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Life with a Flying Column, 1919–1921

By Tadhg Crowe

Introduction

*The following article comprises a statement made on 7 August 1957, to the now defunct Military History Bureau, and is published without any changes. The relevant B.H.B. references are Document W.S. 1658 and File No. S2978. For background material, see *Tipperary Historical Journal* 2001 article on pages 147/148 by the then Editor.*

I was born in the year 1898 in the parish of Solohead, about four miles from Tipperary Town. My people were farmers and I, too, having completed my schooldays, settled down to life on the farm with my parents and other members of my family.

In the early months of 1917, the late Sean Treacy asked me to become a member of the Irish Volunteers. I agreed and, at his request, I got two others in the parish, my cousin Joe McCormack, and Thomas Ryan, to join. From three we built our strength up to eight and Sean Treacy came along on one or two nights each week and drilled and trained us at an old fort in a grove near Limerick Junction. That was the beginning of what later became E/Company, 4th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

Secrecy was then the golden rule in all matters relating to the Volunteers. Quietly we built up the strength to 20 and later to 63. Sean Treacy conducted an election of company officers at which both he and I were proposed for company captain. Sean was then recognised as Volunteer organiser and leader in South Tipperary, but he was a man who would never seek rank. He allowed his name to go forward simply because it was the correct thing to do and to comply with the general rule of the members' right to elect their own officers. For the purpose of the record I will mention that I beat him by three votes, 33 to 30.

In August 1917, after his election as Sinn Fein M.P. for East Clare, Eamon de Valera visited Tipperary Town on a Sunday and addressed a great gathering of people in the Sportsfield. His visit coincided with the death of Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick, and de Valera paid tribute in his address to the patriot bishop.

At that time the British authorities had 'proclaimed' marching in military formation, carrying hurleys and the wearing of Volunteer uniform. All three proclamations were defied on that day. Volunteers carrying hurleys marched in military formation to the Sportsfield and those who possessed uniforms wore them. Our company marched in from Solohead and, as we entered the town, 'separation' women and British soldiers' dependants flung rotten eggs and various classes of filth and dirt at us. We had a bit of a scuffle with them and gave as good as we got. Otherwise the day passed off in an orderly and dignified manner. The R.I.C., apparently considering discretion the better part of valour, made no attempt to interfere with the parades.

Sean Treacy was arrested a few days after this meeting and Maurice Crowe, later battalion and brigade adjutant, frequently came out to Solohead to conduct the training of the company. From then until the conscription crisis period passed in the autumn of the following year, parades were held publicly and in defiance of the R.I.C.

Sean Treacy served his term of imprisonment and returned to continue his Volunteer work in the area towards the end of November 1917. The crops on his farm at Soloheadbeg were harvested and saved during the autumn by Volunteers who gave their time freely and willingly. He was, however, re-arrested on 28th February 1918 and taken to Dundalk prison. He immediately went on hunger strike. We learned in Tipperary that plans for his rescue were afoot and Maurice Crowe and Dan Breen left for Dundalk. I followed on the following day, staying overnight in Dublin. On the train journey from Dublin to Dundalk I had as a travelling companion a young lady whom I did not then know.

On arrival in Dundalk, I met Maurice Crowe, Dan Breen and Frank Thornton, who was there from G.H.Q., and learned from them that, as Treacy and his two fellow-prisoners – Michael Brennan of Clare, and Seumas O'Neill of Cashel – had been granted their demand for treatment as political prisoners, the hunger strike was over and it was not proposed to proceed any further with the plans for the rescue.

I called to the prison to visit Sean and, to my surprise, who was there, concluding a visit to him, only my lady travelling companion. She was a Miss May Quigley and was then, or later, engaged to Sean. Breen, Maurice Crowe, Nicholas Treacy (Sean's cousin, who had also travelled up from Tipperary) and I spent that night with friendly people named McQuill in Dundalk. On my way back, I remember buying a revolver holster and belt in a shop in Capel St., Dublin.

The conscription crisis period followed almost immediately. The battalion organisation had by that time been introduced and our battalion, based on Tipperary Town, comprised ten companies, viz: A and B – Tipperary Town; C Donohill; D – Donaskeigh; E – Solohead; F – Bansha; G – Aherlow; H – Mount Bruis; I – Lattin, and K – Kilross. During that period, from April to October 1918, each company sent two men each day to the Volunteer Hall in Tipperary Town for 24 hours' duty. These 20 men used the Volunteer Hall as a guardroom. They were armed with a miscellaneous selection of revolvers and one rifle which was kept in the Hall.

