

Tipperarymen in Spain (1936 - 1937)

By Pa Lonergan

Introduction

Pa Lonergan was born in Kilfeacle, near Tipperary town, in 1904, and died in 1995. This account of his experiences in the Spanish Civil War has been compiled by his son from two original sources: a typescript copy of his handwritten notes, and a tape of an interview broadcast on Tipperary Community Radio in 1983.

To get to the kernel of the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, you have to go back to the general election of 1931, when the Popular Front – or Communists, as we would call them – won most of the seats. King Alfonso abdicated and left the country. For the next few years a grave period of disquiet followed.

In the general election of 1936 the Popular Front won the day again, and from then on the real trouble started. The nature of the crisis was publicly laid bare on 16 June, 1936 by Gil Robles, leader of the Spanish Catholic Party.

He recalled that since the election in February the government had used exceptional powers, including press censorship and the suspension of all constitutional guarantees. During those four months 160 churches had been burnt, 269 political murders had been committed, and many priests and nuns had been killed and molested.

This was the picture presented to the Irish people. A crusade was initiated, mainly by the Irish hierarchy and Catholic associations. A strong tie existed between Ireland and Spain. The Wild Geese went there after the Treaty of Limerick, and the Irish College in Salamanca provided a refuge for Irish students for the priesthood. General Eoin O'Duffy started a campaign to enlist volunteers for an Irish Brigade to help nationalist forces in Spain under Franco. O'Duffy was a dynamic motivator and organiser, as had been shown by his success in organising the Garda Síochána after independence.

I travelled to the Michael Collins anniversary celebration in August 1936 with Dr Jack Hennessy to meet O'Duffy. I gave him my name as a volunteer for the Irish Brigade, and agreed to act as "key man" for the Tipperary town area. I was lucky to have good contacts, amongst whom were John Heelan, Stephen Moloney, Willie Marnane, Michael Hickey, Tim Kiely, Geoffrey Coman, Jim Hogan, Paddy Dwyer, Billy Whittle and, last but not least, the grand old man of the entertainment world, W.G. Evans, who kindly placed the old Town Hall in Tipperary at my disposal free of charge.

I held my first meeting early in September and there was a good response, mostly from professional soldiers who thought there would be good pay for foreign service. I explained to them that there was no guarantee of any payment, as this was a crusade and it was not certain that funds would be available to pay volunteers. We had several meetings, and some dates had been provisionally arranged for departure, but plans broke down.

Eventually, on 11 December, I got an express letter saying that the date for departure had been fixed for 1.00 a.m. on 13 December at Galway. We were to assemble at Galway docks by midnight on 12 December. Because of the short notice, I was unable to contact all of those on

my list. The members of the Tipperary contingent were William Condon, Thomas "King" McCormack, Billy Finn, Paddy Breen, Joe Walshe, Mick Fennessy, Paddy Murphy, Billy Brennan and P.M. Lonergan. Paddy Dwyer and Geoffrey Coman supplied the cars; Geoffrey Coman's car was driven by garage proprietor John Breen.

The Cashel contingent of volunteers arrived in Tipperary at about 8 o'clock. They took some of our lads and we left Tipperary soon after 8 o'clock. It was a very wet night; we arrived in Galway about 11 o'clock, to find the docks area choc-a-bloc with buses and cars.

Liam Walsh, General O'Duffy's secretary, was at the docks to meet us. He had the tender *Dún Aengus*, which plied between Galway and the Aran Islands, available to bring us out to the ship which was to bring us to Spain; this ship had to stay outside the three mile limit. We were waiting for hours to hear of the arrival of this mystery ship on the high seas.

About 4 o'clock we boarded the *Dún Aengus* – five hundred of us, the biggest load she had ever carried. The night was very dark, a howling gale making the sea very choppy and rough. When we got outside the three-mile limit the ship was waiting for us. Because of the rough sea they could not put out the gangway, and we had to board the ship by rope ladder – an unforgettable experience. The only chance you had when you got on the rope ladder was to keep looking up; the tender was swaying in and out from the ship, with the angry sea beneath.

It took a few hours to load this huge cargo of humanity. It was daylight as we sailed by the Cliffs of Moher. Our vessel, a German cargo ship with an uncommunicative crew, tossed like a cork on the water, travelling too light. The food was vile – black rye bread and shocking soup – but the quality of the food did not matter to us, as we were so seasick we did not care if we never saw food again. It was the first time I was seasick, and I will never forget the misery of it. We slept in the hold on old mattresses, and ropes were tied across the hold to help us walk on the ship.

We arrived at El Ferrol, a small port on the Bay of Biscay – and the birthplace of General Franco – and were escorted in by the small German battleship *Graf Spee*. This ship was later involved in a great sea epic in World War II; surrounded by British warships in the South American port of Montevideo, the captain of the *Graf Spee* brought his ship into the open sea and scuttled her.

We were transferred from the German ship to a nice liner, the *S.S. Domine*, where we had a good breakfast, and at 2.00 p.m. on Friday 18 December we left for Caceres. We arrived there at 12.45 a.m. on the following Sunday, after a long, weary journey, and had Mass and Benediction at midday. On our way to Caceres we were given a reception by the mayor of Salamanca, with plenty of food and wine; for many of us, it was our first taste of Spanish *vino*!

For the first few days there was complete chaos. The whole Brigade would line up for food outside the dining hall, and would be there for hours. When we were formed into companies things improved. Major-General Dalton was the officer in charge of our contingent. We were attached to the Spanish Foreign Legion, and all our fingerprints were taken; that is the rule in the Foreign Legion. The complete change of food was terrible, and many disorders occurred.

