



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL
JOURNAL 1993**

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ISSN 0791-0655

A Free State soldier's memories of the Civil War

By Jack Duff

I joined the National Army in May 1922. I was what was called a "Truce recruit", having joined after the Anglo-Irish Truce of July 1921. I had not been in the Fianna, and did not take any part in the War of Independence. Before I joined the Army I had been employed by the Dublin United Tramway Company. I later worked with the DUTC for 37 years as a tram-driver.

On 9 August 1922 I was part of the Free State forces who entered Clonmel town as the Republicans retreated. The military barracks was blazing. We were welcomed by the townspeople. The Republicans had been taking goods off the traders there, but not paying for them.

I can remember some of the Clonmel families of that time. In Queen Street, perhaps at Number 57 or 58, there was a big house near the cross-roads that led to the railway station. It was owned by a family named Howard, a father, mother and a daughter in her early teens. One rainy night when I was on sentry duty the hall-door was left open, so that we could shelter inside. We were invited in for tea, and returned many times after that. There was a harmonium in the house.

I remember another shop in the area, a small one owned by a lady named Hall, who had been in the United States. She was a bit odd, and used to allow the children in behind the counter to take their own sweets once they had paid! I also recall another house owned by a tailor named Michael, who did a good trade in altering our new uniforms. Opposite the barracks was a public-house owned by a man named Tobin, who also ran a guesthouse.

I remember our first Sunday in Clonmel, when we were paraded down Gladstone Street for Mass. We were led by a Capt. Dunne, an ex-British Army man. We formed up at the start of the street, with a band playing to lead us; I think it was the British Legion band. Just when about half of our column had got into Gladstone Street, a Republican machine-gun opened fire from the hills overlooking the town. The bullets were flying over our heads.

One person was killed near the church, and one or two more were wounded at the Post Office. Most of our men were raw recruits; they just dropped their rifles and ran! On our second parade we were unarmed (we had lost rifles at the first parade), and nothing happened.

Our company commander was a Tipperary man named Tom Taylor, who was once arrested by the Army for something he did up on the heights of Carrickbeg overlooking Carrick-on-Suir town. One day he invited me to come with him for a ride out into the countryside. We took a tender and brought a rifle and some ammunition. We went to a friendly house, where we got tea.

On the road home we saw a man up on a ladder thatching a house. As a [Dublin] Jackeen this was something new to me; so we stopped to watch. As we did so a civilian walked across the yard of the house carrying a revolver. I was then on my own, but Taylor came rushing out shouting at me to know where the man with revolver had done. I asked him "why", and he shouted that it was Seamus Robinson.

In those days it was the order of the day to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. I was glad I had not shot Robinson, because he was one of the bravest men in the War of Independence. I heard later that Taylor went off to America, got mixed up in some racket and was killed. I don't know if this is right.

About the capture of Liam Lynch, I was one of the column on the Knockmealdown Mountains.



The column was stretched out across the mountain, with a Lieutenant Connolly, a Tipperary man, in charge. Near the end of the day Connolly fired one round in the air, to collect in his own men. Away up in the distance a group in civilian clothes then ran; they were fired on, and one was hit. When we got up to him, one of our men said he was de Valera, but the wounded man said: "No, I'm Liam Lynch".

We did our best for him, brought him down the mountain road, and commandeered a hay-float. He was then brought by ambulance to Clonmel hospital, where he died. We had been out on column-duty, searching for Republicans. I know now that our headquarters knew that a party of Republicans were up there.

I remember Liam Deasy, who was Chief of Staff of the Irregulars, being court-martialled in Clonmel. He was sentenced to death, and taken to the Borstal. The coffin was prepared and the grave dug. Then the night before he was to be executed Deasy asked to see the Commanding Officer.

General John T. Prout, whom I met once in Ninemilehouse, went up to Deasy's cell, and was there for ages. Next day the execution was called off and Deasy was sent to Dublin in an armoured Whippet. He called on his men to lay down their arms. I think he had been captured in the Glen of Aherlow.

Editorial Notes on above three articles:

1. The article by Michael Neenan was offered to the Editor in 1992 after the issue of this Journal for that year had gone to press. The author lives in retirement in Carlow.
2. The article by William Grogan is the result of an interview the Editor had with him at his home in Ardane, Glen of Aherlow, on 23 January, 1993.
3. The article by Jack Duff consists of extracts, from tapes in the Military Archives, recorded in 1992 by Commandant Peter Young of the Military Archives with Sergt. Duff, then in his 88th year. The Editor acknowledges the permission of Sergt. Duff and the co-operation of Commdt. Young in extracting the material relating to Co. Tipperary on the tapes.