In relays, on bicycles, they kept the military barracks, the military hutments and the R.I.C. barracks under continuous watch, day and night, and reported any unusual enemy activity. Sean Duffy, the battalion commandant, appointed Sean Carroll a full-time officer in charge of the Hall and of the scouts. Carroll gave up his position in a drapery firm in the town to attend to this duty.

I usually at that time paraded the company outside the church gates at Solohead on Sundays after Mass. On Sunday, 2nd June 1918, a force of armed R.I.C. came out from Tipperary and asked me to cease what they termed illegal drilling. When I refused they appealed to the priest and to an influential Co. Councillor to get me to dismiss the parade and so avoid trouble. We continued to ignore them and the police then used the butts of their rifles. We were unarmed and had only our fists; so, seeing that the battle would probably go against us, I ordered the men to disperse. When the excitement died down I went home.

Two mornings later, on Tuesday, 4th June 1918, the R.I.C. raided my home and took me to Limerick Junction R.I.C. barracks and thence to Cork Prison. One week later, I was brought to Dundrum and tried at the Petty Sessions Court and sentenced to three months' imprisonment on each of two charges – illegal drilling and wearing uniform, the sentences to run concurrently. Then I was brought back to Cork Prison and from there to Belfast to serve my sentence.

There were about 200 prisoners from various parts of Ireland in Belfast prison – all on political charges – when I was brought there. Amongst them were the late Austin Stack of Kerry, Frank McGrath of Nenagh, Michael Kirby of Tipperary and the late Kevin O'Higgins. Austin Stack, as the prisoners' spokesman, demanded that we be treated as political prisoners, but the demand was refused. As a protest, and to enforce the demand, Stack decided that we should, as far as possible, wreck the wing of the prison in which we were quartered. For the next few days each

man procured, at exercise time, and took to his cell, any material, such as bits of iron bars which might be useful.

On the appointed night, we barricaded the cell doors with the bed boards and trestles, broke the glass in the cell windows, smashed the furniture, such as it was, and started to bore holes in the dividing walls between the cells. Struggles began with warders who tried to remove us to other cells. Military and police were called in to assist the warders and they used hoses to flood the cells and to force us out. One man in particular, who put up a glorious fight, was the late Joe McMahon of Clare. He had armed himself with what looked like the leg of a table and it took policemen and warders over an hour to get him out of his cell, and to overpower him. When we saw him again, he was a mass of bandages and sticking plaster.

I remember that I was forcibly put into what warders called a leather muff. It was a device which covered me from my neck to my knees, was fastened at the back, and my hands were strapped together inside of it. I had to attend Mass on the Sunday in the prison with the muff still on as the warders would not, or were not permitted, to remove it. Twenty of us were brought before a court of Belfast City magistrates which assembled in the prison. We were sentenced to 14 days in the dungeons on bread and water, a sentence which we served. Eventually, the prison authorities yielded, and our demands were granted. A big number of the prisoners were transferred to prison in England. I completed my sentence in Belfast, was released on 7th October 1918, and returned to my home in Solohead.

I was only a short time back home when the R.I.C. started to raid for me again. That meant that I had to go on the run and I spent most of my time away from home, especially at night time. Dan Breen and Sean Treacy were then also on the run, and Breen and I spent some weeks together on organising work in the company areas. It was, too, in October 1918, that the South Tipperary Brigade was officially formed at a meeting of battalion officers which was held in P.J. Moloney's house in Church St., Tipperary, and at which Dick Mulcahy presided. I was present at the meeting but, not being then a battalion officer, had no vote. The brigade officers elected were: Brigade Commandant – Seumas Robinson; Brigade V/Commandant – Sean Treacy; Brigade Adjutant – Maurice Crowe; Brigade Q.M. – Dan Breen.

Later that year, Treacy and Breen set up what I might call their headquarters in an unoccupied house, commonly known as the 'Tin Hut' on Hogan's farm at Greenane. It was, roughly, about four miles from my home in Solohead and about half a mile from Sean Treacy's farm at Soloheadbeg. As I have said, they were both on the run at the time, and they were continuously engaged on Volunteer work.

