

# *My part in the War of Independence*

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By Paddy Kinane

## Part II\*

The attack on Rearcross Barracks was planned to commence on Saturday night, July 11, 1920. That night Jim Stapleton, Tom Stapleton, Jack Fahy and myself drove in a horse-and-cart by a back road to Foilduff near Rearcross, where the men were assembling. Amongst those present were Ernie O'Malley, who took charge of the operation, Seumas Robinson, Seán Treacy, Tadhg O'Dwyer (Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, South Tipperary Brigade) and Paddy Dwyer and Jim O'Gorman of Hollyford.

Later that night, when it was made known that the attack was postponed until Sunday night, the four of us who had travelled together returned home again, leaving behind our Lee Enfield rifles and a pump and hose which we had taken with us. The following night Tom Stapleton was unable to come, but Jim Stapleton, Tom Fahy and myself, this time riding on horseback, went again to the assembly point near Rearcross.

We collected our rifles, but when the final details for the attack were settled we had no use for them as we were posted to Flannery's shop. Flannery's shop was situated next door to the barracks. Both were long, two-storied stone buildings, under the same roof, separated only by a single dividing wall. Flannery's carried on, in addition to a bar, grocery and general hardware shop, a small hotel business.

As I had stayed there, I was familiar with the lay-out of the house: that was why I was posted with the party who took it over. The barracks was divided into three portions by two internal stone walls, and this feature was to have a big bearing on the final outcome of the engagement. While I am not positive on the point, I would say that the strength of the garrison in the barracks would approximate to about 18 or 20 men.

Stapleton, Fahy, O'Gorman and myself entered Flannery's house through a low back window. It was then near midnight, and the people of the house had retired to bed. We roused them and, when we told them what we were about to do, they accepted the position cheerfully enough. We were joined in the house by four or five other Volunteers, all I believe from the Hollyford company. O'Malley was in and out of the house several times during the night.

In the top room next to the barracks we filled a barrel with paraffin oil, of which there was an ample supply on the premises, as Flannery's sold it. O'Gorman then climbed through a trap-door in the ceiling of this room; with a hammer he broke a hole in the slates as near as possible to the barrack roof. Reaching an arm out through this hole, he fired five or six shots rapidly with his revolver through the slates of the barrack roof, to break the slates and also to scare away any R.I.C. men who might be upstairs in that end of the barracks.

The next step was to bring the pump and the hose into play. With the hose running through the trap-door and through the hole in the roof, Stapleton and I took turns at the pump, pumping the paraffin oil from the barrel on to that section of the barrack roof nearest to Flannery's house.

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O'Gorman soon had that part of the roof burning. So far, I might say, our task in the house was only child's play, as we worked in the knowledge that we were perfectly safe.

If the police made a sortie out of the barracks to attack us in Flannery's, they would have been met not only by the armed men in the house but also by a volley of fire from a party of riflemen, who, in charge of Paddy O'Dwyer of Hollyford, had the entrance to the barracks covered from a position behind the wall of the chapel yard. A sergeant who came out by the front door to reconnoitre just as the attack on the roof started, was shot dead by our rifles. From the time O'Gorman fired the first shots a light rifle-fire on the barracks was maintained by this party. The garrison replied with everything they had – machine-guns, rifles, grenades and Verey lights.

The roof was burning for about 20 minutes or half-an-hour before that portion of it over the section of the barracks nearest to Flannery's caved in. The fire did not, as we hoped it would, carry over the dividing wall and ignite the roof over the centre section of the barracks. However, with the aid of the pump and hose, we succeeded in drenching it with plenty of paraffin, which O'Gorman set afire by throwing lighted rags and burning sods of turf on to it. Again, this portion burned until it caved in; but again the dividing wall prevented the fire from igniting the third or end section of the roof.

It was in this end section of the barracks that the R.I.C. garrison held out. Several times they were called upon to surrender, but their reply was usually an extra heavy volley of fire. The pump and hose failed us. Either the distance was too great for the hose to carry the paraffin, or else the pump had been overworked. We then resorted to throwing bottles of paraffin, stones and burning sods of turf on to the roof. Some small fires started, but burned themselves out without doing much damage.

After some hours' fruitless effort I considered that we could do nothing further from Flannery's house, so I went, with some others, to the yard at the back of the shop. From the cover of a high wall which separated Flannery's yard from the barracks we continued to throw bottles of paraffin and lighted missiles on to the roof, but with little success.