We underwent a very hard course of training. The army week was of five days, for which we were paid 15 pesetas; the rate of exchange was about 150 pesetas to the pound. We left Caceres for the Madrid front at noon on 17 February, arriving at Torrejon at 4.30 p.m. on 18 February, and went to a deserted village where we spent the night.

As we proceeded on the following day we were attacked, and Lieutenant Tom Hyde and three others were killed. This attack was a tragic mistake; our attackers were nationalist volunteers from the Canary Islands, members of the Spanish Foreign Legion, who were unaware of the identity of the *Irlanda Bandea*.



A photograph of the certificate issued to the writer of this article, testifying to his participation in the Spanish Civil War, signed by General Franco and General Eoin O'Duffy. – Copyright Lonergan family.

We took up outpost duty outside Ciempozuelos, about twenty miles from Madrid, where we remained for about two months. Ciempozuelos was a large town, most of whose population had left following its capture by nationalist forces. Only the very poor remained; as we carried food to our outpost outside the town, we were often followed by starving children begging for scraps. This vividly brought home to me the human tragedy of war – the suffering it so often inflicts on innocent women and children.

Our function in Ciempozuelos was to act as infantry support for a German artillery battery stationed in the town. While they were carrying out shelling attacks, we provided ground cover and protection for the artillery. We spent many days with shells continuously whistling over our heads; on one occasion I had the unnerving experience of walking under a battery of four guns as they began to fire.

Eventually, we left Ciempozuelos for another front nearer to Madrid. We called this front “the gas factory”, and from it we could see Madrid in the distance. Madrid was bombed several times during our stay. The bombing was carried out by German artillery, but the Spanish nationalists did their best to ensure that damage to buildings was kept to a minimum. They took the view that the buildings were of historical importance, and would be wanted for future use – so different to the attitude adopted during the Irish Civil War.

We left this front on 23 April, having been told by General O’Duffy that we were to be relieved, and that a second Irish *bandéra* was expected to take our places. In the event, these volunteers never arrived, as by this time the Irish government had adopted a policy of non-involvement in the Spanish Civil War.

We returned to Talavera, headquarters of the Spanish Foreign Legion, where I was put in charge of the company’s arms. While in Talavera we were bombed by Communist planes; luckily, our anti-aircraft guns prevented major damage. On the following day we left for Cáceres, our brigade headquarters, where we remained, waiting for transport back to Ireland, from 24 April until 17 June. We left Cáceres at 6.25 a.m. on 19 June, arrived at Lisbon at 7.00 p.m., and sailed for Ireland aboard the liner *Mozambique* at 10.00 p.m. This was a lovely ship, a big contrast to the old German ship. The food was good and the weather perfect. After a four-day journey, we sighted Ireland at 8.00 a.m. We docked at 2.00 p.m. and were given a big reception at the Mansion House in Dublin.

This ended our direct involvement with the Spanish Civil War, a war which attracted participants from many countries. Unusually, the war was initiated by what might be called the ruling classes; it is more usual for civil wars to be started by the working classes. In Spain, the working classes were in power, in a government supported and infiltrated by Communists from Russia. It seemed that the Communists were responsible for the abuse of religion and the destruction of the churches; the Spaniards, a Catholic people, would not have approved of this.

The abuse of religious personnel and institutions generated support for the revolt, led by the army under General Franco, and brought about much international support for the rebels; this was the reason for our involvement. As well as the 600 or so Irishmen who fought on the side of the rebels, about 200 Irishmen joined the International Brigade to fight on the opposing side. They were motivated by support for the working classes, who were often very badly treated by the wealthy landowners. We did not encounter any of the opposing Irish, though some of them were in our front.

Much of the involvement of other countries was for those countries’ own reasons, rather than because of ideological support. The German intervention was solely on a military basis, using the war as a dress rehearsal for World War II. We found the German airforce personnel, for whom we acted as ground support, unfriendly and uncommunicative; I felt that they were

afraid to talk to us, in case they would be seen and reported by the Gestapo. Although the nationalist forces owed much of their success to German support, this support was not reciprocated during World War II, when Hitler wanted Franco to allow him to establish bases in Spain. Had those bases been allowed, Germany would probably have won the war, changing the course of history, not least for us in Ireland. The Italians had a very poor army, made up mostly of young conscripts. They had first-class equipment, much better than ours, but were poor soldiers – not much good when the crunch came.

I came to the conclusion that the Spanish Civil War was prolonged by the attitude of the nationalist forces. Whenever they had a victory, they would celebrate for a week, rather than pressing on; this gave their opponents a chance to re-organise and get into position for further resistance. This might be partly explained by reference to the Spanish temperament – they are a happy, carefree race – but in my opinion it undoubtedly prolonged the war.

Safely back home in Kilfeacle, I followed with interest the progress of the Spanish Civil War, both in the Irish newspapers and on an English-speaking, Spanish-based radio station, which I was able to receive at home. Though I had had enough of war, I was glad we had gone to Spain; I felt that if we had not gone, Russia would have gained complete control of Spain, and we in this country would subsequently have been in great danger.

As a footnote to our experience, the Tipperarymen who had been involved in the Spanish Civil War subsequently had correspondence from the socialist republican organisation *Saor Éire*, asking us to join them. We presumed that they had got our details from German sources, seeking to establish contacts in Ireland in the run-up to World War II. None of us accepted the invitation.

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