It was probably about the second week in January 1919, that Treacy told me of his intention to seize a consignment of gelignite which was due for delivery at Soloheadbeg Quarry and informed me that I was one of the men he had selected to carry out the operation. The Quarry was worked by the County Council who had it on lease from the owners. The date on which the gelignite would be delivered from Tipperary military barracks and the strength of the R.I.C. escort which would accompany it were uncertain.

On Tuesday, 14th January 1919, I attended the fair in Tipperary Town and called on Maurice Crowe, the brigade adjutant and collected from him some ammunition for a .45 revolver which I had at the time. In accordance with Treacy's instructions, I reported that night at Mrs. Breen's (Dan's mother) cottage at Donohill. I met Breen and Treacy there and the three of us went to the 'Tin Hut' at Greenane. We were joined at the Hut during the night by Seamus Robinson and Sean Hogan.

Maurice Crowe, Patrick McCormack (then an Irish teacher in Dundrum), Paddy O'Dwyer from Hollyford, Michael Ryan, Arthur Barlow and Con Power reported next day. During the

days that followed there were some changes in the personnel. On account of their business in life, some were unable to remain for more than a day or two and then there were days when Brian Shanahan, Ned O'Reilly, Dinny Lacey and Sean O'Meara were with us.

The plans were simple enough. Each morning, two of the party left to scout for the coming of the Co. Council men and the police escort with the gelignite, and the remainder of us went to the ambush position. Two positions were actually occupied. For the first few days we waited at a point about 200 yards from Coffey's forge.

Then, one day, an R.I.C. man with a dog passed along the road and his dog ran into the field where we were. As there was a likelihood that the policeman might have seen us, we changed the waiting position to one about 150 yards from the entrance to the quarry. There we had reasonable cover behind a whitethorn hedge at Cranitch's field, and there, too, a gate gave easy access on to the road.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning passed with the same routine, but nothing unusual happened. We returned each evening to the 'Tin Hut', lighted a fire and spent the night there. In our conversations around the fire, there were divergent views as to what the strength of the escort would be, and various suggestions were made about the best method of holding them prisoners after they were disarmed and until the gelignite was got safely away. We assumed all along that the police would surrender when called upon to halt and put up their hands, and I am certain that none of us contemplated that the venture would end in bloodshed and loss of life.

On the Saturday evening I returned home for a change of clothing and on Monday morning we resumed the vigil; again, nothing happened. About midday on Tuesday, 21st January 1919, Paddy O'Dwyer cycled back along the Donohill road from Tipperary, where he had been scouting, with the news that a horse and cart, with the gelignite, had left Tipperary military barracks and that it was coming by the Bohertrime road. It was accompanied by James Godfrey, driver of the horse and cart, a Co. Council ganger named Patrick Flynn and two R.I.C. men – Constables O'Connell and McDonnell. We moved into our pre-arranged positions and, almost immediately, Michael Ryan reported that the cart and its escort were approaching.

There were eight in our party that day, viz: Sean Treacy, Seamus Robinson, Dan Breen, Paddy O'Dwyer, Michael Ryan, Sean Hogan, Patrick McCormack and myself. Some of us were armed with revolvers, and Sean Treacy had a small automatic rifle. I had my .45 revolver and my position was about 12 or 15 yards on the right of the main party. My instructions were to prevent the escort and the Co. Council men from running back along the road when the order to halt was given.

After our week's wait, the whole affair ended suddenly and in a tense atmosphere. My recollection is that the two R.I.C. men armed with carbines were walking behind the horse and cart when it came into the ambush position. There were several shouts of 'Hands up!' I myself shouted that command at least two or three times. I saw one of the policemen move up to the cart and crouch down beside it. From the position he took up and the manner in which he was handling his carbine, I was satisfied that he was going to offer resistance.

We had instructions not to fire without orders from Sean Treacy or Seamus Robinson, but, as far as I could judge, the cart and the boxes of gelignite on it were shielding this policeman from their view. I fired three shots at him; one was ineffective, and the other two hit him in the arm and back. About the same time, either one or two shots were fired from the gate where Sean Treacy was positioned, and the other constable fell, shot through the temple.

We got out on to the road. The two constables were dead and Flynn and Godfrey were unscathed, but badly frightened. Dan Breen and I took the belts with the pouches of ammunition

and handcuffs off the dead policemen. Treacy, Breen and Hogan drove away on the horse and cart with the gelignite, and Paddy O'Dwyer and I took the R.I.C. mens' carbines and hid them together with the belts, pouches of ammunition and handcuffs in a ditch about half a mile from the scene of the ambush. O'Dwyer and I then parted, he to go back home to Hollyford, and I went to Doherty's of Seskin.