O'Malley, Seán Treacy and (I think) Dan Breen were then in the yard. They were discussing what our next move should be when a grenade burst in the yard. Everyone present received some kind of a wound or another; fortunately, no one was seriously injured. I only received a slight scratch on a hand, but O'Malley was hit in the back by a splinter. While he was being attended to, scouts reported that enemy reinforcements were approaching Rearcross along a back road. Acting on this report, the decision to call off the attack was made.

So ended the fight at Rearcross. The report of reinforcements proved to be unfounded. What was seen by a scout on the hills (and mistaken for lorries) were a hearse and a funeral carriage. This mistaken report saved the day for the R.I.C. garrison. A little longer, and means would certainly have been found to get that third section of the barracks on fire, and leave them with no option but to die in it or surrender.

The next incident of note I recall was the ambush of an R.I.C. patrol on the Thurles-Shevry road. A short time before the ambush Sergeant Igoe (later leader of the R.I.C. "murder gang") had been transferred to Shevry barracks. We were tipped off about him by the 1st Battalion staff, who asked us to try and "get him". A patrol of four to eight R.I.C. men went regularly, almost daily, from Shevry to Upperchurch.

On July 30, 1920 Michael Ryan, Jim and Tom Stapleton, Thomas Gleeson and myself lay in ambush for the patrol at a point about 150 yards from Upperchurch Cross, as one goes towards Shevry. Two others, Paddy Boyle and Paddy Phelan, acted as scouts. For some reason which I cannot now recall Jim Stapleton and I seemed to have been certain that Igoe would be with the patrol on that particular day; but he was not.



The patrol consisted of four R.I.C., and we had a perfect view of them from the ambush position as they came along the road, until they were within 200 yards of us. They were then hidden from our view by a bend in the road. Whilst out of our sight, two of the policemen must have delayed or dropped back, for only two came properly into the ambush position. Both were killed by our first volley.

We then got out into the road and gave chase to, and fired on the other two. They succeeded in making good their escape back to the barracks, which was only about a mile away. Returning to the scene of the ambush, we collected the rifles and revolvers belonging to the two dead R.I.C. men. That night military and police from Thurles burned Upperchurch creamery and Phelan's house at Curraduff as reprisals. They also made an attack on James Larkin's house, wounding his brother.

On the night of August 15 or early in the morning of August 16, 1920 Jimmy Leahy, the Brigade O/C, Jim Stapleton, John Fahy and myself left Upperchurch in a car driven by Jack Ryan of Thurles. We were bound for Templemore, and our object was to shoot District Inspector Wilson of the R.I.C. I am not sure whether the order to shoot him was a G.H.Q. or a Brigade Headquarters order.

Our car was owned by a Mr. Sonny McGrath of Thurles, whose mother then lived in Templemore. To avoid any suspicion on the part of the R.I.C., we parked the car outside Mrs. McGrath's house in Patrick Street, Templemore. The driver remained in the car.

We expected Wilson to pass through Patrick Street on his way to the R.I.C. barracks. After waiting for some hours at the house of Michael Kelly (next door to Mrs. McGrath's) who was a Volunteer, Jim Stapleton crossed to a house at the opposite side; someone may have called him over. Soon afterwards we saw Wilson coming along, walking on our side of the street, and Leahy signalled to Stapleton that Wilson was on the way.

When about 40 yards away from where we were standing at Kelly's door, Wilson crossed the street to the side Jim Stapleton was on. As he passed, we saw him glance fairly hard at Stapleton. Stapleton followed him a pace or two. Then, with his revolver almost resting on Wilson's shoulder, he fired point blank at his head. Wilson fell forward, dead.

In preparation for our getaway, we had the car turned and ready to go before Wilson came along, and we had also decided on an alternative line of retreat. It was by that route that we left Templemore; it took us through an archway to the demesne, across the demesne. Moving quickly cross country, we reached Barnane, where we rested. Later that day, from the slopes of the mountains near Barnane, we saw the town hall in Templemore ablaze. It was burned as a reprisal by the British military, who also burned Michael Kelly's house where we had waited for Wilson that morning.

At the time, as a result of the activities of the R.I.C. "murder gang" in other areas in Co. Tipperary, I had warned all prominent Volunteers (and their brothers) in my area never to sleep at home. On the night of October 25, 1920 a dance was held in Upperchurch. It was over about 1 a.m. on the morning of October 26, and as the hour was so late, my two brothers, Jim and Jerome went home when the dance was over.

