the direction from which it came. As we had withdrawn and it was then getting dark, the only firing they could then discern was that of the "Tans", while the "Tans" in turn concluded that the military fire was from us, so the battle between them went on all night and we were not in it at all! I cannot give the date of this incident, but believe it was May or possibly June 1921.

As it will be found mentioned, or seen in photographs, that Volunteer uniforms were worn during 1920 and 1921 by the officers of our Column, it may be of interest to show the origin of these particular uniforms. When the Column was first formed, I happened to have in my possession three Volunteer officers' uniforms. I had bought one of these in Fermoy and the other two from a tailor in Clogheen about 1917, and had these in my possession all that time.

When I joined the Column, I have one of these uniforms to [Sean] Hogan, another to Dan Breen; the third I wore myself. I think it was Breen who gave his uniform to Jack Nagle when he left the Column, and the three of us wore these uniforms all the time we were on the Column. Strangely enough, however, I had not my uniform on the night I went into Cahir Barracks. I think that must have been the only time I was out of uniform during that period.

To be caught in uniform, of course, meant certain death. Perhaps there was a certain amount of bravado in wearing uniform during this period. But we felt it was necessary to assert our



right as soldiers and as lawful belligerents, so that in all the exploits I have narrated here where the Column was engaged, the three of us always wore uniform.

I never in my wildest dreams suspected a spy in my native townland. However, it was obvious there was somebody keeping a close watch on my home. As stated previously, my home was raided once a week while I was serving in the Column. On occasions when the Column came near my home I made it a point to visit my mother and family. A visit of this nature brought about a raid on the house a couple of hours later.

The Black and Tan officer, or military officer, as frequently happened, remarked to my mother; "your son was here to-night". The local Company O/C was aware of the facts. He suspected nothing; neither did any Volunteers in the locality. One such visit nearly spelt disaster for me. Fortunately I had grown to be a hardened soldier, had wonderful ears and good eyes, and these facilities saved me; but I overstayed my time a matter of a few hours.

The field adjoining the house was newly sown with wheat. A path led from it into a grass field, which was my route to join the Column. Proceeding along this path I observed what appeared to be a shadow at the gate leading into the grass field, a distance of 150 yards away. I put my ear to the fence and listened, and in a matter of five seconds I distinctly heard a cough. This signal was sufficient to realise what was awaiting for me.

I thought quickly and concluded my only hope was to roll into the corn field. I kept rolling until I got to a hollow in the centre. In the event of being observed I would run for it and fight it out, as I hated the thought of being captured alive and tortured. I had no sooner arrived, as I thought safe and sound, in the hollow of the field when I heard the Lancers on the road. I saw them surrounding and searching the house, and expected every moment to see them galloping into the field. I lay on the ground from 11 o'clock at night until 5 in the morning before I was convinced the coast was clear!

In 1924 I was O/C, 19th Battalion, commanding Kilkenny military barracks. On one Saturday morning inspection of the barracks I remarked that the men's canteen was perfect from a cleanliness point of view. I sent for the Manager and congratulated him. He seemed very pleased and thanked me. At the same time he added: "My I see you alone sometime for a minute?" I called upon him an hour later, when he told me that he knew me by repute well, that he was Manager of the canteen in Cahir [military barracks] when the Column were fighting the "Tans".

He had often heard it remarked: "we are going out for Ryan, and we will have him dead or alive to-night". I asked how it was they were so sure of capturing me. He said that I had a special spy on my home, a local man named [name deleted]. He was a peculiar type, and the last person I would suspect to be fitted for such work.

A Truce In Cahir!

I paid a visit to Cahir on July 14, 1921. I mentioned previously that Cahir was a Loyalist town. Five members was its total contribution of Volunteers towards the fight for freedom from 1916 to 1921! The people were curious at this stage to see individuals such as myself, who had been on the run, and I was accorded a good outward show of welcome. A publican who hunted with the hare and followed the hound prevailed upon me to accept an invitation to her place that evening to meet two Black and Tans who were good friends of hers.

I accepted the invitation, met the Tans referred to and the best bottle in the house was put up. They were gentlemanly fellows, and after a few references to the fight we decided to forget about it and celebrate. The best bottle led to several, and to a sing-song. The evening was most



enjoyable until approaching midnight, when a lorry of "Tans" sought admission for a drink. They insisted on joining us in the sitting-room. The driver, a notorious ruffian, when he saw and learned who I was, stated, "I think too much of the oath I took to drink with a rebel", and approached me.

There were two Volunteers in the room at the time, the Local Company Commander and myself. The Company Commander was armed; I was not. I saw red as the driver approached me. I caught his face with the palm of my left hand and his body with my right. I lifted him to the ceiling and flung him over the banister into the hallway below. Two others came to his assistance, but they were roughly treated by the two Tans who were with me at the beginning of the celebration. Skin and hairs flew in all directions for ten minutes.

One of the "lorry Tans" drew a gun at this stage. He was disarmed by one of my "Tans". A second drew a gun, and the Company Commander handed me his gun. Just at the climax, the District Inspector [of police] appeared and ordered the "Tans" to barracks. Five seconds more and it would have been a sorry sight. The man responsible for this episode was shot dead the following evening while driving through Tipperary town.

As I have referred in the course of this story to the Vice-Brigadier, Seán Treacy, as one to whom we looked as the leader, perhaps I should make some reference also to Seamus Robinson, who was the Brigade Commander from the formation of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade until the Truce in 1921.

Robinson had come to Tipperary after his release from prison in 1917 to become the G.H.Q. organiser of the Volunteers in the county. His 1916 service and the fact that he was the G.H.Q. representative on the spot gave him a certain standing, and so I suppose it followed naturally that, when the Brigade was formed, he was given the appointment of Brigade Commander.

I have no direct personal knowledge of the circumstances of Robinson's appointment to Brigade rank but, from what I know of Treacy, I imagine that it was probably he that supported, if he did not propose, Robinson for the appointment. While Treacy lived, he was looked upon by all the officers and men of the Brigade as the actual power, even though he did not choose to hold the appointment of Brigade Commander. At Brigade Council meetings which I attended, though Robinson might preside, it was Treacy who dominated and directed matters, and it was, therefore, to Treacy we looked for leadership in action.

Almost immediately following Treacy's death, the Columns were formed and the whole energies of the best fighting men were concentrated on the operations and activities of these special units. The activities of the Brigade Staff from then on became almost purely administrative, giving support to the Columns by intelligence and communication services. From the time the Columns began operations, Robinson remained in and about the Brigade Headquarters at Rosegreen, taking no active part in the work of the Columns, and so was not regarded by the men of the Columns as having any effective control of them. In fact, the Column Commanders at this time seemed to be supreme in their respective commands, the Brigade Headquarters merely acting as a centre for intelligence reports and other communications.

From this it may be seen that we looked upon Robinson's position as Brigade Commander as purely nominal. However, with the wisdom of later years, I realise that, had he been possessed of a more forceful character and spent more of his time with the Columns, where he might have influenced or directed their activities on the spot, we might have had less to lament in the way of lost opportunities.