After having some tea in Doherty's, I returned home and told my father that he might expect raids by the police. In fact, I told him exactly what was after happening. We discussed the matter for a few minutes and he advised me to go away at once, but warned me against staying in the houses of relatives as, he said, if the police were looking for me they would be sure to trace and raid the homes of all our relations.

I stayed that night with two old men, very distant relations of my family, and, next day, I went back towards my home. My sister met me near the house and brought me some food. She told me that R.I.C. men from Tipperary had raided the house looking for me at about 6 p.m. on the previous night, and that my father had told them I was not back from the fair in Mitchelstown. They raided again, she said, about midnight and again in the early hours of that morning. That news dispelled any thoughts I may have had about returning home, and I continued on the run for the following 2½ years until the Truce came in July 1921.

Shortly afterwards, on a Saturday night, Maurice Crowe, the brigade adjutant, found me at Patrick Merrick's house, Ballynonty, Cullen. He was anxious about the safety of the carbines which we took from the police, so we went to Soloheadbeg and retrieved them from their hiding place. Maurice brought the carbines, belts, pouches of ammunition and handcuffs to his people's place at Glenbane where Maurice's brother, Edmond, cared for them until they were handed over to Dinny Lacey, Q.M. 4th Battalion. One of the carbines was later allotted by the battalion to the Solohead Company and I used it whilst with the column in an ambush in the Glen of Aherlow.

During the years I spent on the run, I rarely left Solohead or the neighbouring parishes and stayed with friends in different places, until the formation of the flying column in September 1920. Tommy Ryan acted as company captain, but I rarely missed the Battalion Council meetings. Raids by the police and military on my home and on the houses of neighbours were frequent but I was fortunate enough to avoid capture.

On the night of 4th June 1920, an attempt was made to capture Cappawhite R.I.C. barracks. Cappawhite was in the East Limerick Brigade area but bordered on our area, and we were asked to co-operate. We blocked the roads leading from Tipperary, and Tommy Ryan, Jim Kilmartin and I went to Cappawhite bringing with us a bag of 'mud' bombs which had been made from some of the gelignite captured at Soloheadbeg. On the same night, the 3rd Tipperary Brigade were engaged in the attack on Drangan Barracks and practically all the 'Brass Hats' were gone there. Jim O'Gorman from Hollyford and Dinny Lacey were amongst those whom I remember as having been with us to Cappawhite.

The attack started about midnight and followed the usual pattern of barrack attacks at the time – holding the police in the barracks with rifle and shotgun fire and forcing them to surrender by setting fire to the roof. Jim O'Gorman used a ladder to reach the roof, but, try as he would, he failed to set it on fire. He made several attempts at it with oil and mud bombs, but without success. After a few hours, it became apparent that the garrison would not surrender and it was decided to break off the attack.

Dinny Lacey, Sean Stapleton and I remained there until daylight – some time around 4.30 a.m., replying at intervals to the policemen's fire from the barracks. We had one casualty that night – a Volunteer named Tadhg Hogan being wounded. Some of the Donohill Company who were on

duty on road blocks had a fight that morning with military from Tipperary who were going to the relief of the barracks.

Shortly after that, I fell seriously ill with double pneumonia and was nursed over my illness at Rafferty's of Acroboy. It was my second time to have pneumonia and it affected my health for many months to come. I was recuperating at Rafferty's when Sean Treacy and Ned O'Reilly arrived there to make it their H.Q. on the eve of the Oola ambush, so I moved to Quinn's of Ballycohey.

That ambush at Oola took place on 30th July, 1920. It arose from a report by the Solohead Company that a lorry of military carrying mails and preceded by a motor cyclist passed regularly along the Tipperary-Limerick road, and Sean Treacy decided to ambush it. Jim O'Gorman and Michael Fitzgerald called to Quinn's for me after the ambush and told me what happened. The motor cyclist did not pass and the lorry, when it came, was fired on by the main party. This lorry was closely followed by a second lorry of military who dismounted and took part in the fight.

After the first volley it was found that the ejectors of the Martini rifles which the main party were using failed to eject the empty cases from the breech, due perhaps to incorrect ammunition being used. There was then no option but to break off the engagement, and Treacy, they said, saved the day, as he kept the soldiers pinned down on the road with rapid fire from his parabellum whilst the main party were withdrawn. Later, we learned that two British soldiers were killed and three wounded and that General Lucas, who had escaped from I.R.A. custody on the previous night, was in the lorry, having been picked up by the military at Pallas.