That same night the R.I.C. "murder gang" left Thurles barracks and went to Shevry barracks. From there they went to Ryan's of Curraduff, and found Michael Ryan in his home. He was ill at the time, and had gone home to recuperate. He was alone in the house with his mother and two sisters. The R.I.C. demanded admittance, and shot him dead in his bed. From Ryan's the gang went to Jim Stapleton's home at Finnahy. Jim's parents were alone in the house that night; failing to find Jim, the raiders shot some geese in the farmyard, and then proceeded to my home.



Here the raiders, who had their faces blackened, found my two brothers Jim and Jerome in bed. They took them out to the yard, and put them standing there in their night attire. A local R.I.C. sergeant, Sergeant Cotter, was called to identify them; he confirmed that I was not there. The gang then held a conversation for a few minutes, after which, in my parents' presence, they told the two boys to kneel down as they were going to shoot them.

Jim, however, had other ideas; giving Jerome a little nudge, together they both made a dash for the gate which the raiders had left open. As they ran they were fired on; Jerome was hit by a bullet which entered under his left shoulder and passed clean through his body. He continued to run; in the laneway they were again fired on by another party of R.I.C. men, Jerome receiving a further wound in the calf of his leg.

He managed to continue across a field where he and Jim became separated. Jim, who was not hit, came to where some of us were in a disused house. He told us what had happened at my home, and was positive that Jerome had also escaped unhurt.

We collected our arms and went to my home; the R.I.C. had taken their departure. Needless to remark, my parents were in a state of distress, as they were sure that both Jim and Jerome were dead. The sight of Jim, and his news that Jerome was alive, cheered them; but as time passed there was no sign of Jerome. Shortly after daylight in the morning, he was found by some neighbours lying in a turnip field. He was in a complete state of exhaustion from exposure and loss of blood.

To return to the R.I.C. "murder gang" and their activities on that early morning of October 26, 1920. After leaving our house they went to the residence of Tom Gleeson at Moher. Tom was not there; but his brother Willie had gone home after the dance in Upperchurch. They searched for Tom; failing to find him, they took Willie out of the house and shot him dead on the roadside.

It was, as far as I can now recollect, in the following month – November 1920 – that we organised a battalion flying column. The strength of the column was approximately 20 men, but this number varied from time to time, and there were periods when we broke up into small parties of four or five, so as to ease the problem of billeting and to avoid large-scale rounding-up operations by British forces. All regular members of the column were armed with rifles; in addition, some had revolvers. Jim Stapleton and myself acted as column leaders.

About a month or six weeks before the formation of the flying column, with two or three Volunteers from the Borrisoleigh company, I attacked a patrol of four R.I.C. men at Kileskane, near Borrisoleigh. This patrol had left Borrisoleigh to link up with another from Goulding's Cross. It was difficult to get a suitable ambush position on that particular road; so we took the only one that offered, which was behind a wall, about two feet high. We were armed with rifles and shotguns.

We had not long to wait, for the patrol came along almost at once. They were walking in twos, about 30 yards apart. In anticipation of this, we had divided into two parties. Fire was opened almost simultaneously by our two parties, and two members of the patrol (one of the leading pair and one of the pair in the rear) were killed immediately.

Some loads of hay on carts came along the road to the ambush position just as we fired at the patrol and, using the carts and hay as cover, the other two policemen succeeded in escaping. We captured the rifles and revolvers of the two dead constables. When we examined their ammunition, we found that one of the constables was carrying "dum-dum" revolver ammunition.\*

On November 9, 1920 the column, supported by Seán Hayes, Vice-Commandant of the 7th battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade, and some others from the South Tipperary brigade occupied

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\*This was declared illegal after its use in the Boer War – Editor.



an ambush position at Ross (between Thurles and Nenagh) on a bye-road, about 50 yards away from and overlooking the main Thurles-Nenagh road. We had not time to erect a barricade on the main road when a lorry of troops, going in the direction of Thurles, came along.

The driver was hit in our first volley, and the lorry ran up against the ditch, but did not overturn; after events proved that it was not badly damaged. After an exchange of fire for 10 to 15 minutes and with the spare driver at the wheel, the British troops got the lorry under control and drove away.

There were several ambushes on that same road. It is what we call a valley road, running through the hills, and even one local man could snipe safely from the hillsides at lorries or convoys passing along the road below. I remember another occasion when Thomas Kirwan of Borrisoleigh, Jim Stapleton, Seán Dunne, Tommy Gleeson and myself opened fire from the hillside there at long-range on a party of troops who had come out by lorry to fill in a trench in the road.