From Quinn's we went back to Rafferty's of Acroboy and, later, to O'Dwyer's of Ballanastown. The owner of this house was a brother of Sir Michael O'Dwyer of India and Punjab fame, but we were made welcome and given chicken for our supper.

The brigade flying column was established in September 1920, and assembled for the first time at Barlow's of Shrough. Its initial personnel were: Sean Hogan, Dinny Lacey and Paddy Moloney, battalion officers; Michael Fitzpatrick and Jerry Kiely of A/Company; Tom Bellew and Martin (Sparky) Breen of B/Company; Brian Shanahan and 'Pake' Ryan of D/Company; Tadhg Crowe (self) and Michael (Booleen) Ryan of E/Company; Matt Barlow and 'Pake' Dalton of H/Company; John Joe O'Brien, Sean Lynch and Bill Fraher of Galbally, making a total strength of 16, and Lacey was appointed O/C. *pro tem*.

The column moved into the Glen of Aherlow where a period of training was done. It took a while for the people amongst whom we billeted to become accustomed to having armed men training and wandering around in their midst. However, when the first shock of surprise wore off, they welcomed us and catered for us with a will. At Grantstown we were joined by a party of nine men from the 3rd Battalion which included Ned O'Reilly, Jim O'Gorman and my old friend of Soloheadbeg, Paddy O'Dwyer. A meeting of the column to elect a permanent column leader was held at Grantstown. Seamus Robinson, the Brigade O/C., presided and there were two proposals - Dinny Lacey and Ned O'Reilly. Lacey was elected with the support of the 4th Battalion men.

Next came the shock of Sean Treacy's death in Dublin. I remember Dinny Lacey and I were in Dublin when Sean Hogan came and told us the sad news. That was probably on October 15th, for Sean was killed on 14th October 1920. On the day of his funeral, Lacey and I watched the funeral cortege from a field at Barronstown Cross, near Limerick Junction. We knew that military had interfered with the funeral arrangements at Solohead Church and we saw another party of military seize the bicycles of some of the mourners. In view of all the enemy activity that was going on, we reluctantly decided that it would be unwise and foolhardy for us to follow the remains to Kilfeacle Cemetery.

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The first engagement between the column and enemy forces took place at Thomastown – about midway between Tipperary and Cashel – on October 28th, 1920. About 9 a.m. that morning, we prepared and occupied a position to ambush a tender of Black and Tans from Golden; but a lorry conveying about 20 soldiers to the rifle range in Tipperary arrived and we ambushed that instead. My recollection is that the lorry slowed up and then stopped before it came into the ambush position proper, with the result that some of our men had to crawl behind the wall to get a position nearer to the lorry.

Meanwhile, the soldiers were dismounting and taking cover and we had lost the element of surprise. The military officer in charge of the party either wore armour or bore a charmed life. He was firing with revolvers from the bonnet of the lorry and Jim O’Gorman lobbed the only grenade we possessed over the wall and quite close to the lorry, but it failed to explode. Ned O’Reilly and O’Gorman – both crack shots – fired at him from the road but, as far as I could see, without effect.

The firing lasted, I would say, for 8 or 10 minutes. One of our men – Michael Fitzpatrick – received a serious wound in his thigh and had to be helped away. He was our only casualty. Lacey then decided to break off the engagement. As the ambush position was on the main Cashel-Tipperary road there was a grave danger of further enemy forces arriving, and the column, with the exception of two men who were assisting Michael Fitzpatrick, withdrew to Dranganmore.

This movement entailed crossing the road to the Grantstown side and was carried out under cover of a rapid fire from four or five members of the column who occupied a position behind a quarry on that side of the road. The British casualties were, I believe, five soldiers wounded. There were rumours, too, that the officer died a few days later from wounds received at Thomastown, but that, I think, was never confirmed. Following the engagement at Thomastown, the nine men from the 3rd Battalion, who had joined us at Grantstown, returned to their own area to operate as a separate unit.

The next clash between the column and enemy forces took place on Saturday evening, 13th November 1920, at Lisnagaul, about three miles from Bansha in the Glen of Aherlow. We had occupied the position at Lisnagaul on three consecutive Saturdays to ambush a mixed party of R.I.C. and Black and Tans. This was a pay party which usually travelled on Saturdays in a Crossley tender and paid the forces at Emly, Galbally and Bansha before returning to Tipperary town.

On the first two Saturdays the pay party did not come, or at least, it did not travel *via* the ambush position at Lisnagaul. On the third Saturday it came in the afternoon. Including the driver of the tender, the party consisted of eight R.I.C. men and Black and Tans. No barricade was placed across the road and, at his own request, Richard Burke, O/C. Aherlow Company, was given the task of stopping the tender. Burke was armed with a double-barreled shotgun and at his first shot the steering wheel flew out of the driver’s hands and his second shot got the driver on the arms and hands. The tender hit the ditch and stopped. Almost simultaneously the main party opened fire and there was a sharp encounter at close range with some of the police who had taken cover underneath the tender.

That continued for perhaps five or six minutes until the police shouted that they were agreeable to surrender. On going out on to the road we found that three of the policemen were dead and the four who surrendered were all wounded. One policeman had jumped from the tender and escaped when the firing started and I understand he reached Bansha safely.

We collected the rifles, revolver and ammunition belonging to the dead and wounded policemen. In addition, there were some spare rifles and a box of .303 ammunition in the tender,

all of which made a welcome addition to our meagre supply. Finally, we used some spare tins of petrol which were on the tender to spray it and set it on fire, having first removed the bodies of dead policemen from its vicinity.

The British reaction to the ambush at Lisnagaul took the form of reprisals. Three shops in Tipperary town – P.J. Moloney's, Hayes's in Main St. and the Irish House – were wrecked and looted, and military and police who visited the scene of the ambush burned down a nearby Co. Council cottage.

After Lisnagaul, ambush positions were occupied for two days on the Tipperary-Emly road and on the Tipperary-Dundrum road, but without any fight, as no enemy forces arrived. One of the big difficulties about remaining for lengthy periods in an ambush position, especially on main roads, was the numbers of passers-by, such as people going to the creameries, or country people going to the towns, who, with their vehicles, had to be taken in off the road and detained. The longer we remained in the position the greater was the number to be detained, and I remember on one occasion a band of tinkers came along and had to be detained with the others for the length of a day.

The column disbanded for a few days around Christmas, 1920. I did not go home, but spent the break resting at Cronin's of Moanmore, near Solohead. I had never completely recovered from the pneumonia which I had earlier in the year and I remember I felt very sick again about the time the column disbanded.

On Friday, December 28th, I went to O'Doherty's of Seskin where the column was due to reassemble. Dinny Lacey, Seamus Robinson, Jim O'Doherty and Jack O'Meara were in O'Doherty's when I arrived and the remainder of the column were scattered in other houses around Seskin. The five of us had dinner and Robinson retired to the parlour to do some writing.

Next, we heard the screeching of brakes and a lorry of Black and Tans pulled up at the gate and approached the house. After a brief period, whilst Robinson collected his papers, we rushed out of the house and a running fight developed. Our route brought us parallel to the road and also parallel to a river which was swollen.

A second lorry of Black and Tans arrived and drove along the road, apparently with the object of heading us off. We were in a tight corner between the road and the river, and we would have to leave any cover we had if we went towards the river and tried to cross it. Jack O'Meara did go for the river and succeeded in crossing it, and his run drew the Tans who had arrived in the first lorry after him. Jim O'Doherty and I knew the district well and we took Robinson and Lacey along a line where we would have cover.

We had reached a point two fields from the road when the Tans from the second lorry dismounted and entered the field beside the road. We engaged them from the dividing ditch. Things were far from rosy. Robinson had on a pair of light shoes and slipped several times in the mud. He was armed with a parabellum pistol and he was handicapped with the bundle of official papers which he carried under one arm. Jim O'Doherty's weapon was a Winchester .44 repeating rifle for which he had only seven rounds of ammunition and, having fired those seven, his gun became useless to us. Relief came in the person of Bill Fraher. He had been on his way to O'Doherty's house and, fortunately, had his rifle with him when he heard the shooting. He 'doubled' to it, sized up the situation and opened a rapid fire which scattered the Tans and we had no further trouble from them.

We had, however, to keep going and we went in the Oola direction. There were several bullet holes in Lacey's clothing and a bullet had passed through my overcoat. On the journey I started to cough up blood and some of the others helped me along. It looked then as if my health had completely failed. That night, a reprisal party of British forces burned O'Doherty's house and

also burned hay at Jim Kilmartin's place. Jim Kilmartin was also a member of the column.