The troops took cover, and we sniped at them for at least two or three hours while the troops replied with rapid and heavy fire. Meanwhile, other lorries of troops were rushed out from Templemore, Thurles and Nenagh, until there were at least 500 troops in the vicinity. They deployed out and up both sides of the mountain, took cover, and brought two or three machine-guns into action. Continuing to snipe, we gradually withdrew up the mountain side.

The British troops were apparently under the impression that we were present in strength, for they displayed the utmost caution and were not inclined to move from their cover. Eventually we withdrew altogether, and crossed the mountain towards Upperchurch, leaving them raking the mountainside with fire. Later we were told that a number of British soldiers had been wounded in that engagement.

During the following weeks we occupied several ambush positions, including one at Lackenmore on November 27, 1920, without any result. The Lackenmore ambush position was an ideal one, and men from the three Tipperary brigades assembled there to attack a convoy which was expected to pass between Newport and Rearcross. After waiting all day it was decided to abandon the ambush position occupied for two days by the column at Ballyboy, on the Thurles-Upperchurch road. A ration lorry and its escort were expected to pass, going from Thurles to Shevry barracks. I was present on the first day, but not on the second. Jimmy Leahy, the brigade O/C, was in charge on both days.

The first day passed without any incident, but on the second day a lorry of R.I.C., containing, I understand, some members of their "murder gang", came along. An accidental shot fired by one of our men warned the occupants before it came into the ambush. The driver put on speed and drove through the position, making debris of a dray which had been pulled across the road to act as a barricade. Some shots were fired by both sides, but the lorry did not halt.

Early in January 1921 our column and a column from the 3rd battalion of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade occupied a position at Milestone on the Thurles-Newport road, to ambush a convoy of British forces which was expected to pass that way. The position was a good one; the 3rd Tipperary men were on the southern side of the road, and we had a position on the northern side. We were there for two days and, on the evening of the second day, as the convoy had not turned up, it was decided to evacuate the position.

The South Tipperary column moved off in a southerly direction, and my party had withdrawn about a quarter of a mile in a northerly direction along our line of retreat, when lorries of British military and police came along the road. Either the position had been given away, or the British forces saw our scouts, for the lorries halted while still some distance from the ambush position.

The occupants dismounted and fired some shots at some of the scouts. Hearing the shots, we



assumed that the convoy had come along and that it was being engaged by the South Tipperary column, so we retraced our steps towards the road. We soon discovered that the military and police were in extended order and moving in our direction. We had a skirmish with them, and only the coming of darkness and our knowledge of the countryside saved us.

On January 21, 1921, eight members of the column – James Larkin, Jack Fahy, Martin Ryan, Thomas Gleeson, Thomas Kirwan, Paddy and Denis Ryan, and myself – again occupied the ambush position at Ross on the Thurles-Nenagh road. We went there on speculation, this road was frequently traversed by British forces.

This day an armoured car – not one of the turret type, but a lorry protected on the front and sides by, and covered over with, steel plates – arrived. It was manned by military, with machine-guns protruding from its sides and roof. I believe it was the first of this type of armoured vehicle we had seen. We opened fire on it, but only for a brief period. I considered it would be a waste of rifle ammunition, of which we were in short supply, to continue the attack.

In February 1921 elaborate preparations, in which all the brigades in County Tipperary were co-operating, were made to attack Kilcommon R.I.C. barracks. The task allotted to my battalion was to hold the road from Thurles to Kilcommon. The attack did not come off, but I am reminded of it by the fact that George Plunkett [brother of Joseph Plunkett, executed in 1916] arrived at Upperchurch from G.H.Q. that evening. He was on an organising mission and when he learned that Kilcommon barracks was to be attacked was anxious to go there. As he looked both ill and weary, I told him we had too many men to do the job and persuaded him to go to a billet which we secured for him.

It is difficult now to recall the sequence of the events, and the events themselves in the Spring and early Summer of 1921. There were several round-ups in the Upperchurch and Finnahy areas by massed forces of military, assisted by R.I.C. men. One of those took place on the Sunday after the skirmish near Milestone, and resulted in the capture of two Volunteers.