Next day in Donaskeigh, Dan Breen gave me an address of people in Co. Donegal to whom I was to go to recuperate. Packy Deere, O/C. Donaskeigh Company, and a cousin of Sean Treacy, who was also in bad health with rheumatic pains was to come with me. Tom Carew, the brigade Q.M., gave us £5 to cover our expenses. The column had reassembled and moved off and Deere and I went back to Solohead. There, I decided not to go to Donegal. I thought that if I was going to die I would die at home in my native place, and Deere decided that he would not go either.

In January 1921 I was sent to Dublin by Dinny Lacey to collect and bring back some explosives and a plunger for exploding electrically fired mines which, I understood, were to come from Scotland. My instructions were to call to Charlie McLaughlin's office at 8 Upper O'Connell St., where I would either be given the material or be put in touch with the man who was to hand it over. Lacey gave me 8/- going to cover my expenses and I travelled by rail on a privilege ticket I obtained by a cousin of mine who worked on the railway. I was warned under no circumstances to call in to Phil Shanahan, whose place in Foley St. was then the meeting place of Tipperary men in Dublin.

On arrival in Dublin I went to a restaurant and ordered a substantial meal. To my amazement, it cost me 5s 6d, which left me almost broke. I found Charlie McLaughlin's place, but neither the stuff nor my man had arrived. I waited in an outer office until closing time when it was suggested I should call back next day. I then strolled down Talbot St. towards Foley St. in the hope that I would meet someone I knew. I was tempted to go in to Phil Shanahan's and explain my predicament to him, but, in view of my strict instructions, I refrained from doing so.

I bought a loaf of bread with some of my remaining pennies in a shop near Shanahan's, and then two detectives came along. Seeing my bulging pocket, they stopped, tapped me all over and asked me where I was from and what I was doing in Dublin. I told them I was from Limerick and that I had come to Dublin in the hope of finding work. They said there were no jobs to be had in Dublin and to get out of the city as quickly as I could. They were very stiff at first, but the sight of the bread in my pocket softened one of their hearts, for he put his hand in his pocket and gave me 2/-, saying that that was all he could afford as he had just returned from a period of leave in Co. Mayo!

I wandered off through the city and out of it. It was a dark cold night and the curfew hour was approaching. I spoke to a night watchman and hoped that he would permit me to remain with him at his fire, but he told me to move on as they were checked-up on during the night. I eventually spent the night in a group of buildings which was under construction. I had no idea, no more than the dead in their graves, of where I was. When daylight came next morning – it was 21st January, the second anniversary of Soloheadbeg – I saw on a notice board 'Peamount Sanatorium'.

On my way back to the city I inquired the time from a woman at the gate lodge of the Ashtown Gate of the Phoenix Park. While I was speaking to her I gave a nervous start on seeing a party of British cavalry pass on their way out of the park. She noticed it and said 'Don't worry about them; they take the horses out for exercise every morning'. I felt miserable and must have looked it, for she brought me in and gave me a cup of hot tea.

I washed that morning in the underground toilet in O'Connell St. before calling again to Charlie McLaughlin's office, where I spent the day waiting in the outer office. Neither the stuff nor news of it arrived, so I returned by a late train that night to Limerick Junction after a fruitless journey and a night out for nothing.

It is difficult now after such a lapse of time to recall all the various incidents of that period. I remember one evening, about three weeks after my return from Dublin, I paid one of my

infrequent visits to my home. While I was there a party of military, accompanied by an R.I.C. detective named Carolan from Limerick Junction, arrived outside the house. I knew Carolan well and he knew me, but I also knew that he was disposed to be friendly and not likely to identify me for the military.

I gave my revolver to my mother to hide it and walked out into the yard, where I was questioned by the military officer. As I expected, Carolan made no effort to recognise me, but went into the house with some of the soldiers. The officer was very polite and asked my name. I gave him my brother's name, John Crowe. He said it was Tim or Tadhg Crowe they wanted. and inquired if I knew where he was. I replied that we had not seen or heard of him for months! While this conversation was going on, one of our horses strayed into the yard. I caught him by the mane and, breaking off the conversation with the officer, walked away, leading the horse, without being further challenged.

About April 1921, I received orders from the battalion H.Q. to arrest a suspected spy named Jackson who lived in Tipperary town, but was then working at his trade as a plasterer in Solohead. We arrested and detained him in a disused house in Ballygodoon; he was then shifted to a dugout in Lattin and tried by a courtmartial of brigade and battalion officers. I was not on the courtmartial and cannot say what evidence was against him, but the court sentenced him to death and the findings of the court were sent to G.H.Q. for confirmation. About a week or more elapsed awaiting a reply from G.H.Q., who disagreed with the court's findings and ordered the prisoner's release.

On Saturday night, 30th April 1921, Sean Duffy, the Battalion O/C., Patrick Maloney, the battalion adjutant, Brian Shanahan and I brought Jackson from Lattin and released him at Monard Cross. He went on towards Tipperary Town and we went to Martin Ryan's of Boherdota where the four of us stayed for the night. On the next day, Sunday May 1st, after Mass in Solohead, Duffy and Maloney went to Maloney's uncle's place at Gurthdrum. Brian Shanahan went to Seskin and I went to a cousin's house for a change of underclothing. It was arranged that Shanahan and I would rejoin Duffy and Maloney at Gurthdrum later in the day.

About dinner time that day, a party of police from Tipperary raided Maloney's house. Sean Duffy and Paddy Maloney made an effort to escape and had got some distance from the house when they ran into a second police party and an exchange of shots took place which resulted in both Duffy and Maloney being shot dead. Shanahan and I were on our way to meet them when it happened.

Next night, a party of police in civilian clothes called again at Maloney's of Gurthdrum. This time they took out one of the workmen, John Buckley, and shot him. To make it look like the work of the I.R.A. they put a label 'Spies and informers beware' on the dead body. Buckley was a member of my company in Solohead and there was no doubt about his integrity.

Brian Shanahan was appointed battalion commandant in succession to Sean Duffy. James Maloney, then the battalion Q.M., succeeded his brother Patrick as battalion adjutant and I was appointed to the battalion staff as quartermaster. Two other members of the battalion staff were Arthur Barlow, vice-commandant, and his brother Matt, battalion engineer. The big trouble of a quartermaster's job at that time was to get anything in the line of warlike stores. Any little which did come my way was issued immediately to the columns.

I am not sure of the date, but I think it was about that time that there was an incident involving the shooting of a British military policeman. I remember Lacey's column were in Seskin and two of its members, Sean Downey and Bill Allen, were detailed to go to Limerick Junction. If the opportunity arose they would fire at any R.I.C. man or Black and Tan who might be outside the barracks.

Seeing none of the latter, they decided to hold up and disarm a military policeman. Apparently he was not prepared to part with his revolver lightly and, when he attempted to draw it, the boys fired on him, with the result that he was shot dead. A chap named James O'Connell, a member of the Kilross Company, was arrested and charged with the shooting. He was awaiting trial in Cork Prison when the Truce came and probably saved his life.

The disbandment of the brigade columns took place about the end of May or early in June 1921. The idea was that the members of the columns should return to, and form active service units in, their own battalion areas. The 4th Battalion men, after their return from service with the column, proceeded to do something about enforcing the boycott on Belfast goods and they held up a goods train about one mile from Limerick Junction. The R.I.C. from Oola went out later to investigate and found some of the Belfast goods including whiskey which had been taken from the train. The police returned to the barracks and enjoyed their booty. This gave the boys the idea of staging another train hold-up and to ambush the Oola police if they went out again.

I was not present when this ambush took place and in which two policemen were killed and one wounded, and the arms and ammunition of the police were captured. It took place about the first week in July 1921, at Boherdota Bridge and, to the best of my knowledge, Brian Shanahan, the battalion commandant, was in charge of the ex-column men and some members of the Solohead Company who had been mobilised for the occasion. There were various other incidents of that period which have escaped my memory, but I think I have dealt with those of primary interest.

To conclude, it may be of interest to record that, shortly before the Truce, what was left of the gelignite taken at Soloheadbeg was used to destroy Ballydrehid and Alleen bridges. Ballydrehid bridge was blown up by the battalion staff, that is by Brian Shanahan, Arthur Barlow, James Maloney, Matt Barlow and myself. I was present, too, at the destruction of Alleen bridge. That was about a week before the Truce, and I may say that I felt a sense of relief at seeing the end of that gelignite. Its history and its hairbreadth escapes from recapture by the military and police after the Soloheadbeg ambush are fairly accurately described in Desmond Ryan's book *Sean Treacy and the Third Tipperary Brigade*, and, I might add, they were almost as varied and as exciting as those of any of the men who took it.



Memorial Soloheadbeg Ambush