One of these Volunteers, when being interrogated in Templemore barracks, was put standing with a grenade in his hand. He was ordered to pull out the pin and his interrogators, standing a safe distance away, ordered him under threat of shooting to release the lever. As he considered that he might as well be killed by the grenade as to be shot and as he had previously denied all knowledge of the Volunteers and displayed no indications of training, he did so. There was no explosion; the grenade apparently had not been detonated.

On Sunday May 22, 1921, the column was mobilised in the Upperchurch area, with the intention of moving off towards Templederry. That evening, there were ceremonies on in Upperchurch church, and, although we had been told by the priests that it was not necessary for us to incur the danger involved in leaving the countryside to attend, seven of us did so.

Afterwards four of our party – Con Gleeson, John Ryan and two Tom Stapletons – went to O'Dwyer's shop to purchase cigarettes, whilst Jim Stapleton, John Fahy and myself stood at the church gates. We saw lorries of military and Black and Tans turn off the main road at Upperchurch Cross and drive at high speed towards the village. We alerted the four in Dwyer's shop, and they left by the back door and headed up the hill towards a bye-road leading to Templederry.

This was always considered a safe line of retreat. On this particular evening there was to everyone's surprise a party of Auxiliaries halted on a hill on the bye-road leading to Borrisoleigh. There was a sharp exchange of shots between our four men (who were armed with revolvers only) and the Auxiliaries, which resulted in Con Gleeson being shot dead, John Ryan being wounded and captured, and one of the Stapletons captured.

After alerting the four at O'Dwyer's shop, Jim Stapleton, Fahy and myself returned to the



church. By a passage known only to a few, we entered a secret hiding-place or dump situated under the floor of the church at the back of the altar. The British forces entered and searched the church, taking out and maltreating people who were praying there. Our hiding-place was not discovered; we remained there until the sacristan gave us the "all-clear" signal.

In June 1921 we decided to attack Borrisoleigh R.I.C. barracks. This was a strongly fortified post, garrisoned by at least 20 R.I.C. men and situated within five miles of Templemore military barracks. It also lay between Thurles and Nenagh, where there were strong military and police garrisons. Looking back on the incident now, what strikes me most about it is not our failure to capture it, nor that we left Borrisoleigh without a casualty, but the open way in which the preparations for the job were made and the manner in which we approached Borrisoleigh that night.

Jim Stapleton did most of the planning. He was convinced that, from Maher's yard, we could attack the roof of the barracks and set it on fire with bottles of paraffin oil and mud bombs. The garrison would be pinned down in the barracks by rifle and shotgun fire from the opposite side of the street, where there was suitable cover. It was decided to go ahead on these lines, and on the night of June 28, the roads leading from Borrisoleigh to Templemore, Nenagh and Thurles were blocked and manned by strong parties of Volunteers. The road from Borrisoleigh to Upperchurch was left open, this being the route by which we approached the town and also our line of retreat.

At about 10 p.m. that night we started from Glastrigan, conveying the bottles of paraffin, mud bombs and our equipment by ass-and-cart. We reached Borrisoleigh about midnight, and deposited the bottles of oil and mud bombs outside Ryan's public-house at the corner of the Square. We had no difficulty in getting the riflemen and shotgun men quietly into their positions. The town was quiet.

Amongst those with us that night was Seumas Burke, then T.D. for the constituency and later Minister for Local Government in Cosgrave's government. Burke, Jim Stapleton, myself and a few others entered Maher's yard by a laneway, leading from the Main Street. A few men were detailed to act as runners, bringing the bottles of oil and the mud bombs to Maher's yard.

There was no window or loop-hole from the barracks overlooking Maher's yard, and we were safe enough in that respect. But because of the distance from the yard to the barrack roof, it was apparent that it would be very difficult to land the bombs where they were likely to remain on the roof. Many of the bombs rolled off the roof before exploding. We had better luck with the bottles of oil. After using up the bombs and the oil, we fired lighted torches, made of rags and wood. Some of these did blaze up, but the fire they created was not sufficiently strong to get the roof burning.

We kept up our efforts until our supplies of paraffin and mud bombs were exhausted; then we had no option but to call it off. We were at least an hour in Borrisoleigh that night. Whilst the attack on the roof lasted and for some time afterwards the police kept up an almost continuous fire from the barracks. Several times, they sent up Verey lights for assistance, but, as far as I am aware, no reinforcements were despatched from Templemore, Nenagh or Thurles during the night.

The attack on Borrisoleigh barracks was, I think, the last incident worth recording which took place in my battalion area prior to the Truce of July 11, 1921.